

Computers in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language: Access to the Diversity of Textual Genres and Language Skills

Roberto-Márcio dos Santos, Jerônimo Coura Sobrinho

Centro Federal de Educação Tecnológica, Brazil

Abstract: In the area of language teaching both language skills and textual genres can be worked with simultaneously (thus responding to the *Brazilian Curricular Parameters* and to the trends in contemporary education, which emphasize contextualized teaching) by means of computers. Computers can make the teaching process dynamic and rich, since they enable the access to the foreign language through virtual environments, which creates a larger number of learning contexts, with all their specific vocabulary and linguistic features in real communication. This study focuses on possible applications of this kind of approach. The computer online is a resource of diverse textual genres and can be an important tool in the language classroom as well as an access to authentic material produced in contextualized practice close to real-life communication. On the other hand, all these materials must be appropriately used without ever worshipping the technology as if it were a miraculous solution. After all, the professional pedagogic skills of the teacher should never be forgotten or taken for granted. In this study, a series of interviews with teachers was carried out – both with Brazilian teachers of the public sector (basic education) and language institutes (private English courses) as well as teacher trainers (university professors), in order to verify if the teachers were prepared to work with informatics in teaching practices, and check the professionals' views on the subject. The ideas of Maingueneau and Marcuschi about *textual genres* are a theoretical base in this work, besides the concept of *cognitive economy*. The text and its typology are focused here as the basic material for teaching English, through digital technologies and hypermedia. The study is also based on Sharma and Barrett's notion of *blended learning* as a balanced combination of technological resources and traditional practices in the classroom. Thus, this is an attempt to investigate the relevance of information and communication technologies in the education and professional practice of English teachers in Brazil in the context of the 21st century.

Keywords: computers in the teaching of English; learning English with computers; technology and language study; language teacher training.

1. Introduction

Depending on how it is used, the computer may be a great support for the pedagogical practice of the teacher of foreign languages. It is not the solution for every problem, nor is it a miraculous resource that has come to replace teachers, but on the contrary, if the computer is taken as a support at the right time in the right way, then it becomes a unique help in the process of teaching/learning. The use of technology may

accompany the guiding principles of contemporary education, like contextualization and communicative approach. In foreign language teaching, one can simultaneously deal with language skills (i.e., *listening, speaking, reading, writing*), as well as with a diversity of textual genres, thus corresponding to the “National Parameters of Education” in Brazil and to the trends in today’s teaching. Through the virtual environment, the use of computers can make the process rich and dynamic, therefore creating new pathways to real language situations. This is a study about the accomplishment of such educational practices in the foreign language classroom (English, in this case) inside the Brazilian educational system. The researcher carried out interviews with Brazilian English teachers of the public and private systems, as well as with university teachers who are teacher trainers, so as to verify their possible beliefs related to teaching with technology and whether prospective teachers are acquiring actual preparation or training in dealing with technological resources. As theoretical background, the ideas of Maingueneau [8] and Marcuschi [9] upon textual genres and the concept of *cognitive economy* as a strategy for genre recognition support this study. Texts and their typologies are focused here as the basic material for language teaching through digital technologies and hypermedia provided by the computer. In addition, we also take Sharma and Barrett’s notion of *blended learning* [12] as the balanced combination of technologies and traditional practices in the classroom. Thus, it is taken for granted that *blended learning* would make the ideal “dosage” for such combination.

2. Textual Genres

The digital era has brought genres which never existed before. *E-mail*, for example, is a textual model with communicative purposes (like the former *letter, message* or *telegram*) but one that has its own format and language structure pattern. Motta-Roth *et al* [10] defend the idea that the new electronic discourse genres motivate knowledge construction. Therefore, if today’s students are much more familiar with e-mails rather than letters, it is essential that e-mails are included in the students’ linguistic scene from the very start of their schooling. According to Marcuschi [9], today’s “electronic culture” has brought about a boom of new genres and forms of written and oral communication. So, *blogs, wikis, e-mails, and chats* are part of real communication in any modern language, where other genres (*reports, contracts, poems, essays* and so on) were, long before the new genres existed. There are even new terms and ways of writing which are generated from the digital media and the Internet channels. Goodman *et al* [6] assert that key changes include variations of existing words using some of the following linguistic processes: existing words are given a new context, as in *camping*, ‘hovering in one place in an online game’; abbreviated forms are introduced, such as *thnx* for ‘thanks’, and acronyms, such as *TTFN* for ‘ta-ta for now’; and greater use is made of visual symbols, for example, the use of @, numbers and punctuation marks for emoticon ...

How does the computer provide material of various textual genres? What virtual environments does it offer for language practice? The web or the Internet makes it all possible – through wide, comprehensive access. It is up to the teacher to find the

appropriate materials and use the electronic texts in the right way, with a critic spirit and clear, well-determined teaching objectives, rather than taking the technology for its own sake. According to David Crystal [4], today there is more language on the Internet than in all the libraries of the world together. It has never been so easy to access textual material of every sort, considering that the text– written or oral – is the language teacher’s basic working tool. Among the so many virtual learning environments, *Second Life* is an innovative, state-of-the-art way to create diverse and otherwise impossible situations where activities like *role-play* become easier to do. Any context may be brought into the classroom by means of *Second Life*.

When working with genres with pedagogical purposes, one automatically deals with the development of the skill of recognizing each text type or category, which has to do with *cognitive economy*, a factor focused by Russian linguist Bakhtine [1]:

... whenever we hear the others’ speech, we can find out its genre, from the first words, (...) the compositional structure that is being used, foreseeing the end; in short, ever since the start we are sensitive to the discourse as a whole (...). If the discourse genres did not exist and we did not master them and had to invent them each and every time in the speech process, (...) verbal exchange would be impossible.

So, *cognitive economy* is a kind of process through which people, being able to recognize textual genres, acquire more easily the ability to produce them in situations of real communication. This is naturally conditioned to linguistic and psycho-social factors, such as to language knowledge and the rules of human communication.

Some authors mention the relation of textual genres and language teaching, as in Marcuschi’s [9:35] and Pereira’s (Winch [14]) conceptions. Marcuschi says that the use of genres is a way to deal with language in its everyday situations, and Pereira asserts that genres are aids for the understanding of how people interact by means of language.

Bearing in mind the contemporary trend that foreign languages should be taught through communicative approaches, the situations that students go through in their learning must prioritize real communication (which is made possible by e-mails or chats, among others possibilities) by means of social interaction or activities which demand acting and improvising such as *role-play* (made possible by *Second Life*).

3. The Demands of the 21st Century

Some years ago Levy [7] warned society about digitization as a trend in every area, including education. Education is linked to the contemporary contexts created by the digital revolution. Apart from new resources and applications, we are facing a new kind of student – one with more demands, considering all the hypermedia and new technologies in the society in which he/she belongs to. Thus, when including supporting resources in education, we should always, in the words of Coscarelli [3], take into consideration that we need to work with relevant, consistent proposals which involve some sort of challenge to the student, stimulating his/her interest and curiosity, never underestimating his/her potential. Nowadays one can say that “reading the world is virtually possible”, according to Xavier [15], and for the current

generation of young people such reading has become easier, more spontaneous and natural, given their familiarity with technological devices. Veen & Vrakking [13:29] describe what today's students are like: "they surf the Internet and click until they find what they want, searching for icons, sounds and movements rather than mere letters. (...) Physical distance doesn't represent any restriction to communication". This generation of students was born into this virtual world and therefore is familiar with so many media and technologies. Unlike most of their teachers, they are part of the generation known as "iconic" or, according to Veen & Vrakking [13] "*homo zappiens*" – today's typical youth, who "was born with a hand on a mouse, already knowing how to handle the TV remote control at the age of 3, and having a mobile phone at the age of 8".

4. Language Teaching Mediated by Computers

Language teaching has always been pioneering in the use of technology, due to the nature of this area of knowledge, which involves communication in all its forms, writing texts, speaking, recording, listening, watching images, - thus enabling an easy and flexible inclusion of resources. Nowadays some conventions in the area of language studies are changing. For instance, although a workbook still refers to a book for practice exercises or homework, now some authors offer an electronic version, apart from the printed one. Audio used to mean only recordings on cassettes for listening, however now one can listen to lessons on an audio cd, cd-rom, MP3, iPod and so forth. Dudeney & Hockly [2] present in their work plenty of explanations, suggestions and possible applications for English language classes, such as chats, blogs, wikis, podcasts, e-learning, etc., as well as the interactive board and how to work with Internet-based projects. Goodman et al [6] discuss in their work the position of English on the Internet, digitalization and e-books as a new genre, hypertext fiction, and the artificial language generators.

It is now possible to mix pleasure with work when teaching or learning a foreign language, since there are available resources which allow that technology comes accompanied with communication, making the entire process more fun. Winch [14] mentions the need for teaching without a focus on grammar, but rather with "the comprehension of how language is used through daily routine situations". Winch refers to the Brazilian legislation to emphasize the association of this kind of practice:

Instead of starting from grammatical rules, one can start from a passage inside a usual context. For new language practices, like those mediated by the computer, teachers should ideally analyze the structuring rules of language in that new context.

5. Research data

The research was carried out with Brazilian English teachers working in the city of Belo Horizonte. There were 34 participants altogether, from three different groups: public education (15), language institutes (10), and university professors (9). All of them answered questionnaires about computers and other technologies in teaching

The first questionnaire was directed to teachers from public schools and English courses. Hereafter *EP* stands for public school respondent, whereas *CL* represents English course respondent. In Brazil it is usually said that people don't learn a language properly at regular school. In general, people think that language institutes (or courses) have more quality and better learning conditions. So in a way, dividing the questionnaires into two groups will be a contrastive strategy. The question "Have you used technological resources in your classes? How often?" brought the following answers:

Table 1 – Technologies used by teachers in the classroom

PARTICIPANT	RESOURCES USED	HOW OFTEN?
EP01		<i>Every 2 months</i>
EP02	<i>Overhead projector, computer, datashow, TV, videos</i>	
EP03	<i>Audio, videos, computer</i>	
EP04	<i>TV, DVD, radio</i>	<i>Always</i>
EP05		<i>Every 2 months</i>
EP06	<i>Television, VCR</i>	<i>Used for 6 months</i>
EP08	<i>TV, videos, DVD, Internet, games</i>	<i>Always use it</i>
EP09	<i>Videos, CD player</i>	<i>Rarely</i>
EP10	<i>TV, videos, DVD, CD player, overhead projector, computer</i>	<i>Very often, except for the computer</i>
EP11	<i>DVD, CD player</i>	<i>As often as possible</i>
EP12	<i>TV, DVD, computer</i>	<i>Once a month</i>
EP14	<i>TV, stereo system, DVD</i>	<i>Not very often</i>
EP15	<i>Educational videos, films, music, audio cd of the textbook</i>	<i>Whenever it's necessary</i>
CL01	<i>Multimedia</i>	<i>In every class</i>
CL02	<i>DVD, sound system</i>	<i>Constantly</i>
CL03	<i>Audiovisual computer program</i>	
CL04	<i>Laptop (newspaper articles, etc.)</i>	
CL05	<i>Multimedia, Internet, DVD, CDs, etc.</i>	<i>Almost always</i>
CL06	<i>Internet, computer</i>	
CL07	<i>Multimedia, Internet, videos</i>	<i>Constantly</i>
CL08	<i>Multimedia, DVD, Internet, CDs, etc.</i>	<i>Always</i>
CL09	<i>PC</i>	<i>Few times</i>
CL10	<i>Multimedia (it's part of the method used)</i>	<i>In every class</i>

The other group, - the university professors - was interviewed (from a different questionnaire) to inform the researcher about English language teachers' training, and whether the curriculum is being adapted to the contemporary changes. There were 9 respondents in this group (identified above as *FP*), whose answers are described here.

As for whether the teacher thinks he/she is prepared in terms of technological training, the results were as follows:

Table 2 – Teachers' views on their technological training

PARTICIPANT	PREPARED TO WORK WITH TECHNOLOGIES?
EP01	Yes.
EP02	<i>I am prepared.</i>
EP03	<i>In the State schools we lack materials and training...</i>
EP04	<i>More or less, I'd like to know more.</i>
EP05	<i>Yes, but I'm not up-to-date in informatics .</i>
EP06	<i>As long as I'm given the training...</i>
EP07	<i>No, (...) the school doesn't have all the multimedia equipment...</i>
EP08	<i>Yes. (...) the teacher who doesn't fit becomes an illiterate, (...) the knowledge gets obsolete.</i>
EP09	<i>When there is available equipment, I guess so.</i>
EP10	<i>Yes, except for the computer. For me it's not so easy to use it in the classroom.</i>
EP11	<i>Yes, but I still need training.</i>
EP12	<i>Sure!</i>
EP13	<i>Yes.</i>
EP14	<i>Yes, though I feel I need to improve.</i>
EP15	<i>Yes.</i>
CL01	<i>Yes.</i>
CL02	<i>Yes, but I still need improvement, like in how to use Power Point...</i>
CL03	<i>Sim.</i>
CL04	<i>Very much. I'm addicted to technology and spend money on it...</i>
CL05	<i>Yes.</i>
CL06	<i>Yes.</i>
CL07	<i>Yes, I get constant training...</i>
CL08	<i>Yes and no! Equipment change a lot and it's hard to follow.</i>
CL09	<i>I need better training.</i>
CL10	<i>Not much. I'm not too familiar with it...</i>

- Is the current university training in the area of Humanities/Languages preparing future teachers to work with modern technology? If so, how?

FP01: < ... in a way, yes. (...) the students already have Phonetics classes in the lab, where they access sites and study by monitoring their speech and practice (...) following their individual pace (...) I cannot tell if they are ready to teach through those resources. >

FP02: <Yes, leaving the students away from technology would be an exclusive attitude.>

FP03: < Not always. (...) few courses in Brazilian universities reserve part of their curriculum for technological education. >

FP04: < ... it depends on each institution and who is involved. I have seen institutions that promote lectures or mini-courses (...) inside graduation events, include optional courses on the referred topics, and some have offered on-line courses. But this is still very little ... >

FP05: < I don't think this concern exists. It's more like each individual has to take his/her personal initiative. >

FP06: < At the college where I work, that's a reality for the students, who have specific courses about those topics. >

FP07: < Not directly. But students can take specific on-line courses, where they'll be dealing with that sort of thing, for their academic tasks or presentations. >

FP08: < No. At the Federal University there are courses on digital literacy, however the vast majority of students don't take them. >

FP09: < Yes, though it's still very little. There are several courses that involve ICT or are about language teaching mediated by computers. >

- Do the new digital language and hypertext contribute to English teaching and learning? Justify your answer.

FP01: < ... an English learner is, above all, a citizen of the contemporary world. Being inside this globalized context, (...) it's a natural consequence that the language teacher makes use of new media resources (...). Studying the new textual genres – e-mails and blogs – is necessary to integrate learners with the new media realities. I see hypertext as a research strategy independent of language. (...) it's up to the teacher to teach students how to research by using that tool. >

FP02: < Very much. Through the Internet the students' universe expands and their autonomy grows. >

FP03: < No doubt. Besides promoting autonomy in learning, the digital language and hypertext offer learners a variety of discourse linguistic resources which enrich their knowledge of the English language...>

FP04: < ... It helps as long as you know how to integrate your teaching objectives with the students' digital literacy... >

FP05: < ... they're tools that are contributing to teaching (...). I've done a research (...) and found out that computer communication helps students that are shy or afraid of making mistakes (...) Hypertext allows deeper textual analysis, because it presents so many links to other texts/discourses. (...) >

FP06: < ... New language and technologies can potentially contribute to the learning of diverse subjects. In the case of languages, there are a number of resources for self-teaching and planning classes (...). The contribution is related to the kind of use one makes and not for the technology alone. >

FP07: < ... The variety of resources and the easy access and communication enrich the quality of interaction and learning. >

FP08: < Yes, very much, because of the choices of resources on-line (hypertexts of newspapers, magazines, articles, multimodal texts such as vídeos, movie trailers, podcast, etc.) ... >

FP09: < I believe that depends on the lesson objectives. It may either contribute or cause confusion. >

6. Final Considerations

These answers to the questionnaire certainly lead to reflections and points to a few potential issues. In general, the teaching professionals are aware of the importance and demands of information and communication technologies in the learning process. It's clear from some of the answers that public sector schools need more financial and material resources, and they lack professional training. The teachers from public

schools and English courses have acquired different technological backgrounds, so it varies a lot. Some of them don't know very well how to combine the computer with their pedagogical approach. Also, most professionals seem to be aware of the relevance of digital language and hypertext for language teaching and learning. Although there is already some bibliography on the subject, many Brazilian English teachers need actual training. That's why the use of computers in the classroom is still limited, apart from the fact that in the public sector apparently there is not available money. Some private language schools already have interesting initiatives in terms of innovated methods including all the new media.

As for the graduation courses in the area of Humanities/Languages, some institutions have made attempts to offer technological preparation to prospective teachers, though according to some professors the results come slowly and there is much more to be done. Another interesting point is that, in several answers, it is said that technology for its own sake will not generate results in learning. On the contrary, its use must be well-planned and grounded on clear, solid pedagogical purposes. It must be more than mere fun, though fun may very well be part of learning too. Brazilian education has much to gain as long as there are more investments on both physical and human resources.

References

1. Bakhtine, M. *Esthétique de la création verbale*. Paris : Gallimard, 1984.
2. BRASIL. *Orientações curriculares para o ensino médio*. Brasília: MEC/SEMT, 2006.
3. Coscarelli, Carla V. (org). *Novas tecnologias, novos textos, novas formas de pensar*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2003.
4. Crystal, David. "Interview with David Crystal" in: *Think in English*. (cd de áudio / revista – ed. nº 103). Madrid: Ediciones Mejora, 2008.
5. Dionísio, Ângela P. et al. (org.). *Gêneros textuais e ensino*. Rio de Janeiro: Lucerna, 2005.
6. Goodman, S. et al. *Redesigning English*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
7. Lévy, Pierre. *As tecnologias da inteligência*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. 34, 1993.
8. Maingueneau, Dominique. *Análise de textos de comunicação*. Tradução de Cecília P. de Souza-e-Silva & Décio Rocha. – São Paulo: Cortez, 2008.
9. Marcuschi, Luiz A. "Gêneros textuais: definição e funcionalidade" in: Dionísio, Ângela P. et al (org.). *Gêneros textuais e ensino*. Rio de Janeiro: Lucerna, 2005.
10. Motta-Roth, Desiree et al (org.). [Gêneros Textuais: Subsídios para o ensino da linguagem. Bauru : EDUSC, 2002.](#)
11. Pereira, Rodrigo A. "Gêneros do discurso e práticas de ensino/aprendizagem de línguas – questões sobre letramento" in: *Seminário nacional 2, Seminário regional 5, de Formação de Professores*. (cd-rom). Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, 2007.
12. Sharma, P. & Barrett, B. *Blended learning: using technology in and beyond the language classroom*. Oxford: Macmillan, 2007.
13. Veen, Wim & Wracking, Ben. *Homo Zappiens: educando na era digital*. Tradução de Vinicius Figueira. – Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2009.
14. Winch, Paula G. "Gêneros textuais como inovação no ensino de língua inglesa" (artigo – online). Santa Maria: Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, 2007.
15. Xavier, Antônio C. & Marchuschi, Luiz A. *Hipertexto e gêneros textuais – Novas formas de construção de sentido*. Rio de Janeiro: Lucerna, 2005.