INTERACTION AND SILENCE IN ONLINE COURSES[*]

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RESUMO: *Este trabalho investiga a interação e o silêncio em dois cursos, desenvolvidos através de oficinas virtuais via e-mail e destinados ao desenvolvimento da habilidade de redação em inglês. Embora visando à produção textual, esses cursos percorreram caminhos distintos,direcionados pelos interesses dos participantes, por dificuldades lingüísticas reveladas nas mensagens e pela interpretação do professor para as direções interativas e os momentos de silêncio. Partindo de uma perspectiva vygotskiana de interação e da noção de dialogismo bakhtiniano, foi possível inferir motivos de interação e silêncio, e refletir sobre papéis de alunos e professores em um contexto instrucional mediado pelo computador.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Interação; silêncio; produção escrita; e-mail; curso on-line.*

Introduction

Although some studies have been attempting to figure out the relationship among students and their teacher in online instructional environments, the reasons that compel them to interact or to silence still lack in-depth understanding. Due to that, and particularly because online courses have been gradually more common nowadays, it is necessary to investigate what depicts online interpersonal interaction for instructional purposes,

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as well as what leads students to silence sometimes, remaining quiet in, or *absent from,* online classes.

Motivated by such inquiry, this paper aims at making meaning of *interaction* and *silence* in two specific online courses. These courses were designed according to a *three-dimensional approach* to the teaching and learning of English (Freire, 1998) which, grounded on *experience, reflection,* and *practice,* was realized through *online workshops* (Freire, 2000a, b). Such courses took advantage of the communicative potential e-mail systems have to foster the development of writing skills, and were designed to Brazilian undergraduate students of English enrolled in a public university in the State of São Paulo. In spite of sharing the purpose of producing texts in English as a foreign language, the participants of these two courses accomplished their goals by progressing through distinct pathways, due to the interests tacitly shown by each group of students, to possible linguistic difficulties that emerged from the messages exchanged, and/or to the way the teacher interpreted both the interactive directions and the moments of silence.

By understanding interaction from a vygotskian perspective, and by taking the bakhtinian dialogism into account, the conclusions presented, even though resulting from a small scope research, hint at possible causes that may encourage students' interaction or promote their silence, as well as at reflections upon roles and responsibilities students and teachers may perform in online instructional contexts.

1. The *three-dimensional approach* and its conceptual bases

As stated by Zamel (1987), writing is a process that involves self-negotiation of meaning and that, therefore, results from an inner dialogue tacitly developed by writers who engage themselves in selecting ideas and articulating content and form. From this perspective, the written product not only reflects the writers' thoughts,

feelings, and points of view, but also unconditionally conveys their own *identities* (Ivanĭc, 1994). According to this assumption, writing – seen either as a process or as a product – invariably unveils connections to personal experiences, i.e., to the way writers live, construe, recall, and put their own experiences across, as well as the ones of others which they witness.

In rethinking writing programs in the light of this theoretical assumption, my claim is that an association between *lived experience* (understood as the background knowledge acquired by negotiating meaning in any situation), *reflection* (perceived as the recollection of past events and the continual search for meaning), and *practice* (seen as preparation and as tacit performance) may result in an innovative, three-dimensional approach to the teaching and learning of writing (Freire, 1998: 370-372). This original approach, by leading students to review examples of their own writing and to think about them from a fresh point of view, may provide these learners with opportunities to reflect upon and to re-interpret the tacit frames of the routines recurrently performed when they compose texts in English. By conceiving of a writing program that focuses lesson contents on the search for the features and communicative purposes that characterize situations in which the written presentation of ideas is required students may come up with alternative ways of overcoming their difficulties and expressing themselves in English more effectively. Furthermore, by recalling the circumstances that surrounded the production and reception of particular texts, students of any level may be brought to relive and establish connections between their past and more recent experiences involving the use of the target language. In this regard, leading students to produce various text types and to reflect upon them may therefore enable these students to interact not only with English in a different way but also with their own *experiential continuum* (Dewey, 1938a).

From the perspective of this three-dimensional approach, the written performance may be enhanced by the introduction and

exploitation of an interpretive component which would investigate the meaning of experience and, in particular, the notion of lived experience. In fact, this account of mine was motivated by the arguments presented by van Manen (1990: 36-7), who stresses its implication to studies founded on hermeneutic phenomenology. According to him, knowing what lived experience is becomes an important question since phenomenology aims at transforming lived experience into a textual expression of its essence which acquires hermeneutic significance as we, through recollection, meditation, conversations, or other kinds of interpretive acts, assign significance to the phenomena of lived life. For van Manen, lived experience constitutes the starting point and the end point of an investigation that follows such a methodological path. Dilthey (1985) also emphasizes that life-expression has its source in lived experience whose meaning is understood and expressed again in the form of lived experience (cf. Mueller-Vollmer, 1994: 25-6). These arguments support my search for conceptual clarification and lead me to reflect upon two particular considerations:

> **(1)** Experience is a temporal flow in which every state changes before it is clearly objectified because the subsequent moment always builds on the previous one and each is past before it is grasped. It then appears as a memory which is free to expand. (Dilthey, 1994: 150)

> **(2)** A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflective awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective. (Dilthey, 1985: 223)

The accounts above make me conceive of the flow of experience as a time-related sequence – a sort of *historical chain* (Carr, 1986) – in which previous experiences provide a framework for the subsequent ones. This continuous relationship between past and

more recent experiences indicates a chain of connection and continuity which is, as suggested by Dilthey (1985; 1994), objectively captured through reflection.

A similar association between continuity and experience is addressed by Dewey (1938a). From his perspective, however, this connection is more comprehensive than just perceiving that experiences are sequenced and interrelated. He refers to continuity as also being a criterion that, articulated with the principle of interaction, serves to discriminate between educative and mis-educative experiences. For him, interaction assigns "*equal rights to both factors in experience – objective and internal conditions*" (Dewey, 1938a: 42) which, taken together, form what he terms *situation*. By considering that continuity, interaction and situation constitute inseparable principles for the interpretation of experiences in their "*educational function and force,*" Dewey formulates the theory of *experiential continuum* (1938a: 25-50).

Dewey's theory of experiential continuum is focused on the interconnected flow of various experiences and presupposes a situated process of continuity and interaction. From his viewpoint, knowing is not simply an internal phenomenon for it displays a close relationship with a set of lived experiences while involving an active manipulation of the environment. Nevertheless, if Dewey understands that learning comes about through a continuous process of interaction between previous and subsequent experiences, he does not claim that all experiences are "*genuinely or equally educative*" (Dewey, 1938a: 25). As he points out, such an interpretation primarily depends on the quality that emerges from each interaction as an immediate reaction of agreement-disagreement or acceptance-rejection, as well as on the ways these reactions impact on future experiences. According to Dewey (1938a), as experiences "*neither occur nor remain in a vacuum*" (p. 40), their meaning and their ensuing implications should be interpreted as the result of a continuous process of communication and interaction between

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internal and external factors. Each experience, then, becomes a moving force whose value is understood retrospectively (since new experiences are grounded on the previous ones), as well as prospectively (since past experiences impact on the subsequent ones). From this perspective, therefore, reflecting upon lived experiences – retrospectively and prospectively – requires a process of investigation that includes reflective thought and that involves the inquirer in transaction with the situation. These are the premises suggested by Dewey (1938b) in his *theory of inquiry*, which highlights the "*transactional, open-ended, and inherently social*" (Cf. Schön, 1992: 122). These are also the assumptions on which Schön (1983; 1987; 1991; 1992) formulates his *epistemology of practice*, which portrays his interpretation of Dewey's theory of inquiry, substituting the notion of *reflective practice* for Dewey's *reflective thought* (Schön, 1992: 123).

The arguments presented by Schön (1983: 60-63) underscore that practice has an ambiguous connotation: it not only refers to "*performance in a range of professional situations*;" it also means "*preparation for performance*" which is characterized by repetitive or experimental activities that lead to increasing proficiency. Such an ambiguity implies that, in professional terms, the more stable the practice is, the less subject the practitioner will be to surprise. In other words, the more repetitive and routinized the activities become – and, therefore, the more spontaneously the practitioner behaves – the more s/he will miss "*important opportunities*" (p. 61) to think about or assess his/her own actions. In considering this assumption, reflecting upon practice assumes a special significance in terms of potentially leading professionals to realize the mechanisms that tacitly guided them in the performance of certain tasks.

Schön's notion of reflection upon practice has evolved from the concept of *tacit knowledge* presented by Polanyi (1966-1967). By sharing with him the assumption that we invariably know more than we are able to tell (Polanyi, 1966-1967: 5; Schön, 1983: 49), Schön claims that competent practitioners – and by the same token,

I would say, skilled students – tacitly master the activities they per-
form. However, because they are not aware of having acquired this
sort of knowledge, they can neither verbalize it promptly nor de-
scribe it in detail. For this reason, Schön (1983; 1987; 1991; 1992)
advocates an epistemology of practice constructed upon reflection
and revealed through *reflective turns* which he defines as follows:

> When we attend to what we know already, appreciating the
> artistry and wisdom implicit in competent practice, believing
> that by reflection on that practice we can make some of our
> tacit knowledge explicit, we take a "reflective turn" that leads
> us to [...] a kind of reflective practice, a communicative and
> self-reflective practice of reciprocal inquiry. (Schön, 1992: 123)

In considering Schön's definition above, a reflective turn, by
leading practitioners – as well as students – to realize tacit features
of their routines, represents a *moment of meaning* (Moustakas, 1990:
55-6) through which they encounter their practice, become aware
of its peculiarities and their behaviors, and perhaps become more
conscious of its potential and limitations.

In reflecting upon Dewey's experiential continuum and upon
Schön's epistemology of practice, I figure out that the act of recall-
ing and interacting with the flow of lived experiences, and of distin-
guishing the tacit features involved in routinized activities may lead
practitioners – and students – to perceive the nature and the frames
that depict their practice. The resulting awareness may potentially
help them to identify their most frequent actions and spontaneous
responses; to analyze their individual or group performance; to as-
sess and, if necessary, to reframe or redesign general procedures;
and to create and/or develop strategies to cope with either predict-
able or unexpected situations. By conceiving of their practice from
a reflective perspective, practitioners and students can therefore
interact with their experiences, get involved in making new (herme-
neutic) meaning, and possibly transform such experiences into
educational ones (Dewey, 1938a; 1960; Kolb, 1984). Furthermore,

by associating experience and understanding, they can act on possibilities, *participate*[1] in their routines in an innovative way, and develop themselves in professional and academic terms. Hence, a reflective attitude towards routinized practices may lead professionals and students to acquire and/or enhance their "*experience knowledge*" (Greene, 1991: 37).

Nevertheless, Schön's epistemology of practice emphasized the experiences lived within the boundaries of one specific work-related environment, drawing attention to the reflective behavior possibly performed by members of that particular *community of practice*[2] (Lave and Wenger, 1991) at that particular point in time. It seem to me that Schön disregards the fact that individuals may belong to various communities (either simultaneously or over time) and, therefore, that the experiences lived inside as well as outside the workplace (or the school context) are equally influential in determining who those individuals are, and the way they deal with their professional/academic activities. Taking this constraint into account, I wonder whether the ideas embedded in the metaphor of the *professional knowledge landscape*, presented by Clandinin & Connelly (1995), can bridge the gap I perceive in Schön's notion of reflection upon practice, enriching its principles and enlarging its scope.

The metaphor of the professional knowledge landscape, although having arisen out of the realm of teaching, and having

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[1]   The meaning I attribute to participation regards the one suggested by Lave & Wenger (1991). According to them, "*participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction – indeed, are mutually constitutive*" (p. 51-2).

[2]   According to Lave & Wenger (1991), a community of practice corresponds to "*a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice*" (p. 98). As they remark, this concept involves a largely intuitive notion which requires a more rigorous treatment (p. 42). Although lacking detailed explanation, I interpret their notion as referring to the community that shares common purposes and activities, and whose membership is determined by means of specific modes of participation in typical practices, as happens in business settings, for instance.

been originally designed for teachers as practitioners, seemed to be open to reinterpretations. As described by its authors:

> It [the landscape metaphor] allows us to talk about space, place, and time. Furthermore, it has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships. Understanding professional knowledge as comprising a landscape calls for a notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places, and things. Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it as both an intellectual and a moral landscape. (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995a: 4-5)

I understand that the landscape metaphor provides an excellent ground to deal with the temporal and spatial aspects of professional/academic life. It accounts for the environments in which practitioners and students perform their activities, as well as for the surrounding areas in which they relate to other people and take part in other events. In my opinion, Clandinin & Connelly's metaphor conceives of professionals (and, in this regard, I perceive that it may comprise learners of any sort) in a more comprehensive way, referring to them as individuals who are exposed to various sorts of experiences inside and outside their workplaces (or school contexts). Thus, the metaphor transcends the concept of practice ("*broadly conceived to include intellectual acts and self-exploration*," Clandinin & Connelly, 1995a: 7), and provides a way in which the practitioners' and the students' *personal practical knowledge*[3] can be contextualized.

In addition, the landscape metaphor seems to be particularly relevant to the purpose of investigating the meaning students make of their writing activities. I believe that by motivating them to recol-

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[3]   According to Clandinin (1985), personal practical knowledge is "*knowledge which is imbued with all the experiences that make up a person's being. Its meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of, a person's experiential history, both professional and personal*" (p. 362).

lect their lived experiences and to envision them as part of their metaphorical landscape, teachers may go beyond the characterization of the texts composed as instances of specific *genres* and/or *text types* to provide students with the means to recognize and reflect upon aspects of their tacit writing practice. Moreover, by considering Clandinin e Connelly's landscape metaphor in association with Dewey's experiential continuum, and Schön's epistemology of practice as the rationale for the interpretive inquiry component previously suggested, writing classes will not only reveal the essence of writing as a phenomenon but, particularly, the way students live and understand it. In this regard, by using samples of the texts the students produce as input for interpretive conversations, these students can become inquirers into their own practice and interpreters of their own experience. As a result of recovering and reflecting upon writing routines and procedures, both the students and the teacher can be in touch with a network of lived experiences and understand the place of writing practices within the dimensions of their landscapes.

2. The *Three-dimensional approach* gives rise to *online workshops*

As discussed so far, the three-dimensional approach to teaching and learning (Freire, 1998: 370-2) is based on *experience, reflection,* and *practice* – constructs that render it feasibility for they can be the bases to build a range of instructional environments which may or may not be mediated by technological tools. Grounded on these constructs, the core purpose of the approach I suggest is to allow and motivate students to live new experiences by means of the target foreign language which, in their turn, will provide them with the opportunity to practice this foreign language in the written mode, and to reflect upon it in the light of their metaphorical landscapes. In this sense, requesting students to compose distinct types

of text and, mainly, inviting them to think about the writing products from the perspective of the process that inspires them may engender an inquisitive, interpretive course of action that allows the students to be in touch with the boundaries of their landscapes as well as leading them to perceive alternative ways of dealing with the reception and production of written texts in English.

The three-dimensional approach whose rationale I have been discussing so far may be accomplished through distinct classroom practices and performed either in face-to-face or in online instructional environments. The *workshop* format, however, seems to be remarkably suitable for the implementation of such an approach since it is soundly rooted in the performance of practical activities and not on content systematization predominantly. Therefore, a lesson planned according to a workshop arrangement is largely supported by interactions among participants and by the pedagogical material that may be partly pre-selected or thoroughly joint-created in action. As a workshop renders the instructional setting a much more informal atmosphere, students and teachers may feel much more comfortable to experience, practice, and share reflections together.

Nevertheless, the interaction required to develop a workshop is not exclusively compatible to the face-to-face instructional environments that depict regular schools. Regardless of the specifics of these teaching/learning contexts, the essential interpersonal interaction may be also mediated by computers and successfully encouraged by the communicative potential of the electronic mail, for instance. By taking advantage of this communication tool, the workshops I put forward correspond to online classes in which, by overcoming geographical and time constraints, students and teacher can be together at their convenience, being able to potentially bring about a learning community whose members interact asynchronously.

In the light of the arguments above, I introduce the term *online workshops* (Freire, 1998; 2000a, b) to identify the digital instruc-

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tional setting in which not only expressions of ideas and production of texts can be developed, but in which meaning may be also made, shared and negotiated, as well as interdisciplinary knowledge may be constructed, co-constructed, and/or re-constructed.

At first glance, *online workshops* may be interpreted as bearing a resemblance to *group discussion lists* or to the hackneyed *e-mail message exchange*. Nevertheless, the similarities the three of them may have remain on the surface, restricted to the operational level of mechanical procedures since, to some extent, they require analogous knowledge and manipulation of the computer system. *Online workshops*, in opposition, have definite instructional objectives to be reached through the articulation of *experience, practice* and *reflection*. From the perspective of such a theoretical rational, it is essential to highlight that *online workshops* were not primarily conceived to be restricted to the e-mail environment for the instructional purposes that guide their development can be incontestably achieved through the mediation of other computer-mediated communication tools. The conception of *online workshops* were first and foremost grounded on a *three-dimensional approach* through which the rhythm of interaction and, as a result, the construction of knowledge are guided by the purpose(s) students and teacher negotiate and define as their ultimate goal(s). *Online workshops* have an unambiguous starting point and an explicit target; the paths students and teacher walk through are not strictly pre-established though; they need to be (re-)negotiated in action and (re-)evaluated all the time. These features mainly – and not only the instrumental ones – constitute the distinctiveness that depicts *online workshops* as a unique concept which, grounded on *experience, reflection*, and *practice*, can be used to accomplish interdisciplinary instructional purposes.

In this regard, CMC[4] tools may provide the participants in *online workshops* with the advantage of having their interactions

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[4]   CMC stands for *computer-mediated communication*.

available to be revisited, reviewed, and rethought any time. By recording and displaying the textualization of all the interactions which the participants may go back and forth through, the written messages exchanged throughout *online workshops* constitute a noteworthy experience and practice on writing as well as a suitable input for reflection and interpretation that, in spite of the subject discussed, seem to particularly fit the development of foreign language writing skills.

3. Implementing *onlineWOW* for the first time: intriguing outcomes

Online workshops were carried out for the first time by a Brazilian teacher of English and four Brazilian undergraduate students who interacted through e-mail – a communication tool all of them could access at the public university they respectively worked and studied in. The four volunteer students were pre-service teachers of English who, by being enrolled in the last year of their Language Course and bearing in mind its forthcoming conclusion, were primarily interested in improving their foreign language writing skills. Apart from that, they were attracted to participate in an online two-month, non-compulsory sequence of activities in which they were supposed to interact at least twice a week. By taking into account that the *online workshops* would be focused on *writing* exclusively, the group labeled them *onlineWOW*, and established that, throughout their online interactions, they would deal with and reflect upon descriptive, narrative, and argumentative texts.

As the teacher and the students belonged to the same educational institution, but had never had the opportunity to share formal lessons, they had an introductory face-to-face meeting in which the students, by foreseeing the way they would possibly feel in their very first experience online, decided they would interact with the teacher on an individual basis, as illustrated overleaf:
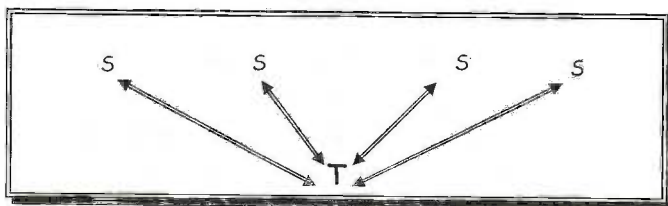
Figure 1: *OnlineWOW:* the *one-to-one* pattern of interaction.

In order to set the message exchange off, the teacher provided the students with the four questions below which aimed, on the one hand, at getting data to draw their profiles and, on the other hand, to allow them to start writing about something they certainly know very well and would feel quite comfortable to talk about (i.e., their lived experiences):

How have you started to learn English?
How do you perceive yourself as a language speaker?
How have you started to use computers?
How do you perceive yourself as computer user?

By responding to these questions, the students started composing texts in English, getting involved in reflecting upon them in terms of content and form. They got engaged in a movement of recollecting events, describing past and recent experiences in and with the target language, expressing ideas about their performance in English, and revealing how they perceived themselves as language learners/speakers and computer users. Therefore, by recalling life episodes and commenting on previous experiences, they started realizing the boundaries of their *metaphorical landscapes* (Clandinin e Connelly, 1995a: 4-5). Table 1 provides a synopsis of the *onlineWOW* development, summing up the meaning made of the e-mail messages exchanged:

FLOW OF INTERACTION	● one-to-one
	● regulated by action
MESSAGE CONTENT	● co-constructed by the teacher and each student
	● decided in action throughout interaction
NATURE OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES DISCUSSED	● students as language learners/speakers
	● students as computer users
FLOW OF REFLECTION	● self-reflection
	● student-teacher shared reflections
TEXT TYPES PRODUCED AND EXCHANGED	● descriptive
	● narrative
	● argumentative
FEEDBACK	● customized
	● negotiated until the most efficient format was reached
ROLES PLAYED BY THE STUDENTS AND THE TEACHER	● each student and the teacher as interlocutors
	● each student and the teacher as partners in individual discoveries

Table 1: OnlineWOW overview.

Although the shared decision on maintaining the flow of interaction as established in the initial meeting, the group was forced to cope with a series of unexpected difficulties that prevented them from exchanging messages on a regular basis. Some of these were technical problems caused either by the maintenance of the server or the availability of computers at the university – or even by temporary breakdowns occurred with personal equipment. Some other times, the schedule of assignments got so harsh that the students felt forced to postpone the activities which were not strictly related to the subject matters they were enrolled in. Due to that, four months had passed and the *onlineWOWers* still felt they were unable to achieve their pre-established goals. Nevertheless, they were really interested in finishing what they had committed themselves to because, on the one hand, they realized they were actually improving their writing skills and, on the other hand, the discussion had spontaneously evolved towards a critical direction, addressing teacher's

development issues – an area which was particularly relevant to whom would become a teacher in the end of that specific school year.

Considering the unexpected routine the *onlineWOW* ended up with, the group had a second face-to-face meeting in which the extension of the online discussions was decided. As a consequence, the message exchange course was re-examined and two specific details were reframed: (1) the participants' discussion would be focused on the theme *The teacher I would like to be*; and (2) the pattern of interaction would change from *one-to-one* to *one-to-many* so that comments and reflections could be shared by the whole group, as illustrated below:
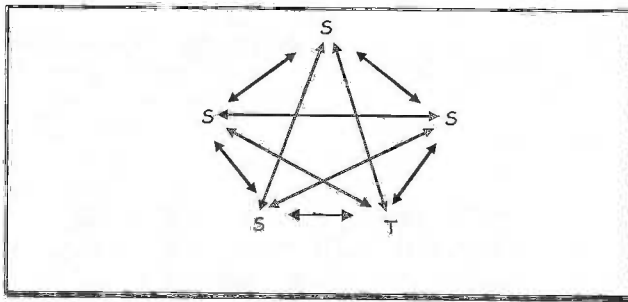

Figure 2: *OnlineWOW:* the new teacher-student pattern of interaction.

The decisions made by the students and the teacher gave rise to a second phase in the group's joint reflection process which was then depicted as follows:

THEME: THE TEACHER I WOULD LIKE TO BE	
FLOW OF INTERACTION	• *one-to-many* • regulated by action
MESSAGE CONTENT	• co-constructed by the group • decided in action throughout interaction
NATURE OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES DISCUSSED	• teachers' development issues • teachers' professional practice
FLOW OF REFLECTION	• self-reflection • reflections shared with the whole group
TEXT TYPES PRODUCED AND EXCHANGED	• descriptive • narrative • argumentative (summary: provided by the teacher to sum up discussions)
FEEDBACK	• shared with the whole group • negotiated until the most efficient format was reached
ROLES OF THE STUDENTS AND THE TEACHER	• students and teacher as interlocutors • teacher as a *moderator* sometimes • students and teacher as partners in group discoveries

Table 2: *OnlineWOW* overview – second phase.

Throughout this second phase, the participants still had to face the same technical and academic obstacles that had, in the first phase, obstructed the flow of communication between the teacher and each student. At this point, however, the impact of the silence – interpreted as *absence* – of any member of the group could be much more expressive, for the flow of interaction should be nurtured by all participants who were supposed to make comments on the others' comments, as well as reflecting upon someone else's reflections. In this regard, therefore, being unable for any reason to receive and/or send messages meant being temporarily out of the conversation, prevented from expressing opinions, from sharing reflections and, in the long run, from practicing writing. In other words, some delay could be acceptable, but being *off-line* for a significant period of time would mean being *left behind*, with few op-

portunities to catch up with the discussion and consequently to take turns *on* and *in* time.

Similarly to the first phase, the accomplishment of pre-established goals took much more time than formerly decided and, for this reason, the second phase of the *onlineWOW* was concluded five months after its beginning. Throughout its development and for the purpose of keeping the group (or at least part of it) continuously attuned to the discussions addressed, the content of the e-mail messages exchanged referred either to the main topic the group had enacted predominantly or to any intriguing one suggested by one particular student. By pursuing this course of action, the interactive movement at times encouraged the engagement of the whole group in collaborative construction of knowledge, other times brought out more individualized learning.

Regardless of some unexpected difficulties, the first implementation of *onlineWOW* accomplished much more than initially planned: besides allowing students to reflect upon their experiences and performance as language learners/users and writers, the workshops made them realize the boundaries of their *metaphorical landscapes* (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995a: 4-5), not only in terms of foreign language writing skills but particularly in professional terms. According to their evaluation, *onlineWOW* provided them with the opportunity to be exposed to and practice the foreign language in an innovative way, as well as unveiling doubts and anxieties regarding the professional career they would start in quite a near future. Moreover, this online experience led them to learn how to deal with and communicate through computers. In other words, the *online workshops*, initially conceived to apply the three-dimensional approach to the teaching/learning of foreign language writing skills, actually became a forum through which pre-service teachers' growth could be also fostered. Hence, the outcomes from this implementation of *onlineWOW* support the assumption that they can be interdisciplinary instructional sites.

4. Offering *onlineWOW* for the second time: more intriguing outcomes

OnlineWOW were offered for the second time by the same teacher, in the same public university, and under a similar depiction: a two-month, non-compulsory sequence of online activities which demanded the exchange of at least two e-mail messages a week. The participants formed a group of eight undergraduate students of English, attracted by the possibility of exposing themselves to this language in a unique way, and of improving foreign language writing skills. Similarly to the previous group, these participants were pre-service teachers of English; however, by being enrolled in the third year (and not in the last one of their course), they had not experienced professional pressures and demands of any sort.

In an introductory face-to-face meeting, the group discussed the purpose of their online interactions; set up descriptive, narrative, and argumentative texts as their ultimate writing target, and defined *one-to-many* as their communication pattern, as shown below:
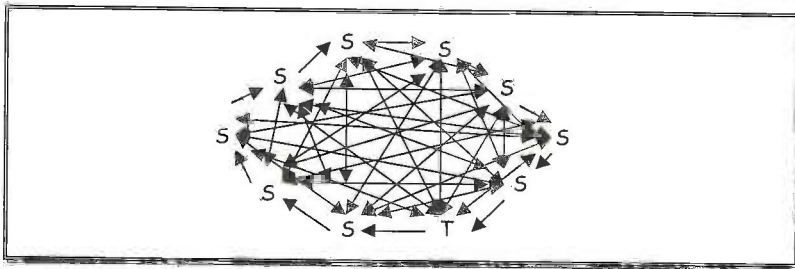

Figure 3: *OnlineWOW*: the *one-to-many* pattern of interaction.

Considering the number of students involved this time and their prevalent linguistic motivation, the workshops had a distinct beginning: rather than asking some questions as preliminary input, but by bearing in mind the purpose of portraying their individual profiles, the students were invited to compose a short,

descriptive text to introduce themselves to the group and, particularly, to the teacher (who did not know them). Following this opening task, a sequence of individual or group activities would be planned according to the flow of interaction. Through them, *experience*, *reflection*, and *practice* would be provided to and fostered among participants. As for the structure, even though not entirely pre-defined, the *onlineWOW* were designed to have the following orientation:

FLOW OF INTERACTION	• one-to-many • regulated by action
MESSAGE CONTENT	• input provided by the teacher (task format) • tasks involving individual and then group activities • based on group interaction • decided in action throughout interaction
NATURE OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES DISCUSSED	• experiences lived in/with the FL • experiences lived through task development • experiences lived through reflections upon the tasks • comments on individual and group performance
FLOW OF REFLECTION	• self-reflection • reflections shared with the whole group
TEXT TYPES PRODUCED AND EXCHANGED	• descriptive • narrative • argumentative
FEEDBACK	• shared with the whole group • negotiated until the most efficient format was reached
ROLES OF THE STUDENTS AND THE TEACHER	• students and teacher as interlocutors • teacher as a *moderator* sometimes • students and teacher as partners in group discoveries

Table 3: *OnlineWOW* overview.

Although the participants were highly motivated to start interacting, difficulties came their way almost immediately: firstly, a number of technical problems prevented some of the students from accessing their e-mail accounts. After overcoming them, a strike that involved the three public universities of São Paulo forced the group to interrupt their online activities for more than two months

because only some students had computers at home. Regardless of these circumstances, the group tried to keep together and re-started the workshops almost three months after its pre-scheduled beginning.

Nevertheless, due to the strike and the resultant need to compensate classes and activities previously programmed and unexpectedly postponed, the students felt trapped in a timetable that provided short deadlines to the completion of assignments, research, and tests which should be quickly re-scheduled and re-inserted in an already tough calendar. As a result, they gradually started reducing the flow of interaction, imposing interruptions which were, at least in the beginning, followed by reminder messages from the teacher. At last, seven of them, one after another, stopped responding to the messages, forcing the teacher to conclude the activities even without addressing argumentative texts. The *drop-out* students offered no explicit explanation for their attitude: some of them avoided coming across the teacher; others, when a meeting in person was inevitable, provided evasive excuses, asserting they would make an effort to catch up with the message exchange and with the delayed tasks. They never managed to do that, though.

In fact, only one student succeeded in submitting the assignments and concluding the discussions upon description and narration. By reflecting upon the group's and upon his own performance, this student revealed how disappointed he was with his classmates who were unable not only to cope with the circumstances but also to share difficulties with the *onlineWOWers*. From his perspective, the decision they made contributed to detract the workshops from their main purpose and led them to miss the opportunity to live an interesting experience in the foreign language, to reflect upon the texts produced, and to improve their writing skills. These reflections reveal that, to some extent, the *onlineWOW* reached their goals and, at least to this particular student, they made a difference.

Making meaning of the *onlineWOWers'* interaction and silence

In picturing a classroom, the image that more often comes to mind is, as pointed out by Laplane (2000: 8-10), the one of a place in which teaching and learning take place; ideas are exchanged; assignments and activities are undertaken; people talk, read, and write; and debates occur. However, this author also draws attention to the fact that a classroom may be also conceived of a site in which neither all the people exchange ideas, talk, read, write or discuss all the time. This counter-argument leads to the assumption that a classroom should be then perceived as a *locus* in which both *interaction* and *silence* may naturally come about as potential outcomes of environments that associate teacher and students together in any kind of instructional activity. Nevertheless, while interaction is treasured as a positive quality that plays a crucial role in the process of constructing knowledge collaboratively; silence has been placed on the opposite end, suggesting *isolation* and/or *failure* sometimes, but more often regarded as an *interaction problem*.

By interpreting these two constructs from a vygotskían and a bakhtinian perspective (Vygotsky, 1984; Bakhtin, 1995), we assume that learning and development emerge from and evolve through social interactions in which the role played by the *other* in the actions shared are primarily dialogic and linguistically mediated. Bakhtin (1995: 113), in scrutinizing language as an interaction mediator, highlights that *a word* is a bridge through which the individual and the *other* are bound together, thus revealing their interrelationships and, at the same time, setting a common territory in which both act, react, and interact. In addition to addressing issues regarding interaction and discussing the relationships between utterances produced and received, Bakhtin also distinguishes *stillness* from *silence*, assuming that the former implies "*no noise*" while the latter indicates that "*nobody speaks*" (cf. Laplane, 2000: 65). From his perspective, silence may be under-

stood as the *exchange utterance condition* so that, rather than suggesting an *interaction problem* (as mentioned above), it may depict a *listening position*.

The arguments presented so far, although having arisen out of the realm of face-to-face interactions, and having been more frequently applied to the understanding of face-to-face teaching-learning environments, seem to provide trustworthy foundation on which the comprehension of online instructional settings – like the ones focused on in this study – may be coherently grounded.

In reviewing *onlineWOW* applications and reflecting upon them from the perspective of the theoretical bases presented above, it is possible to conclude that, similarly to any face-to-face classroom, both occasions were depicted by meaningful instances of interaction, as well as of significant moments of silence. In the first phase of the workshops developed by the first group, for instance, interactions performed a more likely unilateral, linear direction which was determined by the *one-to-one* format selected by the students. According to it, the flow of interaction enacted and maintained between the teacher and each student generated a *pair-work* conversational rhythm through which private concerns were presented and discussed. The alternation between taking turns and pausing, however, took place in a peculiar way for although the teacher tried to take individual differences into account as well as considering possible difficulties regarding the students' linguistic background or their workload at the university, a long delay in replying to a message – i.e., a long *pause* – was subtly reminded by the teacher and almost always promptly attended to by each student.

The second phase of the workshops developed by this first group, however, was illustrated not only by another pattern of interaction (*one-to-many*), but also by a *turn-taking* and *pause* movement that highlighted distinct levels of involvement and participation in the discussions all the group should take part in. Intriguingly enough, a supposedly collaborative work that would become visible

by the whole group's message exchange rhythm, gradually evolved to an unusual kind of participation through which the group, in addition to dealing with the meanings made throughout the reflections conveyed, had also to cope with some students' long pauses, interrupted by relevant comments on ongoing issues and sometimes followed, again, by another prolonged silence moment. Such a performance indicated that, although sometimes *silent* – i.e., without sending any message to make their attendance conspicuous – these students were invariably attuned to the issues addressed, probably involved in a kind of *self-reflection* or *inner conversation* that allowed them to be able to re-engage themselves in the flow of conversation and to respond to it coherently. In other words, they were there, in the *online* classroom, receiving and reading the messages, considering the arguments presented, reflecting upon them, but probably: (1) not finding time enough to compose a text to properly convey their opinions in a foreign language on time and in time to take the turn, or (2) not knowing how to convey their viewpoints, suggestions, or reflections in English. The apparent absence of one or more students from discussions and their return to conversation in a pertinent way demonstrated that they were *legitimate peripheral participants* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) who could somehow overcome linguistic constraints and undoubtedly contribute to the reflections on their own pace.

Among the participants of this first group, the performance of one student should be referred to for she not only enacted the *onlineWOW* goals as the ones of her own, but also attempted to inspire her online classmates to do the same. Many times, she tried to break the other students' silence, by evoking them to interact, by asking thought-provoking questions, and by stating she was looking forward to hearing from them. This student developed a very interesting way to interact with the textual material produced throughout the *onlineWOW*: she printed all messages, studied the comments made on content and form, and attempted to deliber-

ately incorporate the highlighted structures or expressions to subsequent messages. By following the study routine she spontaneously established and strictly engaged herself in, she could succeed in improving her written expression in English. Undoubtedly, she tried to reach a high level of interaction with the group but, mainly, she established a high level of interaction with her own *self* and, as a result, she could have a clear picture of herself within the boundaries of her metaphorical *landscape.* Perhaps this was the reason why she refused to stop the online interactions and, for some time, she persevered with sending the teacher electronic messages written in English.

Similar engagement, responsibility, and persistence could be perceived as features that characterized the only student who reached the pre-established goals in the second group. Such a student and the one described above had distinct study routines but certainly the same determination and desire to evolve and to motivate classmates to practice, to reflect upon, and to experience the foreign language in an innovative way. Nevertheless, it is to some extent difficult – and, in fact, unfair – to confront the job performed by the two groups because, in spite of having writing purposes as their common target, the circumstances that surrounded and depicted the second group impacted on the implementation of the workshops and, naturally, on their development. Having to overcome initial technical problems and the natural consequences of a two-month strike constituted challenging requirements for those students who suddenly had to figure out how to re-arrange their timetable to fulfill compulsory commitments that started piling up. In this regard, the *onlineWOW* were an optional activity that, under such a depiction and at that point of that particular school year, they might find themselves somehow unable to cope with or they just did not want to undertake anymore.

The picture portrayed above may explain the sequence of moments of silence that characterized the development of the work-

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shops with the second group of students. In this particular case, silence seemed neither to designate a *listening position* nor a *problem of interaction* for, considering the quantity and the content of the e-mail messages exchanged, the students were respectively neither waiting for taking turns at the right time nor facing any linguistic difficulty that could prevent them from interacting in English (at least, if this was the case, it was never verbalized). It seems that silence was then used by the students as a kind of *shield* to subtle avoid letting the teacher know they felt forced by the situation and simply wanted to give up a commitment already made. In this regard, if silence meant *stop to think* in most part of the interactive job performed by the first group, it more likely meant *stop thinking* for most part of the students of the second group; nevertheless, it did not necessarily implied *stop reading,* for neither one of the ultimately labeled *drop-out students* asked to be excluded from the group and, for this reason, they received – and perhaps read – all the messages exchanged.

As stated above, silence may have various connotations: if perceived as a *listening position* or a sign of *legitimate peripheral participation*, it has a positive implication that places it much closer to the notion of interaction. On the other hand, if understood as an *interaction problem* or as a kind of *shield*, it is figured out as opposed to interaction and as an outcome that has negative repercussions. Nevertheless, whatever the meaning one makes, the online teacher seems to be trapped when s/he has to deal with silent students and know whether they are still there, attending online classes. The online teacher may come up with dilemmas that can be translated by questions such as: *when should I interfere with one online student's silence?; should I wait until the silent student feels like interacting and meanwhile devoting my time to feed communication among the rest of the group?; how long do I have to wait until asking a silent student what happened?; may chasing silent students lead them to escape definitely?; to what extent am I supposed to respect*

the right online students have to give up courses?; to what extent do I have to allow students to interact only at their convenience and to follow their own pace exclusively? – just to mention some of the unsolved questions. The hesitations that underlie such an inquiry impact on the online teacher's performance leading him/her, throughout the whole course, to play close attention to the interest revealed by online students, to the linguistic difficulties that emerge from the messages exchanged, and mostly to possible ways of interpreting the interactive directions undertaken and resulting moments of silence. Similarly, the doubts mentioned above impact on the designer of online programs who – sometimes alone, sometimes together with the teacher – has to decide to what extent an online course should be grounded on or provide opportunities of substantial interpersonal interaction.

The discussion presented above reveals that if investigating classroom interaction leads us to noteworthy insights, inquiring on classroom silence may be also enlightening, particularly if the instructional setting is the digital one for, in such environments, participants should interact somehow and with someone in order to negotiate meaning, construct knowledge, and confirm their attendance as well. Nevertheless, interaction and silence can not be researched in isolation for the meaning of one of them only reveals its depths once it has come into contact with the other. This perception may be understood as an advice to provide substantial bases for further investigation in online instructional environments.

ABSTRACT: *This paper aims at making meaning of interaction and silence in two online courses carried out through e-mail online workshops. In spite of sharing the purpose of producing texts in English, the participants accomplished their goals by progressing through distinct pathways, due to the interests they revealed, to linguistic difficulties that emerged from messages, and to the way the teacher interpreted interactive directions and moments of silence. By considering interaction from a vygotskian perspective and by taking the bakhtinian dialogism into account, it was pos-*

sible to hint at possible reasons for interaction and silence, and to reflect upon roles students and teachers may perform in a computer-mediated instructional environment.

KEYWORDS: Interaction; silence; writing skills; e-mail; online course.

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