Syncretic texts and digital literacies: blogging in teaching EFL at the public school

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe a research experience of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through Project Work and Digital Media in a public school, by using blogs and transmedia strategies. We also explore the nature of text production in this context, observing the semiotic features of hypertext as a syncretic language. Through Project Work, students demonstrated to engage in the pedagogical activities, and by using transmedia strategies for learning and blogs to encourage text production, there seemed to have been an enhancement to their literacy(ies) skills in both verbal and non-verbal languages.

RESUMO

Neste artigo, descrevemos uma experiência de ensino de Inglês como Lingua Estrangeira (ILE) através de um Projeto de Trabalho e Mídias Digitais em uma escola pública, usando blogs e estratégias transmidiáticas. Também exploramos a natureza da produção de texto nesse contexto, observando as características semióticas do hipertexto como linguagem sincrética. Através do trabalho com o projeto, os alunos demonstraram engajamento nas atividades pedagógicas e, por meio, de estratégias transmídia para a aprendizagem e blogs para incentivar a produção de textos, parecia ter havido um realce em suas habilidades de leitura temporis(s) tanto na linguagem verbal como na não verbal.

Keywords


1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to report on an experience of technology engaging for the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the context of a public school in southern Brazil, through text production in blogs and transmedia strategies. The language teaching technologically mediated can be a way to encourage such paradigmatic ruptures and promote advances that qualify education, enabling also a critical view regarding the uses of technology. The conception of language practice as socio-historically situated amidst worlds of meanings constructed in discourse is gaining ground in linguistic studies, also for guiding reflection on digital culture, about the effects of meaning generated from language practices developed in this environment.

We assume that the teaching of a foreign language does not primarily need to focus on exclusive exposure to that language, not only aims to train students to be fluent in the language structure studied, but, as Garcez and Schlatter [1] indicate, the objective is to awaken the student to varying degrees of proficiency and interest in the language and culture under study, which does not exclude the relationship with their mother tongue and cultural contexts in which languages are, which in this case, includes the digital culture and the textuality that proceeds from it.

2. BLOGGING IN PROJECT WORK

The project was developed during ten English lessons in a class of 19 students of the eighth grade of an elementary public school. The productions of the students, developed during this project work, make up the corpus of research that has characteristics of action research, which, according to Gil [2], "involves the resolution a common problem, in which both the researcher and the participants must engage in together, trying to solve."

The common problem that triggered the project was the discussion about consumerism and its implications for the environment, starting from the documentary The Story of Stuff [3], debated with the students, which appointments they recorded and systematized on their blogs.

Project Work or Project Pedagogy has been proposed by theorists of education as an alternative to the traditional education, strongly criticized for the passive role that apprentices are submitted in the educational process. Hernandez [4] states that the Project Work approach intends to be transgressive and change old educational paradigms about how people learn, store, and handle knowledge, similarly to what has been proposed with regard to the use of technological devices in school contexts.

From previous research, it was found that Project Work is presented as a way to deliver the curriculum, making room for the appreciation of the student's productions and knowledge. Since the responsibility for learning is now shared between teacher and students, encouraging the last to leave the condition of passivity, and the focus is put on the interaction, it is necessary to investigate textual production experiences developed in this context, in hypermedia environment, with the use of digital language, and how they innovate when compared to those developed without it.

The project work developed during 15 weeks, the months of August, September, October and November 2011. The classes took place in the Computer Lab Educational School, in the third period of Monday, during the afternoon shift. The workload of the English Language this school is only an hour-weekly class, which greatly limits the opportunities for contact with the language of the students.

The possibility of making a blog that would be 24 hours in the air and, through this digital environment, meet people from other parts of the planet were motivating elements of the project. At the beginning, we tried to contact by e-mail, the group of environmentalist Annie Leonard, producer of the documentary...
Leonard, who also starred in the documentary, send an e-mail or a short video encouraging students to continue the activities.

However, the answer came from another member of the group, congratulating the initiative, but apologizing for not being able to forward this participation due to the high volume of commitments of the participants of the production of The Story of Stuff.

One of the prerogatives of the project was that the instructions on the tasks they were given in an additional language and students only publish in English. Therefore, they were allowed to freely use online translators.

The project worked as a motivational lever inspiring students to communicate in their mother tongue during oral discussions on the subjects of the documentary and on the computer screen, using the target language in study, reading instructions, doing searches, surveys and posting their own opinions on the topics covered.

Students participated in the production and supply of blogs, combining the language present in the digital environment, speaking on the subject of the documentary The Story of Stuff: a linear chain of materials production in the world economy that encourages consumption and contributes to the rampant environment devastation. Students were encouraged to reflect on the theme with the goal of developing discussions to post on the blog. The discursive purposes were linked to consumerism and environmental awareness.

During the project development, students had the following educational and transmedia experience: class presentation and initial proposition of the project, in which its name was chosen by the class: 8th grade for the environment, the main tasks to be undertaken were defined and it was agreed that the project’s final production would consist of a weblog.

In the first lesson, the class watched the 12-minute video: Group work through the Internet, one video of the DVD series Bits and Bytes [5], produced by TV Escola and distributed to all public Elementary Education schools in Brazil, through the National Program of Educational Objects, managed by the Brazilian Ministry of Education.

In the following classes, each of the 7 parts of the documentary The Story of Stuff were discussed and analyzed. The Story of Stuff was produced in 2007 by independent studio Free Range and the American environmentalist Annie Leonard, being available for free on the Internet.

In the third lesson, students watched the second part of the documentary, which discusses the stage of extraction in the linear system of production. In this part of the documentary, Leonard reports that a third of the planet's natural resources have been consumed by humans. The environmentalist presents statistical data on resource extraction in the United States and the world, stating that, with this linear economic system, people are valued for what they possess and consume. In the same class, after the discussion of the subject dealt with in the second part of The Story of Stuff, students were also presented to the mother-blog, prepared to be the headquarters of the project online, hosting each group’s blog web address.

The mother-blog was prepared with a threefold function: 1) recording guidance and instructions on procedures, exercises and postings that students should produce for their blogs; 2) grouping the blogs produced by the students, allowing them to find them with more ease and encouraging them to interact in the classmate’s blogs, with comments; 3) working as a logbook of the project, recording the stages developed.

In the fourth class, the students were presented the Blogger software [6], through a presentation on a multimedia projector, a tutorial on how to open an e-mail in Gmail [7] and how to access Blogger through Gmail to elaborate their blogs design composition by choosing their layouts, colors, font types and sizes. Students grouped in twos or threes and began the production of the nine blogs that were later hyperlinked to the mother blog.

Contrary to initial expectations, not all students knew how to handle with ease the features of the digital environment. Some have had difficulties, but others have faced barriers to create their e-mail, required for the production of blogs on the Blogger software. Some students were able to open their e-mail accounts, but then lost or forgot their username and password, having to restart the whole process again in subsequent classes. Others could do the job, but had difficulty accessing Blogger through. Once the e-mail accounts were ready, the students had to create their blogs. At this stage, once again, some students showed difficulty to select and save their preferences on the virtual form.

This process of account opening and creation of blogs took three lessons to be complete, which spawned the need to resume the first and second part of The Story of Stuff in the eighth class. After reviewing them, we watched the third part of the documentary, in which the production stage of the linear system is presented. At this stage, Annie Leonard talks about the toxic and chemical substances that enter and leave the industry, stating about the rural exodus and the small communities, and brings data on the impacts of pollution caused by the industry toxins.
The requirement to read and write in a foreign language and work only on the Internet environment caused some expertise challenges. However, when reviewing the blogs after some time past the end of the project, one can see how these students succeeded in producing syncretic texts and one can recall the possibilities that the world wide web opens to language practices in the digital context.

Easy access to online translators and possibilities of the program allowed them to produce syncretic texts translating ideas from Portuguese to English. Students were able to discuss and record their ideas and views on the issues raised in the documentary and made it collectively in the large group and in small groups organized for the preparation of each blog. Moreover, the proposition of the Project Work in computerized environment contributed to their digital literacy, evidenced because, after the project, one student has reformed her blog, using it for other discursive purposes and dealing with other issues, enabling her to become a more active text producer on the Internet, as can be seen on Image 4.

Since one of the nine blogs was edited and transformed after the end of the project, the analysis was performed on the eight other blogs, which were kept as they were elaborated during the project. In the following section, we perform the analysis of one of the blogs developed, discussing its syncretic textuality.

5. ENVIRONMENT BLOG ANALYSIS

This blog was written by a couple of female students. They experienced difficulties in using Blogger early in the project, lost the password of their first blog, which has become inaccessible, and had to develop another one, which was hyperlinked to the mother-blog later. Despite these adversities, the girls showed creativity and skill in the use of language. Their blog has four posts, two of which are poems that they themselves created and translated into English, with a formidable lyrical effect.

The first post is a poem named What to do? The theme of the devastation of nature is present in statements like: The black air, dirty water, trees cut!, Dead fish, bird homeless and man?, The shadow of the city. The degraded air! and the world ends in a landfill.

The theme of man's alienation is present on: Prison at home, Artificial Life! They prefer the computer. Where is the man who can feel pain?, and: Sitting at home, watching TV. Still, the theme of hopelessness about the future is present in the statement In complete darkness, humanity is moving toward its end. The enunciator is projected in the statement The blue sky over me I can not see, instead, black smoke, which makes me believe in anything, emphasizing the theme of hopelessness in the future.

The fourth and last post is also a poem created by the students. Its title is Eco Logical, referring to the theme of ecology, environmental devastation, also to the poetry itself, which repeats the last words of each stanza, in a protest, which indicates the idea of an echo logical that is, an echo that makes sense, that has a reason to be repeated. Again, the theme of devastation of the planet is also present in the text, through figures like lungs that are consumed and soil that produces bread even after the fire. Unlike the first poem, the theme of hope is present, and the pain relief afforded, as the last verse mentions the word love. There is the figure of Echo, who responds, "More love, love, love." This poem exemplifies a case of syncretic language through the junction of the sounding of verbal language, which syncretizes with the theme present in the writing, in the title and throughout the stanzas.

Regarding the blog as a whole, colors and layout are exactly the same, black, white and gray, with black gradient background and areas of posting lists and sides with thin diagonal gray. The cool and neutral colors in the blog can also indicate language syncretism if the option for black is interpreted as a protest by the devastated nature, converging with the mourning for the destruction of the environment present in the posts.

6. FINAL NOTES

The blog analysis evidence the student’s reflection about the themes presented in the documentary The Story of Stuff, discussed in class, through Project Work, and denounce the degree of proficiency with which the students dealt with the additional language under study, the syncretic hypertext language and the Internet. The specificities in the semiotic and discursive choices of the blog glimpse the different movements of the group of students and the ways in which their preferences were negotiated and their speeches built while working with peers.

The data show the interactive nature of the blog as a social software, as already mentioned, according to Sousa [8]. However, it can be stated that the interactive potential of the blog has been little explored during the development of the project, possibly due to the little need to interact in writing with classmates with whom the students spent time every day at school, or because of poor proficiency of students in the use of the foreign (English) or digital languages.

Anyway, the use of the blog in the project allowed students to become aware of its resources as a social software by learning how to use it in a concrete situation of interaction, which created conditions for learning the communicative, discursive and semiotic skills which are involved the production of a blog.

The enunciative choices made in the blog denounce the school context in which the textual productions, i.e. blogs, were performed. It is possible to note the interest of speakers to convince their enunciator, the teacher, about the competence of their speech, with the intention to reach the value object that underlies the educational student-teacher relationship in the school environment: good grades and passing the school year.

However engaged the class may seemed to be in the theme of the project, with the discussions and the challenges faced by the narrative at school, their goal of good performance and approval permeated the entire process, showing up in their enunciation choices.
The themes that predominated in the blogs produced were undoubtedly the dyad preservation / destruction of the environment and the linear system of our materials production economy. These subjects were divided into a few minor issues that pervade such as ignorance, injustice, alienation, protest, improvidence, shame and responsibility of human beings, themes underlying the dichotomy destroy / preserve. Also the dependence of humans on the environment was thematized, and the exaltation of beauty and ubiquity of nature.

Regarding the plastic choices made in the production of blogs, the formulaic nature of the program again stood out, evidenced by the repetition of the topological characteristics of the device, eidetic categories and choices in the eight blog layout designs. On the other hand, the potential for program selection also demonstrated prominence. Only two layout models were repeated in the blogs and, even then, were adapted by the authors so that none of the blogs is exactly the same as the other.

It should be noted that the hypertext language makes use of underlined font for highlighting hyperlinks, i.e., terms that serve as ports for other displays and other texts. Also the layout and typography decisions, characteristics of visual communication design, are claimed to participate in the process of discursive construction when writing in hypermedia environment.

This multiplicity of elements in the semiotic construction of discourse characterized the syncretic textuality in hypertext: verbal language is replaced by features of non verbal language and vice versa. By using verbal language, the announcer must make plastic choices when before he/she was primarily concerned with non verbal language only, and this, in turn, undergoes a complexity in language syntagmatics.

The development of blogs in the project further complicated the educational action and allowed it to be deeply resumed. The possibilities of hypertext, in its syncretic textuality, showed not only influence but delimit the choices of linguistic-discursive writing in hypermedia context.

Working with hypertext imposes challenges to the teaching of languages and text school practices performed in this context, since it requires that participants in the educational process deal with a wider range of communication options.

With the increased use of computer labs in schools and the implementation of projects such as the UCA (One Laptop per Child), in Brazil, it is possible that the syncretic text will become a constant in text students’ productions, resulting in the need for more studies about the implications of language learning and text production in computerized environments.

It is possible that the syncretic characteristics and plastic choices necessary for its production becomes a part of everyday language used also in school, which requires a different conception of linguistic school education, one that contemplates digital literacies.

The search path trodden in using transmedia strategies in Project Work development and blogs producing by elementary school students showed the entanglement between the linguistic and the digital languages and its implications for the school context. It is hoped that the research has contributed minimally to the discussion about the necessary linguistic demands of education in the digital, contemporary, present time.

7. REFERENCES


