THE USE OF HYPERTEXT IN CLASSES OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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RESUMO

As Novas Tecnologias de Comunicação e Informação (NTICs) têm transformado a sociedade e essas transformações refletem uma necessidade de mudança para escolas, alunos e professores. Nesse sentido, o hipertexto foi escolhido para ser utilizado como fonte para promover a língua inglesa oral em estudantes brasileiros. Nesta pesquisa qualitativa foram utilizados como instrumentos de coleta de dados um questionário para definir o perfil dos participantes da pesquisa, entrevistas com grupo focal, autorrelatos e notas de campo. Os dados obtidos revelaram que o hipertexto, por meio de suas características de não linearidade e de hipermodalidade, foi eficaz na promoção do desenvolvimento das habilidades orais em língua inglesa, além de auxiliar no desenvolvimento dos novos papeis de professores e alunos para atuarem na, então denominada, Sociedade da Informação.
Palavras-chave: Hipertexto; Prática Oral; Língua Inglesa.

ABSTRACT: New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) have been transforming society and these transformations reflect a need for change for schools, students and teachers. In this sense, hypertext was chosen to be used as a resource to promote oral English language for Brazilian students. In this qualitative research, a questionnaire to define the profile of the participants of the research, focus group interviews, self-report and field notes were used as instruments of data collection. The data obtained revealed that hypertext, through its characteristics of non-linearity and hypermodality, was effective in promoting the development of oral English skills, and it also led to the development of new roles of teachers and students to act in the so-called Information Society.
Keywords: Hypertext; Oral Practice; English Language.

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Introduction

New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) have been transforming people´s personal and professional lives, because communication, both written and oral, is now performed in different ways from what it used to be before we had global access to the Internet. This new context reflects changes in ways of acquiring and producing knowledge in the contemporary society.

In order to minimize the differences between school and life outside school and to help students of English in the intermediate/upper-intermediate level enhance their speaking abilities, it was decided to develop some English classes by using hypertext as a tool to promote oral practice. This decision was also made due to the understanding that it is common for Brazilian students, when learning the English language, that after reaching the intermediate/ upper-intermediate level of language proficiency, their oral production seems to develop more slowly than at the beginning of their learning process. One of the reasons which may contribute to this hypothesis is the fact that for some oral practice to happen, teachers tend to use a text, which can be either written or oral, or even a video, and then present some questions/discussions on this material. However, with this type of activity all learners read, listen to or watch the same material, and so, they are likely to have just one point of view about the topic presented. When this happens, the most talkative students tend to discuss all the content at once, so that not all learners have the same opportunities to express themselves, especially the shiest ones.

Therefore, it is part of the teacher´s role to think about activities that promote opportunities for all students to express themselves, regardless of the moment when they feel ready to interact. In this sense, we believe new information and communication technologies, including hypertext, could make such conditions possible, once they reflect changes in the ways of presenting, acquiring and producing knowledge in the so-called Information Society (IS).

Taking this into account and in order to promote the development of oral English skills through new language practices for Brazilian students, a course based on hypertexts was designed and the participants wrote self-reports and participated in interviews with focus groups to demonstrate their perceptions on the use of hypertext.

This study also permitted to verify whether the use of hypertext helped to develop digital literacy, and the new roles of students and teachers in the contemporary society. Ramal (2002), as quoted by Piconez (2010), says teachers' role is to transform passive citizens into active and critical ones. Students are expected to develop autonomy.

The aim of this paper is to present part of the results of an investigation to explore the use of hypertext in the classes of English as a foreign language, as a means of developing speaking skills through new language practices. It is organized in the following way: firstly, a discussion about digital literacy and hypertext is presented. Next, the methodology used is explained, followed by the data analysis and the final remarks.

Some considerations about digital literacy and hypertext

Digital literacy

Most of the concepts of digital literacy emerged from the definition of Gilster (1997), "digital literacy is about mastering ideas, not keystrokes". Gilster further defines digital literacy as "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers". With this definition, the author shows that knowing how to use technology and searching for information is not enough; it is necessary to know how to make use of this information in real life. The author suggests that there are four major digital literacy skills: searching the Internet, browsing in hypertext, gathering information and evaluating content. The author also emphasizes critical thinking.

Martin (2006), quoted by Bawden (2008, 22), states that digital literacy is:

> the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesise digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process. (MARTIN, 2006)

For Xavier (2005), knowing how to use multimodalities is part of being digitally literate, because it involves changes in the way people read and write verbal and non-verbal signals, if we compare them to the ways we do these activities in the book.

Thus, we can say that digital literacy includes the ability to search, filter, synthesize and transform information into new knowledge, taking into account the social practice, as well as incorporating the ability to be critical in relation to the information available on the Internet, so that one is not influenced by it, but able to use it in his favor and benefit to society.

Hypertext

Generally speaking, hypertext, according to Xavier (2005) allows simultaneous access to texts, images and sounds in an interactive and non-linear way, permitting the reader to control their navigations on the web.

This characteristic of non-linearity of the hypertext is essential for the information society, because the links let the readers have the freedom to choose the path to be followed, create their own text, and consequently, we can say that it helps develop their autonomy.

In this direction, Xavier (2009) says that the nonlinearity stimulates the occurrence of various interpretations, and it has "the power to increase the autonomy of the hyper-reader in relation to what was read, permitting him to easily circulate by multiple virtual sites and return to the baseline, when desired," decentralizing knowledge in general, and providing more knowledge or, at least, more information about what he wants.

The hypermodality, another feature of hypertext, which refers to the combination of multimodality and hypertextuality, not only allows connections between units of the text in various scales, but links between units of the text, visual elements and sound units. These combinations are very interesting and important when we think of developing oral practice through hypertext, because according to Khan (1997), as quoted by Buzato (2001), the Internet has characteristics that benefits different learning styles due to the presence of different multimedia elements such as sound, image and text. The Internet also helps to develop intercultural interaction, multidisciplinarity and the control by the student of what he wants to learn or search.

According to Felder and Henriques (1995), presenting the same material in different ways has a reinforcing effect in the retention / fixation of the content. They also add that the challenge for language teachers is to create ways to increase verbal presentation in the classroom with nonverbal visual material.

With regard to intercultural interaction, we can say that it is made possible by overcoming the barriers of space and time, allowing students to search distant cultures and civilizations through different points of view, i.e., they do not need to be limited to a single author. With the Internet and hypertext, students can access the opinion of several authors.

A multidisciplinary approach is also justified by the fact that the Internet provides access to a variety of different perspectives on the same subject.

Finally, there is "control by the student". As Buzato (2001) points out, students can control what, how and the order in which they learn, with a greater variety of ways to express their understanding of the issues studied. In this sense, it is possible to say that this quality of hypertext also helps develop autonomy, one of the new roles of students and teachers in the information society.

Methodology

This article results from a qualitative study developed in Brazil, at a public university and it included the participation of a teacher-researcher (TR) and five students (S1 - S5) from a Language and Literature course.

In the next table, some information about the students who took part in this research is presented, such as age, how many hours they usually spent on the Internet, their knowledge about computer skills, digital literacy and familiarity with hypertext.

Table 1: Students´Profile

Student	Male/female	Age	Time spent on the internet every day	Computer skills knowledge	Digitally literate	Familiarity with hypertext
A 1	F	20	6h	A little	Yes	No
A 2	M	19	2h-3h	Yes	Not completely	Yes
A 3	F	21	6h	A little	Not completely	No
A 4	F	26	1h-2h	Yes	Not completely	No
A 5	M	19	3h-5h	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Author (2017)

The information above as well as the topics suggested for the classes were gathered through a questionnaire which was handed out to the students before the beginning of the course.

After analyzing the information in the questionnaire, the course was prepared and the data were collected in an extracurricular eight-hour length course, spread over eight classes, which aimed to contribute to the development of oral language skills of the students.

The topics chosen by them were used during classes as we can see below:

Table 2: Topics of the classes

CLASSES	TOPICS
CLASS 1	British Culture: Street Parties
CLASS 2	Current Issues
CLASS 3	Sports: Olympic Games
CLASS 4	Countries: General Information
CLASS 5	Countries: specialties about different countries
CLASS 6	Movies: plots
CLASS 7	Movies: actors and specific characteristics
CLASS 8	Educational System

Source: Author (2017)

The topic about countries and movies aroused great interest, a lot of discussions and interactions, and they also led to new sub-topics. For this reason, two classes were necessary for each of them. For example, in relation to countries, aspects

related to geography, culture, food and language were discussed. Thus, it was not possible to have classes with all the themes suggested by the students, as we can see in the following excerpt taken from the self-report of A1: "The topics were very interesting because they included things that all of us liked. I only missed music."[3]

In each class the students were allowed from 15 to 20 minutes to do research about the topic of the class, before they started their presentations.

Among the collection instruments employed, a questionnaire was applied at the first meeting (as mentioned above) in order to raise issues of interest to students, information about their knowledge in relation to computer use, familiarity with hypertext and expectations regarding the use of hypertext as a resource to promote oral skills in English.

In addition to the questionnaire, focus group interviews, field notes and self-reports were also used so that students could write their perceptions about the use of hypertext.

All the classes happened in rooms with Wi-Fi Internet and the students had their own notebook to browse the Internet, do their research and then talk about the topic suggested.

Besides the access to the texts, which included all forms of media (sound, image, written texts), students could also access online dictionaries to check vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as any link they were interested in.

During their presentations, which happened after the 15-to-20-minute research, students were able to browse the Internet at any time they want, to search for information that was not clear for them or simply because they felt like having more information about a specific topic.

There was not an order for the presentations. Students were free to choose who to start it and they could interfere at any moment, because we were more interested in having spoken interaction in English and not only a single performance.

Data Analysis

One of the topics of the classes was about sports. The teacher-researcher started the class with a warm-up, asking students-participants if they liked sports. Then,

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[3] Translation for: "Os assuntos foram bem interessantes, pois englobavam coisas que todos nós gostávamos. Só senti falta de música."

she suggested a site with a short text about the Olympics, and from the discussion of the text, she asked them if the information contained in that text had been sufficient or if they would like to know more about that topic.

They said they would like to get more information about the Olympic sports and also about the places where the competitions would take place. Therefore, the teacher-researcher suggested two electronic addresses. These addresses were hyperlinked and so they had several links that would lead them to wherever they wished.

The choice made by the TR, for a written text and a hypertext, was to verify the students' perceptions in relation to different types of texts and check if the oral practice actually suffers significant changes regarding the use of hypertext.

When asked about the role of the written text as a source of information for discussion, participants said they felt limited, as it can be seen in the self-report of S5: "I felt limited, with nothing to speak" (referring to the text in his self-report 1).

With the information obtained through the hypertext they could practice speaking in the English Language over a longer period because they had content to chat and interact with other participants. When they were interested in a specific sport, there was the possibility to access links that would take them to specific characteristics of the sport, as required equipment, rules/regulations, and different modalities of the sport. They also had the possibility to access links about previous Olympics with information about where the sports took place, providing them a little knowledge of the culture of different places and countries.

According to the participants, the access to different links made them capable of speaking more, and also do research that would allow the understanding of something that could not have been very clear in the first text they read.

Students expressed these ideas in their first self-report:

> S1: If I have more links to search, I´ll be able to speak more.
> S1: Using one text we are supposed to focus in one idea, in one point of view, and because of it I couldn´t understand some parts of the text. Using more links (hypertexts), I could research the points that I didn´t understand and also search some curiosities.
> S2: It's sure that the more tools you have, the more you can go deeper into a subject.

Concerning that, it is possible to say that texts with links allow us argue more and more about something. Therefore, we can claim that the use of hypertext enable us

to have several ways to approach the same point, opposite to the traditional texts, which usually don't offer their readers this possibility.

Another student (S4) stated that the hypertext provided them with much more information and immediate information as well, whereas without Internet, the interaction with the classmates was poor, due to the fact they had to depend only on their knowledge.

It is possible to relate these data with the development of autonomy, so important nowadays in the new roles of students and teachers. The hypertext motivated them to go deeper into a subject, to see different points of view, making them responsible for their learning. This does not mean having complete control of what happens in the classroom, but "the more we empower them and give them agency, the more likely they are to stay motivated over a long period" (Harmer 2007, 103)

Access to different links , and consequently to different information and different points of view, is possible due to the characteristic of non-linearity of hypertext, which, according to Xavier (2009) allows the reader to visit several sites, providing more knowledge or at least more information . To Buzato (2001), this type of access also allows the student to control what, how and the order to learn, besides offering opportunities to express their understanding from a wider variety of media.

In this sense, we can relate this characteristic of hypertext to the hypothesis of topicalization (Ellis 1990), which suggests that the production of students is enriched as they have the chance to name the topics to be discussed and control its development. According to Ellis (1986) quoted by Ellis (1990, p. 123-124) "fluency-work in the classroom (i.e. activities designed to allow the learners to use their existing resources in natural communication) is enhanced by handing topic control over to the learner."

Ellis (1990, p. 125) states that, "This kind of output can serve as valuable input for other learners." He also adds that the learner would benefit much more from a topic started by another learner than a topic initiated by the teacher and, although, the production is a factor that must be emphasized, it is important to remember that this production takes place in a context of interaction.

The hypermodality also appears as a very relevant aspect in the reports. In a comparison of the text with hypertext, S2 reported:

> Another point is that this technological tool makes the reading and the interaction much more dynamic, interesting, exciting, because the student has around him different genres, like video, picture, etc., by

working as complementary data. In short, surf the Net is a lot of profitable certainly.

It is possible to observe from the report just mentioned that hypermodality also promotes motivation and supports different learning styles , which is called "multimediatism" by Khan (1997), as quoted by Buzato (2001), with its variety of styles : verbal text , audio and images.

In another class we discussed about countries and the students were very excited when S2 said his research was about Australia. Then the teacher asked if they would like to visit this country and asked them to give their opinions. After all the comments, S2 effectively began his presentation, which had several interactions of the other participants, who searched for more information in real time. S5, for example, found a video on the Internet to show the Australian accent. S3 added that the natives of that country use a lot of slangs and talked about some of them, which made everyone search a little bit more about slangs in Australia and talk about them. This confirms that interest in the topic promotes one of the interactive principles that Brown (2007, p. 73) calls "willingness to communicate", which results in both production of the learner and input for the learner. According to the author, this principle requires a learner's attitude that says, "I *want* to reach out to others and communicate".

In interviews with focus group conducted after the discussions on the topic *countries*, students-participants discussed about the use of hypertext as a resource to promote oral practice and reported that it provided a lot of information, with a link leading to another and according to them, this made them communicate more, developing the speaking ability, because everyone had some information to add or a comment to make.

In relation to the interaction, they were unanimous to state that the several features provided by hypermodality helped greatly in oral production , because they could also make comments of the videos and pictures and not only of the verbal text. This shows us that the variety of input is important because heterogeneity is a hallmark of our classrooms, as it is common to find, in the same classroom , students who have different levels of linguistic and cultural knowledge, speed of learning, intellectual development, in addition to the different learning styles and preferences.

Harmer (2007, p. 128) says that, "one way of offering different content is to allow students to make choices about what material they are going to work with." We

therefore believe that hypertext makes the work of the teacher easier, because its hypermodality allows the presence of a lot of kinds of materials through a lot of modalities (images, texts, symbols and sound, for example).

The topics "movie" and "countries" were well received by the students, who were very motivated to talk about them. Before the survey of approximately 20 minutes, there was a warm-up with discussions in English about whether they liked movies, about different kinds of movies and about the latest movies they had seen.

S1 decided to talk about a Brazilian movie and began his presentation saying that he considered the English translation for one of the characters a bit strange. So they checked the vocabulary and pronunciation in an online dictionary. S1 also showed several pictures of the characters and actors. Meanwhile, S3, who was also surfing the Internet at the same time, searched and presented some information about the movie director and one of the actresses. During the presentation, S1 said he did not know how to say a word in English and S2 promptly looked the word up in his online dictionary.

During the presentation of S4, S5 showed a picture and discussed about it with S4. S3 also showed images of the movie chosen by S4, and they all interacted in discussions and also presented some fun facts about the movie, which were browsed at the time of the interactions.

These data supports one of the abilities of the Insiders[4] (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006), the one which refers to the fact that young people today, are multitasking, i.e., they have the capacity to do more than one activity at the same time. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006, p. 59), "the capacity of multitasking seemingly allowed them to maintain one eye on task while going about other business."

In a general review of the lesson, students-participants said that the topic chosen was interesting, which helped to promote the motivation and hence the interaction. From the speech of S5, "when you have interest, performance is better", we can say that the motivation factor greatly influences the oral practice. Harmer (2007) states that to maintain learner motivation it is necessary that he (the learner) accomplishes things that he enjoys doing and that the choice of the teacher for the activity to be performed has a very important role in the engagement of the learner in the learning process.

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[4] According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006), Insiders are people who were born and grew up in the context of the cyberspace.

For the last class, it was decided to do something different. Two weeks before, the teacher-resercher asked students to do research, at home, on the educational system of a country of their choice. This had been a theme suggested by one of the students and as it could be too dense for a 20-minute survey, the teacher decided it would be better if they brought the research already done. As students were free to choose the country they wanted, each student researched the educational system of a different country.

Without being predicted, prior research has helped to deal with a difficulty that occurred in the last class, when the Internet connection was halted due to a storm that happened in the university the previous day. However, what at first appeared to be a problem, ended up being useful, because it allowed the participants to make a comparison between a class where we could use the hypertext to search for additional information and one in which this was not possible.

According to data obtained from the focus group, in the field notes of the TR and self-reports, it is clear that, in this class, the interaction was affected and restricted because the students-participants practiced more listening than speaking. This means that without having information in front of them to be accessed, their speaking skills can be limited as they had nothing to say or to contribute to the interaction of their colleagues.

The situation presented shows us that the use of hypertext can really promote the development of oral skills through its characteristic of non-linearity, which allows the reader to "browse" whatever he wants, in addition to research additional information . According to the students, when you have internet access you can search on the subject being presented and provide more information for discussion in a collaborative way, through interaction.

However, without access to the Internet, the interactions were based on the knowledge that students already had. The presentations of S3 and S4, for example, were related to countries whose educational systems were very different, and without the possibility of seeking additional information, they were limited to listen to the presentations.

The excerpt of the final self-report of S1 demonstrates how it was for the students- participants to be without internet resource: "The day without Internet was really bad, because we were "stuck" to just one text, which was not very productive."[5]

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5 Translation for: "O dia sem internet foi bem ruim, pois ficamos "detidos" somente em um texto, o que não foi muito produtivo".

With the use of hypertext, according to S5, people do not tend to focus on a single aspect, because the hypertext "opens a world of possibilities of information that supplement and enrich satisfactorily all kinds of research." According to S2, in his final self-report, using the hypertext, the student "has the opportunity to initiate a discussion on another aspect that may have caught his/her attention".

These data are similar to what Brown (2007) claims to be one of the principles to promote the development of the ability to speak: "Part of oral communication competence is the ability to initiate conversations, to nominate topics, to ask questions, to control conversations, and to change the subject."

Hypermodality, as well as non-linearity, were seen by students as the factors that influenced the most the development of oral practice, as they contributed to several other discussions, since they (the students) could follow different paths through the links as we can observe in the following excerpt of S5:

> S5: The ease with which we had access to a lot of information, the speed and density of the content, taking into account that every visited website brings different information, so they complement each other, enriched satisfactorily the discussions, since each student had access to various resources, such as video, music, text and images to use as the basis for his speech.[6]

The vast amount of information available through the links presented on the hypertext, also favors the more timid students, who are usually quiet during classes, trying to encourage himself to expose his ideas and, when this occurs, it may be too late. The excerpt below, from the self-report of S2, perfectly shows this fact:

> S2: In traditional foreign language classes , sometimes the most introverted student, waits too long to make comments about a particular subject proposed by the teacher and he can end up frustrated because another student may have made them before him. Under these circumstances, such student may end up being overshadowed by having no more to say about it. Making use of hypertext, this student has the opportunity to initiate a discussion on another aspect that may have caught his attention. I say this from my own experience.[7]

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6 Translation for: "A facilidade com que tivemos acesso a diversas informações, a rapidez e a densidade de conteúdo, levando em conta que cada site visitado traz informações diferentes, logo, um complementa o outro, enriqueceu de forma satisfatória as discussões, uma vez que cada aluno tinha acesso a diversos recursos, como vídeo, música, texto e imagens para usar como base para seu discurso".

[7] Translation for: "Nas aulas de língua estrangeira tradicionais, às vezes, o aluno mais introvertido, ao deixar para tecer seus comentários a respeito de um determinado assunto proposto pelo professor no fim da aula, frustra-se por outro aluno tê-los feito. Nessas circunstâncias, tal aluno pode acabar sendo ofuscado por não haver mais o que dizer a respeito. Fazendo uso do hipertexto, esse aluno tem a oportunidade de dar início a uma discussão sob outro aspecto que possa ter chamado sua atenção. Digo isso por experiência própria".

The students-participants, during the focus group interviews, reported that during their searches, they also noted something down to organize their speech. This fact demonstrates, once more, the development of digital literacy, which according to Martin (2006) assumes knowing to search for information, analyzing and synthesizing them. Knowing how to use the technological resources is not enough to be considered digitally literate (GILSTER, 1997). It is necessary to understand and to know how to use this information in real life.

Final remarks

From the results obtained in this study it can be said that hypertext , through hyperlink, provided interaction and communication among learners, because the wealth of information available made the oral production easier, since all students had some different information to add, besides the possible searches conducted during interactions to answer questions and curiosities that arose at the time of discussion.

For interactions to be significant it is important that all participants understand what is being presented, which brings us to one of the functions of the output hypothesis (Swain 2005), which is the hypothesis test, which refers to the fact that the learner has to modify his speech to make ideas clearer.

It is important to say, however, that the interaction also happened due to the interest in the topics presented, which at first, as in the case of the topic "Educational System", might not have been very engaging for all participants, but as classes went by and while they did research, more searches and presentations, these topics became more interesting because of the links that could be accessed according to the needs and desires of the students.

We believe that the input contributes greatly to oral ability, but when the teacher suggests activities that promote production, students feel more secure and end up producing more.

To conclude we deem relevant to remember that the main idea of the study was to collect data to verify the students' perception on hypertext as a resource for development of oral skills, but the data seem to contribute not only to perceptions, but

also to show the effectiveness of the use of hypertext in English language lessons to develop oral skill.

It is also important to notice that, according to the participants, the use of the Internet also helped them to learn more vocabulary once they considered the online dictionary more practical, faster and easier to use than a paper dictionary. So they would look up more words in the dictionary than they would usually do. This reinforces the characteristics of the new generation, i.e., of the Insiders, who were born and grew up in the context of the cyberspace (LANKSHEAR AND KNOBEL, 2006).

It is also possible to say that the interactions helped develop collaborative work, one of the implications for the learner who lives in the Information Society as well as the classes contributed to the development of digital literacy, once it is necessary to know how to use all the information available in the net, filtering this information to create new knowledge. At the same time the learner becomes more digitally literate, he also becomes a more active learner, with more autonomy, which shows the changes of the roles of students and teachers in the contemporary society, also called Information Society.

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