THE INFLUENCES OF COLLABORATION
ON THE LEARNING OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at presenting a theoretical background on collaborative learning and its possible effects on the learning of a foreign language. To do so, two studies will be presented (FIGUEIREDO, 2001, and SOUZA, 2003). The first study focuses the investigation on the interactions that occurred between students in the classroom while they were taking part in peer correction activities. The other one focuses the investigation on the interactions that occurred in the virtual world, while students were taking part in a telecollaborative project. Both studies reinforce the fact that interaction and collaboration contribute to the learning of a foreign language, since the participants in such interactions play an active role in this process.

KEYWORDS: interaction; collaboration; foreign language learning.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar alguns conceitos sobre aprendizagem colaborativa e seus efeitos na aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira. Para tanto, serão apresentados os resultados de dois trabalhos (FIGUEIREDO, 2001 e SOUZA, 2003). O primeiro focaliza sua investigação na interação ocorrida em sala de aula durante a realização de atividades de correção com os pares. O segundo, por sua vez, investiga as interações realizadas num ambiente de telecolaboração. Esses estudos reforçam a idéia de que a interação e a colaboração contribuem para a aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira, visto que os aprendizes, por meio dessas interações, assumem um papel mais ativo nesse processo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: interação; colaboração; aprendizagem de língua estrangeira.

1 INTRODUCTION

Some researchers (HALL & WALSH, 2002; JOHNSON, 1995; TSUI, 1995; VAN LIER, 1984, among others) have described the typical patterns of interaction found in the language classroom as being predominantly structured the following way: an initiation (or elicitation) by the teacher, a response by the learner, and an evaluation (or follow-up) by the teacher, indicating whether the response is acceptable or not. For example:

> Teacher initiates: *What is this?*
> Student responds: *It's a ball.*
> Teacher evaluates: *Very good.*

According to Thornbury (1996), the sequence "Initiation-Response-Evaluation" – especially when the evaluation consists of a kind of feedback as "Very good", "Excellent", "No, that's not right", etc. – restricts the development of authentic interactions in the classroom, because the discourse, in this perspective, is totally controlled by the teacher, since it is the teacher "who decides who will participate, when students can take a turn, how much they can contribute, and whether their contributions are worthy and appropriate" (HALL; WALSH, 2002, p. 188). The literature concerning classroom interaction shows us that, besides controlling discourse, the teacher dominates turn-taking in the classroom, allocating little time for students' linguistic production. Johnson (1995) states that, even during student-student interaction, the teacher still keeps a certain control of what the students talk about because generally the teacher chooses the topic of the conversation or selects a grammar point to be practiced through this 'dialogic' activity.

According to Musumei (1996; DALACORTE, 1999), only a few students try to introduce a topic for conversation during a lesson. What we generally see are students who keep silent or stay in doubt because they are not used to interrupting the teacher in the classroom.

Therefore, they prefer asking their peers to help them or having a private interaction with the teacher to have their doubts solved.

Thus, to optimize learners' participation in the classroom and to make them be more involved in the learning process, we should make use of activities that promote student-student interaction and collaboration, so that they can learn from one another. By working collaboratively, students can exchange not only information, but also learning strategies (SWAIN, 2000; SWAIN, BROOKS; TOCALLI-BELLER, 2002). Consequently, one of the challenges we, teachers, have is to learn not to control interaction in the classroom and to use a collaborative learning approach. By doing this, we can eventually learn how to step aside to give the learners a more meaningful and active role.

2 COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Collaborative learning is a constructivist approach and is broadly defined as "a *situation* in which *two or more* people *learn* or attempt to learn something *together*" (DILLENBOURG, 1999, p. 1), emphasis in the original, be it through face-to-face interaction or through computer-mediated interaction, the aim of which is to promote the co-construction of knowledge. There is a substantial body of research on collaborative learning (BRUFFEE, 1999; FIGUEIREDO, 2006; FIGUEIREDO; SABOTA, 2002; KESSLER, 1992; OXFORD, 1997; TINZMANN et al., 1990, among others) due to the fact that interaction not only helps the less experienced student, but it also helps the more experienced student find out new ways of learning.

As some researchers show us (FIGUEIREDO, 2006; OXFORD, 1997; TINZMANN et al., 1990), collaborative learning is grounded on the sociocultural theory proposed by Vygotsky and his collaborators. According to this theory, social interaction is a prerequisite to learning and cognitive development (LANTOLF, 2000).

According to Vygotsky (1981), the child goes through three cognitive development stages:

a)   object-regulation: the environment exerts its influence on the child;

b)   other-regulation: the child is able to carry out certain tasks, but only with appropriate linguistically mediated assistance from a parent, or older and more capable peer;

c)   self-regulation: the child independently develops some strategies to perform a specific task.

For Lantolf and Appel (1994), the transition from other-regulation, or intermental activity, to self-regulation, or intramental activity, is favored by supporting strategies, known as scaffolding[1], and takes place in the zone of proximal development[2] where the child and the adult engage in an interaction.

Vygotsky actually specifies "more capable peers", but, as has become apparent from a range of studies about group work (COELHO, 1992; LONG; PORTER, 1985), it is not necessary for there to be a group member who is in all respects more capable than the others. This is partly because most activities involve a variety of tasks such that students who are experts in one task, and therefore able to offer assistance to their peers, may themselves need assistance on another task. But it can also happen that in tackling a difficult task as a group, although no member has expertise beyond his or her peers, the group as a whole, by working at the problem together, is able to come up with a solution that none could have achieved

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[1] The term *scaffolding* comes from the works of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and is used as a metaphor to describe the assistance offered by a tutor, a parent or a peer to assist learning.

[2] The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (VYGOTSKY, 1978, p. 86).

alone (SWAIN; LAPKIN, 1998). According to Wells (1999, p. 13), the zone of proximal development "constitutes a potential for learning that is created in the interaction between participants as they engage in a particular activity together." He goes on to say that the ZPD "applies potentially to all participants, and not simply to the less skillful or knowledgeable" (WELLS, 1999, p. 13).

Another benefit of collaborative learning is that it fosters L2/FL acquisition by providing the students with opportunities for both input and output (EHRMAN; DÖRNYEI, 1998; LONG; PORTER, 1985). According to Swain (2000, p. 97), it is through collaborative dialogue that "language use and language learning can co-occur." Wiersema (2000, p. 1) also adds the fact that if the students learn to work together in the classroom, they will have the chance to become better citizens, since it will be "easier for them to interact positively with people who think differently, not only on a local scale, but also world-wide."

Despite these benefits, some authors show us some possible problems that might arise when students take part in collaborative activities. For example, student-student interaction not only involves agreement, but it also involves disagreements (EHRMAN; DÖRNYEI, 1998; MATUSOV, 1996), or cognitive conflicts (PERRET-CLERMONT, 1980, apud FORMAN; CAZDEN, 1985) because through dialogue students become active and are able to express their opinions and points-of-view. However, as Perret-Clermont states (1980, cited by FORMAN; CAZDEN, 1985), peer interaction can induce cognitive conflict that, in turn, results in cognitive growth, accrediting the social factor a special role as one of the factors that lead to cognitive growth and learning.

Kinsella and Sherak (1998, p. 87) point out that some students' "reluctance and disorientation in this interactive learning format stem from their prior educational experiences", in which they are used to receiving information solely from the teacher. This can make students not so enthusiastic about learning with and from their peers, since

they might consider themselves as not able and confident to help one another.

Another aspect which might be a matter of some concern to teachers is that this kind of interaction – peer-peer dialogue – can favor the use of L1 in the L2/FL classroom (PRABHU, 1987). Nevertheless, some researchers (ANTÓN; DICAMILLA, 1999; BROOKS; DONATO, 1994; MELLO, 2002) have demonstrated that the use of L1 should not be considered a hindrance to L2/FL learning, since it might function as scaffolding used by the students to make the learning of the L2/FL easier.

2.1 TEACHER'S AND STUDENTS' ROLE IN COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

As we have seen, collaborative learning implies that the student have an active role in the learning process. Thus, the teacher's role has to be that of facilitator and mediator (TINZMANN, 1990) since s/he mediates the learning process instead of controlling it or just being an information giver. So the teacher has a vital role for collaborative learning to occur (MCDONELL, 1992) because, by stepping aside, s/he will make it possible for the students to become autonomous and to assume an active and meaningful role in the learning process.

Differently from a traditional classroom where the students passively receive knowledge from the teacher, in collaborative classrooms the students become collaborators and active participators (TINZMANN, 1990). They have the chance to learn from their peers and to teach them. By working together, they have the chance to notice what they still have to learn, and they also have the opportunity to develop social, cognitive and affective skills (CRANDALL, 1999; GHAITH, 2002).

Hence, the students have the chance to become reflexive and autonomous because, through the exchange of ideas and points of view, they may become self-regulated.

2.2 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE VIRTUAL MEDIUM

Some authors have demonstrated that, through the computer and the internet, the learning of a foreign language can occur beyond the walls of a classroom (LEFFA, 2003; PAIVA, 2001, 2005; SOUZA, 2002, 2003; WARSCHAUER, 1997).

Computer-mediated interaction is seen as an opportunity for socialization, for linguistic output, and for learning (WARSCHAUER, 1997). Some advantages of online learning are time- and place-independent communication, the opportunity to communicate with a great number of people, which might make learning be favored by interactional exchanges and by the collaboration among participants.

According to Sullivan and Pratt (1996), empirical support for computer-mediated interaction arises from research in second language or foreign language classes oriented toward composition skills. Moraes (2003), for instance, discovered that exchange of e-mails between Brazilian adolescent students and native speakers of English from different countries allowed the Brazilian students to learn new words and to develop their communicative competence. Similar results were found by Lee (2004), in a study conducted with American students who interacted, through the internet, with Spanish speakers.

Telecollaborative projects have also been used to foster language learning (DEBSKI, 2001; LELOUP; PONTERIO, 2003; SOUZA, 2003). By means of such projects, students from different institutions and from different countries can help one another in the process of learning a foreign language, as well as have access to aspects concerning cultural differences.

According to Paiva (2005, p. 35), emphasis in the original, through the use of the internet in the process of learning a foreign language,

> time, space, and even the participants, stop being predetermined. The walls and the barriers of time are metaphorically broken down, as neither an hour nor a place is predefined. In some ways we have also left open the possibility of a certain indirect participation in the "class".

Despite these apparent advantages, some aspects of computer-mediated interaction could possibly be a hindrance to collaborative learning. One aspect that could hinder collaboration is the fact that in face-to-face interaction people tend to be more willing to help one another and more committed to the activity they are performing than in online interaction just because they are doing the activity in the presence of the other.

3. SOME STUDIES THAT FOCUSED O COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Due to space limitation, I will only present two studies whose focus was on collaborative learning: the work by Figueiredo (2001), about collaborative correction of texts written in English, and the work by Souza (2003), about computer-mediated collaborative learning. The first one focuses on the interactions that occurred between students in the classroom (face-to-face interaction), while the other one focuses on the interaction that occurred between students in the virtual world (computer-mediated interaction).

3.1 THE WORK BY FIGUEIREDO (2001), ABOUT COLLABORATIVE CORRECTION OF TEXTS WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

Figueiredo (2001) investigated the text correction strategy for written English known as *peer correction*. His aim was to better understand this kind of dialogical correction and to verify its influence on the learning of English, as well as to investigate students' perception of their participation in these kinds of correction activities.

Ten 5th year students who took English as a major at Universidade Federal de Goiás took part in this case study, in the first semester of 1999. The students wrote their texts individually and later on they went through a peer review activity. After the correction, the texts were rewritten and handed in to the teacher to be corrected again. By means of the interaction with a peer and the talk about the form and content of the texts, the students were able to correct 31% of the mistakes in their original texts.

The participants of this study considered the peer correction activities fruitful because, besides having had the chance to collaborate with a peer, they were able to reflect on their written texts, as can be observed in the following example[3]:

> Paloma: I don't care if it's the teacher or Pollyana who is going to correct my text. I don't care about it. But in fact I like it better when Pollyana is the one who corrects because we can talk about our mistakes, you see? But when the teacher corrects the texts, generally she corrects the text and hands it to you without talking to you about it. Sometimes, I just look at the mark I have on the text and keep it. But it's better when you correct with a friend because you can talk about your mistakes, you can reflect on your production, I mean, you learn more if there is a peer by you correcting the text with you.

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[3] All the examples were originally transcribed in Portuguese. So I decided to translate them into English to make the reading of the text easier.

The peer correction activities have the potential to encourage the students to play an active role in the learning process, since they do not receive information passively from the teacher, as we can see in the following example:

> Eduarda: I myself like discussion. I like it very much. I think that the university is the ideal place for this. So, we read, I read her text, I asked her some questions, I suggested her some things. So, the discussion about the text was good for her and it was also good for me, because we learn from the mistakes. So, when I am talking to her about a text, trying to correct the mistakes, I learn much more than when I just see the teacher writing rules on the blackboard.

As negative aspects of this kind of dialogical correction, the students mentioned, for example, the lack of confidence in their peer's correction, difficulties in finding the mistakes, doubts in correcting the texts, greater reliance on teacher feedback than on peer feedback and errors that are induced by the peer. These may suggest that instructing students both how and why to collaborate may be important. The following example illustrates a situation in which a student made a new mistake because of a suggestion made by a peer:

> Ângela: I think the activity with my colleague, well, she made me alter a structure in my text and later on, when the teacher corrected my text, I saw that my previous structure was correct. So, it was not that good to make a mistake because of a peer's suggestion, you see?

Despite the negative aspects, not only did the collaborative review cause improvements in the written texts, but it also made the students become more motivated and confident as they perceived that they were able to help one another correct the mistakes in the texts. By taking part in this kind of dialogical correction activity,

they started considering correction as a way of learning and not as a way of emphasizing their mistakes.

3.2 THE WORK BY SOUZA (2003), ABOUT COMPUTER-MEDIATED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The work by Souza (2003) aimed at verifying how students from two different cultural backgrounds would perform their learning priorities by means of computer-mediated interaction. To do so, he implemented a telecollaborative project named Projeto de Aprendizagem de Português-Inglês em Regime de *Tandem*. Tandem learning involves the formation of partnerships between foreign language learners who are speakers of different languages and whose goal is to learn each other's language.

Four Brazilian students who took English as a major at Universidáde Federal de Minas Gerais, and 5 Australian students from different courses at the University of Melbourne took part in this study in the second semester of 2001, for ten weeks, and they formed three pairs and a set of three students. These students had to carry out tasks[4] that could only be concluded if they counted on the help from the peers.

As positive aspects of the telecollaborative project, the participants mentioned the fact that they were able to have access to colloquial language, which is generally not present in textbooks, they were able to learn about another culture, as well as they were able to develop metalinguistic awareness, since they had to explain to the peers some grammar and semantic aspects of their L1. The opportunity to learn more about the Portuguese language was mentioned by one of the Australian participants:

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[4] The participants, for instance, were asked to plan a trip to Belo Horizonte and to Melbourne, to talk about current themes in the media, talk about regional food and habits, and so on.

Herber: My diary: I like this idea, it is cool, but it will be difficult for me to take part in the project every week. It will take me long to write 400 words. On the other hand, I will learn more Portuguese than I am learning now because I will not be ashamed to ask a question. I have to go to Biology. Bye.

Linda, another Australian participant, also mentioned the fact that the email exchange between her and the Brazilian partner made her perceive that it was necessary for her to check what she had written and correct some grammar mistakes, which is an indication that this activity has the potential to promote metalinguistic reflection among the participants, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Linda: Meudiario: This week I have learned expressions and words in Portuguese, which I think is what I need to improve my skills in the language. Also I have found out that this project does not only improve my Portuguese but helps me to improve my English. As I check what I have written I discover some little grammar mistakes which need to be corrected.

As negative aspects, the participants mentioned some discrepancies regarding their expectations: some of them were interested in cultural aspects, while others were interested in linguistic aspects; some of them wanted to be corrected, but their peers did not like to correct their mistakes. They also mentioned the fact that it took their peers too long to reply to their messages, as well as that they did not have enough time to effectively take part in the project, due to other duties, which could make impossible the accomplishment of the tasks, as we can see in the following report from a Brazilian student:

Helena: My journal; Hi, Ricardo. Well, my partner didn't show up this week. To tell you the truth, we did not interact during the

Portuguese week[5]. Although I sent her a message about this problem, nothing changed. I did not even receive a reply message. And because of that, I am not as enthusiastic about the project as I used to be in the beginning. I don't know if I will continue taking part in it.

Despite these negative aspects, the students evaluated the project positively, since it promoted meaningful interaction among the participants. They were also able to expand on their linguistic and cultural knowledge by engaging in an interactional activity with a participant from another country.

4 FINAL REMARKS

Both studies, presented here, show us how important collaborative activities are for the learning of another language (L2/FL), be it through face-to-face interaction or through computer-mediated interaction, since the students have the chance to assume an active role in the learning process.

Collaborative activities – besides fostering the transition of other-regulation to self-regulation – still have the potential to promote the development of intellectual, social and affective skills. By working in groups, the students become less anxious when they have to communicate in the second language. The students learn with one another and they have the opportunity to perceive that some learning aspects are easy or difficult for everybody. By working together, they get engaged in a kind of positive interdependence which aims at autonomy.

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[5] The students had to interact in Portuguese for a week and on the following week they had to interact in English, and so on.

Collaboration is a key concept in the teaching-learning process because it emphasizes not only the question of co-construction of knowledge during the accomplishment of tasks, but also the importance of interaction and positive interdependence in human relationships.

So, we, as teachers, should understand the connection of collaborative learning to social support and academic achievement and promote a learning environment where the students can take part in activities which make it possible for them to interact with the peers in a meaningful, collaborative and supportive way, so that they can learn even more from one another.

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