MY ENGLISH ONLINE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o curso de inglês online My English Online (MEO) em relação à sua eficiência no desenvolvimento de competências comunicativa. Para tanto, o estudo oferece uma breve revisão da literatura de conceitos relacionados ao potencial do inglês para promover o acesso à informação (Finardi; Prebianca; Momm, 2013) e educação on-line (Finardi; Tyler, 2015); bem como o seu potencial para expandir este acesso através de ambientes virtuais de aprendizagem (Leffa, 2016); à aprendizagem de línguas assistida por computador (Cardoso, 2012); abordagens híbridas (Graham, 2006) como a abordagem da Sala de Aula Invertida (Lage; Platt; Tregial, 2000) para promover ensino e aprendizagem de línguas adicionais (Finardi, 2012; Silveira; Finardi, 2015). Os resultados de Finardi et al. (2014) e Finardi, Prebianca e Schmmit (2016) foram contrastados com a análise da MEO, levando em consideração a descrição de Bachman da Capacidade de Linguagem Comunicativa (Communicative Language Ability) e Competência Comunicativa (Bachman, 1990). Os resultados do estudo corroboram os anteriores (Finardi et al., 2014; Finardi, Prebianca; Schmmit, 2016) quanto à falta de feedback para as atividades de produção oral no curso MEO, para oportunidades de interação real e também feedback insuficiente para tarefas de produção oral. O estudo conclui, assim, que o curso MEO não reconhece a importância de aspectos pragmáticos no desenvolvimento da Competência Comunicativa e, como tal, deve ser utilizado no formato híbrido como forma de compensar essa lacuna.

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Palavras-chave: MEO; Abordagens híbridas para o ensino e aprendizado de idiomas adicionais; Competência comunicativa; Competência Pragmática.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze the online English course My English Online (MEO) in relation to its efficiency in developing communicative competence. In order to do so, the study offers a brief review of literature of concepts related to the potential of English to promote access to information (Finardi; Prebianca; Momm, 2013) and online education (Finardi; Tyler, 2015); as well as its potential for expanding this access through virtual learning environments (Leffa, 2016); to computer assisted language learning (Cardoso, 2012); hybrid approaches (Graham, 2006) such as the Inverted Classroom approach (Lage; Platt; Tregial, 2000) to foster additional language teaching and learning (Finardi, 2012; Silveira; Finardi, 2015). Results of Finardi *et al.,* (2014) and Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit (2016) were contrasted with the analysis of MEO taking into consideration Bachman's description of Communicative Language Ability and Communicative Competence (Bachman, 1990). Results of the study corroborate previous ones (Finardi *et al*., 2014; Finardi, Prebianca; Schmmit, 2016) with regards to the lack of feedback for oral production activities in the MEO course, for opportunities for real interaction and also insufficient feedback for oral production tasks. The study thus concludes that the MEO course falls short in recognizing the importance of pragmatic aspects in the development of Communicative Competence and as such should be used in the hybrid format as a way of compensating this shortcoming.

Keywords: MEO; Hybrid approaches to additional language teaching and learning; Communicative competence; Pragmatic Competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid dissemination of digital resources significantly impacts the access and production of knowledge as well as the use, the teaching and the learning of additional languages (L2) in the 21st century (Menezes, 2012; Finardi & Porcino, 2014). According to Menezes (2012), modern artifacts such as smartphones, laptops, tablets and digital books provide new contexts and registers for teaching/learning L2. Some of these learning contexts include, but are not limited to: Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (e.g.: Cardoso, 2012), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) (e.g.: Finardi, Leão & Amorim, 2016), Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) (e.g.: Finardi & Tyler, 2015), online courses (e.g.: Prebianca, Santos

Junior & Finardi, 2014, Finardi, *et al.,* 2014) and hybrid approaches such as the inverted classroom (e.g.: Finardi, Prebianca & Schmitt, 2016) that may be used in tandem with the aforementioned contexts.

Finardi *et al.* (2014) and Finardi, Prebianca and Schmitt (2016) analyzed the potential and limitations of an English (L2) distance learning course offered for free to university students in Brazil with the support of the Brazilian government funded program Languages without Borders (LwB)4, the My English Online (MEO)5 course. These studies analyzed the potential of the MEO course for English (L2) teaching/learning in a hybrid format, concluding that the limitations found in the MEO can be somehow circumvented or minimized if the course is used in the hybrid format, combining face-to-face classes and online instruction.

Building on the results of the aforementioned works, this study intends to advance in the discussion about the potential of online courses for the teaching and learning of L2 so as to contribute to the in(formation) of L2 teachers through the analysis of the MEO course under the light of the concept of pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990), problematizing the possibility of learning L2 in online environments under the perspective of pragmatics. With that in view, the study offers a brief review of literature of online courses for the teaching and learning of L2 and of the concept of pragmatic competence as well as its implications in the development of communicative competence.

2. ONLINE COURSES AND L2 TEACHING/LEARNING

According to Leffa (2016), the most popular online courses in Brazil are Livemocha6, offering the possibility of learning thirty-five languages, and Busuu7, offering twelve language courses. Duolingo8 is even more popular because, unlike the two previous courses

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[4] http://isf.mec.gov.br/

[5] https://www.myenglishonline.com.br/home

[6] https://cursosgratuitos.pro.br/livemocha-cursos-gratis-de-ingles-espanhol-frances-e-muito-mais/

[7] http://www.busuu.com/pt/

[8] https://www.duolingo.com/

that are free only in the beginning, Duolingo is totally free and offered in almost 20 languages. Leffa (2016) claims that a distinctive feature of Duolingo is the merge of characteristics of a social network, a virtual game and sometimes an online course. However, Finardi, Leão and Amorim (2016) concluded that Duolingo cannot be understood mainly as a game or as a social network since its main features are those of an online L2 course.

Finardi, Prebianca and Momm (2013) suggest that both English and digital literacy are needed to increase access to online information, and Finardi and Tyler (2015), based on this assumption, analyzed the role of English in accessing online education through the analysis of MOOCs available in different languages. Results of this study showed that most (almost 90%) MOOCs are available only in English, corroborating Finardi, Prebianca and Momm's (2013) hypothesis that some knowledge of English is necessary to increase access to online information. Finardi and Tyler (2015) added that some knowledge of English is also important to expand access to online education in the form of MOOCs.

It is important to note that MOOCs were not created for the purpose of teaching/learning L2 although some MOOCs may be found for this purpose. However, Finardi (2015) believes that MOOCs can be used for teaching-learning L2 within a hybrid approach that combines face-to-face classes with distance learning activities using MOOCs to teach diverse contents in/through English. To that end, the MOOC would have to be adapted for a bi-multi-lingual approach known as the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach (Alencar, 2016) coined by Finardi (2015) as the Inverted CLIL Approach. According to Finardi's (2015) proposal for the use of MOOCs in the Inverted CLIL approach, students would read and watch the texts and videos available in MOOCs in English for the teaching of diverse contents, after being adapted and mediated by the English teacher who would dedicate the time in the classroom to clarify doubts and practice oral production, thus reversing the order of activities usually performed in the classroom and at home by students.

Despite some relevant exceptions (e.g.: Tyler, 2016), studies on the potential of MOOCs for L2 teaching-learning are still scarce, but the literature on L2 distance learning is already beginning to accumulate results. The MEO course is an example of a distance learning course that has been accumulating studies (e.g.: Finardi *et al.,* 2104; Finardi, Prebianca & Schmmit,

2016), perhaps because of its importance as a free course provided by the Brazilian government funded English without Borders (EwB) program aimed at university students. The MEO was chosen as the object of this study for having already been studied previously, though without making a relation with pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990) as proposed in our analysis. As suggested by Finardi *et al.* (2014) and Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit, (2016), the limitations identified in the MEO course could be overcome if it were used in the inverted classroom format which is a form of hybrid approach. Thus, before we analyze MEO taking into consideration pragmatic competence, we will make a brief review of the hybrid approaches that comprise this study.

3. HYBRID APPROACHES

Finardi, Prebianca and Schmitt (2016) analyzed the potential of the MEO course to be used in a hybrid approach known as the Inverted Classroom approach. Hybrid approaches combine classroom instruction with online instruction and are also known by the term Blended Learning (BL). The Flipped Classroom approach was proposed by Lage, Platte and Treglia (2000) for the teaching of several contents but not specifically for L2 learning, although Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit, (2016), in the analysis of MEO in this approach, think this is not only possible but also desirable. In the Inverted Classroom approach, activities that usually take place in the classroom, such as the presentation of content via the teacher's lecture, are carried out at home through readings and videos, and problem solving and activities that are usually done at home are carried out in the classroom, hence the name of the approach. In the Inverted CLIL approach proposed by Finardi (2015) the only difference is that the focus is on both the teaching of contents and L2s, and L2 learning is done unconsciously and indirectly through the learning of different contents in L2, using, for example, MOOCs.

Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit (2016) collected data from two hundred and eighty-nine students and staff from a Brazilian public university that used the MEO course in order to evaluate the ergonomic and pedagogical characteristics of this course. Results of their study

indicate that if the course is only used in the distance mode it is not able to develop all the skills for it lacks resources to develop oral and written production skills. However, according to these authors, if the MEO is used in the Inverted Classroom modality, some of its limitations can be overcome and L2 learning can be enhanced.

A number of studies (e.g.: FINARDI, 2012; PREBIANCA, FINARDI & CARDOSO, 2015; PREBIANCA, VIEIRA & FINARDI, 2014; PREBIANCA, CARDOSO & FINARDI, 2014; SILVEIRA & FINARDI, 2015) demonstrate the advantages advocated for hybrid approaches such as the focus on the learner, whose learning strategies and rhythm are valued; the development of learner autonomy by actively engaging in the learning process; the development of learner motivation and learner digital literacy. Because most of the limitations identified in the MEO course are thought to be circumvented if this course was used in the hybrid approach, this study aims to go a step further analyzing the potential of this course to develop pragmatic competence.

4. MEO

The MEO offers leveling tests, interactive books, reading activities, grammar exercises with correction, dictionaries, oral and written activities and tests for each of its five levels. Each level contains three parts with activities in an e-book. At the end of each stage, MEO users take a progress test in preparation for the final test of each level. As mentioned earlier, MEO is one of the actions of the English without Borders (LwB) program launched by the Ministry of Education in partnership with SESU and CAPES in 2012 in Brazil in an attempt to improve overall proficiency in English of Brazilian university students.

MEO offers authentic materials from the National Geographic database for the development of written comprehension and videos for the development of oral comprehension. At the first level, students are expected to be able, at the end of the unit, to perform the following actions: greet colleagues, say and write phone numbers, follow classroom instructions; identify colleagues, talk about nationality and marital status, say and write addresses and say and write dates. In the second level, students are expected to be able to perform the following actions at

the end of the unit: say and write phone numbers, follow classroom instructions, identify and talk about work and compare work in different countries. At the third level, students are expected to be able to perform the following actions at the end of the unit: talk about sports activities, compare daily activities, talk about favorite sports and discuss national holidays. At the fourth level, students are expected to be able to do the following at the end of the unit: discuss topics in the past, talk about grandparents, compare ways of doing things now and in the past, and talk about discoveries. The fifth level is divided into three parts and students must be prepared to pass one of these English proficiency tests at the end: TOEFL, FCE or CAE.

According to previous studies on MEO (e.g.: FINARDI *et al.,* 2014; FINARDI, PREBIANCA & SCHMMIT, 2016), this course has a grammatical-lexical content approach, mainly aimed at developing oral and written comprehension skills, at the expense of oral and written production skills. However, when analyzing the potential of this course for teaching-learning L2 in the inverted classroom format, Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit (2016) suggest that these gaps could be somewhat compensated if the course is used in the inverted format. In order to further this discussion, this study proposes an analysis of the potential of this platform for the teaching and learning of L2 under the light of pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990) and for that reason this principle is described in the following section.

5. CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Based on current understanding of what it means to speak a language, we can state that any language course that seeks to develop oral skills successfully must necessarily strive, or at least create the necessary conditions for the development of Communicative Competence (CC). Ellis (2008) postulates that in a broad sense, CC means having knowledge of the grammar of L2 and also knowledge of how this system is put into practice in real communication.

The term Communicative Competence was coined by Hymes (1972) who extended the concept of linguistic competence proposed by Chomsky (1965). Hymes defines CC as the aspect of our competence that allows us to produce and interpret messages and negotiate meanings in an interpersonal way within specific contexts.

Ellis (2008), in defining CC, states that it is the knowledge that the users of a language have internalized so that they are able to understand and produce messages in the language. The author adds that many models of communicative competence have been proposed, and that most of them recognize that the concept of CC encompasses both Linguistic Competence (e.g. knowledge of grammatical rules) and Pragmatic Competence (e.g. knowledge of what constitutes a behavior in a given situation).

In fact, years after the coinage of the term CC, several scholars and researchers contributed to the understanding of the relationship between communicative competence and pragmatic competence among whom we can cite the works of Canale e Swain (1980), considered by Brown (2000) a reference in the discussions on Communicative Competence. The model of CC originally proposed by Canale and Swain in 1980 suffered some alterations, and in 1983 Canale defined four different subcategories that further define communicative competence.

Bachman (1990) introduced a theoretical framework for measuring language proficiency describing the concept of Communicative Language Ability (CLA). Bachman (1990), consistent with earlier works in Communicative Competence, cites previous works, among which are Hymes' (1972), Canale and Swain's (1980) and Canale's (1983).

Bachman states that CLA consists of three components: Language Competence, Strategic Competence and Psychophysiological Mechanisms. In detailing the elements that compose Language Competence, Bachman presents a two-fold construct divided into Organizational Competence and Pragmatic Competence. Thus, according to Bachman (1990), Pragmatic Competence plays a preponderant role in Communicative Competence. When comparing the importance of Pragmatic Competence with other aspects underlying Communicative Competence, Thomas (1983) alerts us to the disastrous consequences of cross cultural pragmatic failure, when she states that:

> While, however, a speaker who is not operating according to the standard grammatical code is at worse condemned as 'speaking badly', the person who operates according to differently formulated pragmatic principles may well be censured as *behaving* badly; as being an untruthful, deceitful, or insincere person. (THOMAS, 1983, p. 107).

Kasper (1997), in reference to Bachman's model, states that it clearly shows that pragmatic competence is neither extra nor ornamental and that it is not subordinated either to grammatical knowledge or to textual knowledge, but, in fact, interacts in a complex way with organizational competence. In fact, communicative competence has a deep interactional aspect that allows us to claim that being communicatively competent means being pragmatically competent. Put differently, there is no communicative competence without pragmatic competence.

6. METHOD

The research methodology is qualitative and aims to analyze the potential of MEO for teaching-learning L2 in the face of Brachman's model of communicative competence. In order to do so, the study analyzes the MEO in relation to potential failures concerning the development of pragmatic competence.

In accordance with the construct presented by Bachman (1990), we consider the predisposition, the involvement, the commitment and the collaborative work of the interlocutors to be of great relevance for the maintenance and progress of conversational exchanges. Thus, we understand that the aspects of speech and also writing in the interactions between platform users are the linguistic abilities that demand greater dependence of the contribution of other parties involved in dialogical relations.

7. ANALYSIS

Finardi *et al*. (2014) report data, reproduced here in Table 1, of the twenty-five MEO students interviewed regarding their satisfaction with the course and about the potential and limitations of this course for L2 learning.

Table 1- Opinions of MEO users on the potential and limitations of this course (n= 25).

General opinion of MEO.	The methodology helps to improve English.	An online course alone is not enough to teach/ learn an L2.	Most difficult skills/activities to be developed in the MEO.
Good/ Very Good (23) Bad/ Does not meet expectations(2)	Yes (22) A little (3)	No (19) Yes (6)	Speaking (11) Other activities /Did not answer (14)

Source: Finardi *et al.* (2014).

As we can see in Table 1 above, there are certain disparities and contradictions in students' responses regarding their impressions of the MEO course. On the one hand, MEO users demonstrate satisfaction with the virtual learning environment and with the methodology of the course, while the answers of the last two columns point to possible limitations of the course. Most students (19) do not seem to have their expectations met in this environment, as they demonstrate disbelief in the possibility of learning an additional language exclusively in online courses.

Concerning the activities of greatest difficulty to be developed in the MEO course, almost half of the respondents (11) point to oral production as the most complex ability to be developed, that is, communicative competence, possibly due to the lack of opportunity for real interaction in oral activities and consequent lack of feedback, according to reports in Table 2 from another study (FINARDI, PREBIANCA & SCHMMIT, 2016) on the same course but with a different group of MEO users. Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit (2016) sent a questionnaire to 280 MEO users in order to analyze this course in terms of its potential for L2 teaching/learning in the hybrid format. In a second moment of the study these researchers

interviewed three participants, named A, C and M and results of this interview are reported in Table 2 below:

Table 2- Excerpts of interview carried out with MEO users regarding feedback.

Researchers' question	Users' replies
What is the quality of feedback provided by MEO? Does the software provide correct answers? How is the software feedback?	M: Some activities do not offer feedback, especially those of written production such as essays. C: Though we record speaking activities and send them to feedback, there is no feedback for speaking activities. A: I have not used MEO frequently after I realized that speech recordings are not corrected.
But in relation to feedback, do you believe that only the MEO feedback helps you learn or do you need a more complete feedback with the mistakes you've made and what you have to improve?	A: Yes, it would be better if someone (rather than the software) directed us, maybe checking our answers to see if we are having difficulties. C: Or maybe the software itself could do this with some kind of intelligence. C: Yes, identifying our mistakes and giving us instructions pointing to the recurrence of these mistakes would help us. C: Yes, because the software does not do that, right? It just says right or wrong. M: Yes, it only identifies that you made a mistake, but it still does not show the frequency or how to correct it.

Source: Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit (2016).

As can be seen in Table 2 above, the assessment of MEO users is that this course only gives feedback on reading, vocabulary, listening, and grammar activities.

Therefore, the non-attendance to elements that compose the pragmatic competence puts in check the efficiency and the purpose of the MEO course, considering that the objective of the course is the preparation of students to be part of academic routines in English, this virtual learning environment should provide the development of oral production skills through real interactions.

Previous research from Finardi *et al*. (2014) and Finardi, Prebianca and Schmmit (2016) suggest that language learning does not occur satisfactorily in purely virtual learning environments. Given that the MEO course, in terms of oral comprehension, does not provide real opportunities for interaction in the target language, this study corroborates the suggestion made by Finardi, Prebianca and Schmitt (2016) that if MEO were used in the inverted format, some of these limitations could be overcome, and in this case, it is important to note that the teacher, as well as MEO users, have an important role in mediating and acting as interlocutors in this process. In a hybrid approach, classroom time could be used for conversational exchanges, in accordance to the model proposed by Bachman (1990), leaving the contents of the MEO to be used as homework, in the inverted format as suggested by Finardi, Prebianca and Schmitt (2016).

8. CONCLUSION

We can see the relevance of the new digital resources and the internet for the educational process in general, and particularly for L2 teaching and learning (FINARDI; PORCINO, 2014). With the expansion of online contents (FINARDI; PREBIANCA; MOMM, 2013) and online education possibilities (FINARDI; TYLER, 2015), online L2 courses are gaining more prominence and adherence (FINARDI; AMORIM; LEÃO, 2016) as internet access increases. Pereira and dos Santos (2015) affirm that one of the challenges of incorporating technologies in education is to ensure that they are associated with pedagogical practices that effectively promote learning. In this sense, several studies reviewed here have testified to the need of evaluating the potential of certain technologies for teaching-learning L2 specifically,

suggesting that the role of the teacher is essential to mediate learning with the aid of technologies in hybrid approaches.

In order to contribute to the training of teachers for the use of hybrid approaches and the use of the MEO course, this study aimed at analyzing the potential of MEO in relation to the development of pragmatic competence. Results of this study suggest that despite the desire to develop oral skills, under the light of Bachman's model, the MEO course falls short in this regard because it only focuses on organizational competence and not on both organizational competence and pragmatic competence, therefore compromising the development of communicative competence. However, the study concludes that if the course is used in the inverted classroom format, as suggested by Finardi, Prebianca and Schmitt (2016), these caveats can be reduced and even overcome through the mediation of the teacher and other interlocutors.

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