Oral traces in written L1 and L2 interactions:
Affective gifts of informal language styles in virtual learning communities[*]

Traços orais em interações escritas na primeira língua (língua portuguesa) e na segunda língua ou língua estrangeira: ganhos afetivos no uso de estilos de linguagem informal em comunidades virtuais de aprendizagem

Janete Sander Costa[**]
Querte T. Conzi Mehlecke[***]
Margarete Axt[****]
Liane M. Rockenbach Tarouco[*****]

Abstract: This study aims at analyzing oral traces in written language of in-service and pre-service participants interacting in two cooperative/collaborative writing environments on the Web: *For-Chat* and *EquiText*. While accomplishing academic writing tasks students blend in with informal expressions and notations that represent their involvement, affective bonding, and easiness in sharing ideas, personal feelings, actual traces of a conversational language within a group. Oral in written events of two subject-groups, a Portuguese (First Language) and an English group (Foreign/Second Language) are analyzed in a qualitative mode. The authors, participant-observers, highlight oral traces in participants' text productions while developing language, individual authorship and new meanings, as gifts resulting from the dialogic affective atmosphere allowed by the oral language interwoven with the academic, formal written style.

Keywords: Oral in written language. First language and second/foreign language. Cooperative/collaborative interactions. Dialogic virtual communities. Authorship and meaning.

Resumo: Este estudo visa analisar traços orais na língua escrita de professores em serviço e em formação, participantes de dois ambientes de autoria coletiva na *Web*: o *EquiText* e o *For-Chat.* Ao realizar atividades acadêmicas escritas, os estudantes misturam expressões e notações informais que representam sua participação, sua ligação afetiva, descontração no compartilhar de idéias e de sentimentos pessoais entre si. São características da linguagem oral, da conversa informal em grupos. Eventos orais e escritos desses dois grupos-sujeito, um, interagindo em português (primeira língua) e,

outro, em inglês (segunda língua ou língua estrangeira), são analisados qualitativamente. Os autores, observadores-participantes, ressaltam traços orais em suas produções textuais, produzindo sentido e autoria no coletivo, como um ganho do clima afetivo e dialógico, própria da linguagem oral, entremeada ao estilo escrito, formal, acadêmico.

Palavras-chave: O oral na escrita. Primeira língua e segunda língua ou língua estrangeira. Interações cooperativas/colaborativas. Comunidades virtuais dialógicas. Sentido e autoria.

1. Introduction

This study aims at presenting a partial analysis of the interweaving processes of oral language traces in written productions of a group of in-service teachers, participants of a bi-modal distance learning Graduate Course, and a group of pre-service undergraduate students of a conventional Languages Course, both subject-groups utilizing virtual learning environments while developing common academic tasks.

Two cooperative/collaborative writing tools – *For-Chat* and *EquiText* - are the virtual environments chosen for this study as they allow participants to produce interesting dialogic effects during their encounters while interacting via written language, either in Portuguese, the For-chat group's first language (L1), or in English, the EquiText group's Foreign or Second Language (F/L2).

2. For-Chat

The first environment, *For-Chat*, has been the congregational stage for an in-service teachers group, constituted by graduate students from different parts of Brazil, coming from multiple teaching undergraduate areas such as, Maths, Psychology, Physical Education, Language, Sociology, Architecture, Edu Tech, Computing Sciences, Engineering, among others, who are actually taking part of ongoing Graduate Courses at the Information Technology in Education Program. Part of this group is enrolled as totally distance learners - a pioneer Distance Learning Master's Program in Education – along with the other part who come from a semi-distance mode, linked to the Informational Technology in Education Doctorate Program, from the same Federal University. This hybrid group constitute a bi-modal enterprise, an unique initiative project in Brazil.

The environment *For-Chat* created around year 2001 at LELIC (Laboratory of Studies in Languages Interaction and Cognition) — at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul - UFRGS, Brazil, consists of an open space ideal for housing such hybrid phenomena. As students create their texts, either in a more formal way, closer to the written academic style, or in an informal, almost oral language, in a conversational tone, as per Fig. 1, other subjective effects start to unveil newer and richer possibilities allowed by its semi Forum/semi-Chat form.

3. EquiText

The second tool on the Web is *EquiText*, the interactive also dialogic text developing arena - where a volunteer group of pre-service private College students' in a Language Course - constitutes the second subject-group for the present analysis.
Evidences selected from the two subject-groups show that there is an oral basis in written language while participants establish their communicational bridges with each

other or among themselves in an intense dialogic, subjective mode. Those processes undertaken while participants are/were constructing new meanings – relevant for their individual teaching contexts supported by the digital technologies - throughout their task completion, seem to confirm the hybrid space intermingled between the oral, the spoken, a less formal style, and the written, more consciously controlled, a more formal style.

As another tool for cooperative/collaborative writing on the Web – EquiText – created by a group of students at the Information Technology and Education Graduate Program, at the same University, (see Costa SITE 2000 and 2001a, b, for further detail) also permit interwoven language styles, such as the oral in the written, invaluable collective linguistic productions, leading us to give new credit towards the blending possibilities that such cooperative/collaborative environments support as far as simulative learning environments.

4. The Study

Both, *For-Chat* and *EquiText*, as they start being utilized by participants to express ideas freely and creatively – favored by its design and mostly by the open and shared mediations performed by teachers-participants-observers' exchanging roles throughout the linguistic and cognitive processes - allow participants to become more affective and effectively involved. In other words, along the academic tasks development both tools are openly designed either for telling and retelling stories, as in the indirect speech discourse style, or for serious reflections dressed up by formal language, or for chatting along when there's a need for more affective exchanging.

Any participant has the right and voice to express feelings, bring in their past readings and thoughts, as well as their new theoretical reflections upon the assigned readings. Also writing and rewriting ideas are facilitated as the tools allow feed-back over ideas already expressed any time, at any paragraph already displayed on the lay-out, reinforcing the editing process as well as the possibility of reviewing positions, concepts, interpretations.

Participants either in *For-Chat or EquiText* seem to reinforce their own authorship along their individual processes of finding new sense and responsibility in the new roles that themselves as educators are facing in all educational instances – including the virtual.

Figure1 and Figure 2, below, illustrate the interactions and the intermingling of the oral in the written language. L1, in the Portuguese language, is displayed in the *For-Chat* co-authorship tool, and L2, in English as a Second or Foreign Language, is here displayed in *EquiText*, the collaborative writing tool utilized in this study.
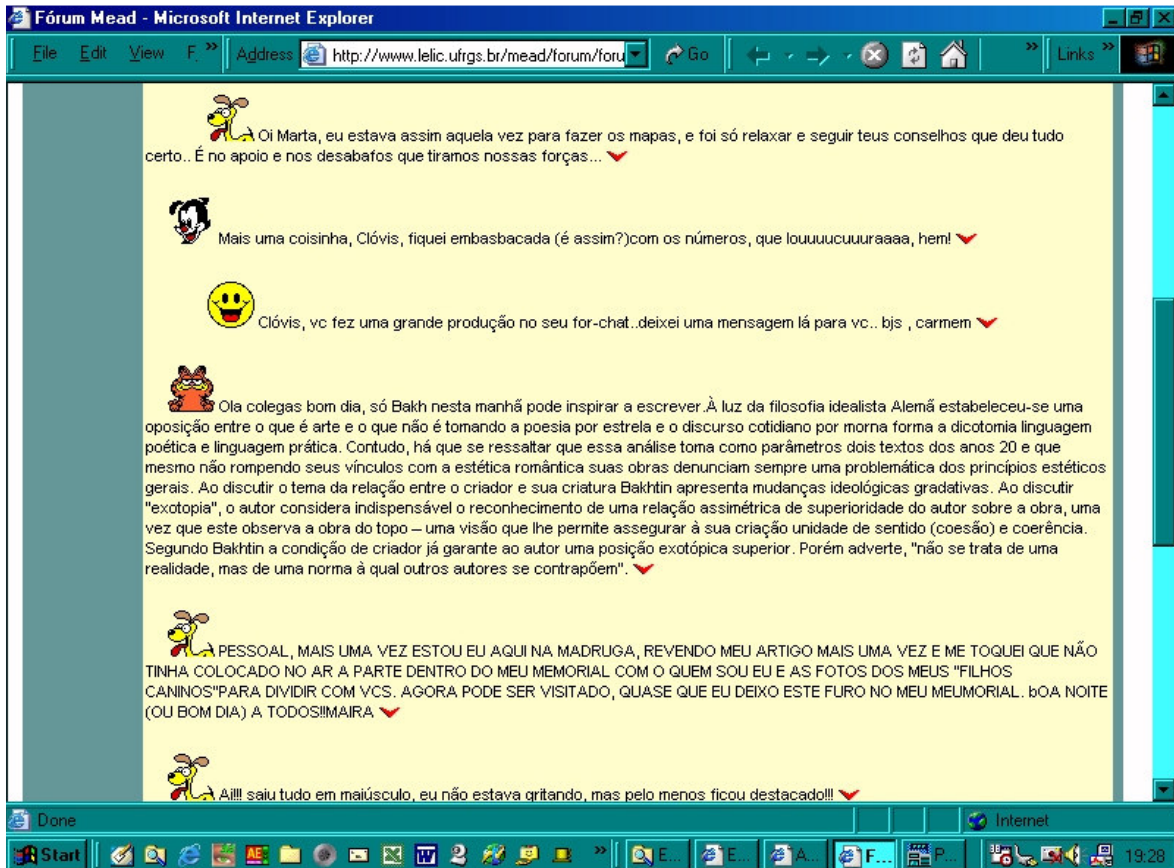
Fig. 1: *For-Chat* event displaying the interactive and the oral marks in participants´ written texts. Available at: <http://www.lelic.ufrgs.br/mead/forum>

Fig. 2, below, illustrates an interactive text construction in *EquiText.* There's a little box displayed over the text in process to show how oral language can be inserted in parallel to the main text. As a matter of fact, the whole text called "Collaborative Writing" is a conversation where participants, undergraduate Language students and their teacher are negotiating the topic for the collective text to be written collectively, next. Costa et al. 2001 a, b present further detail.
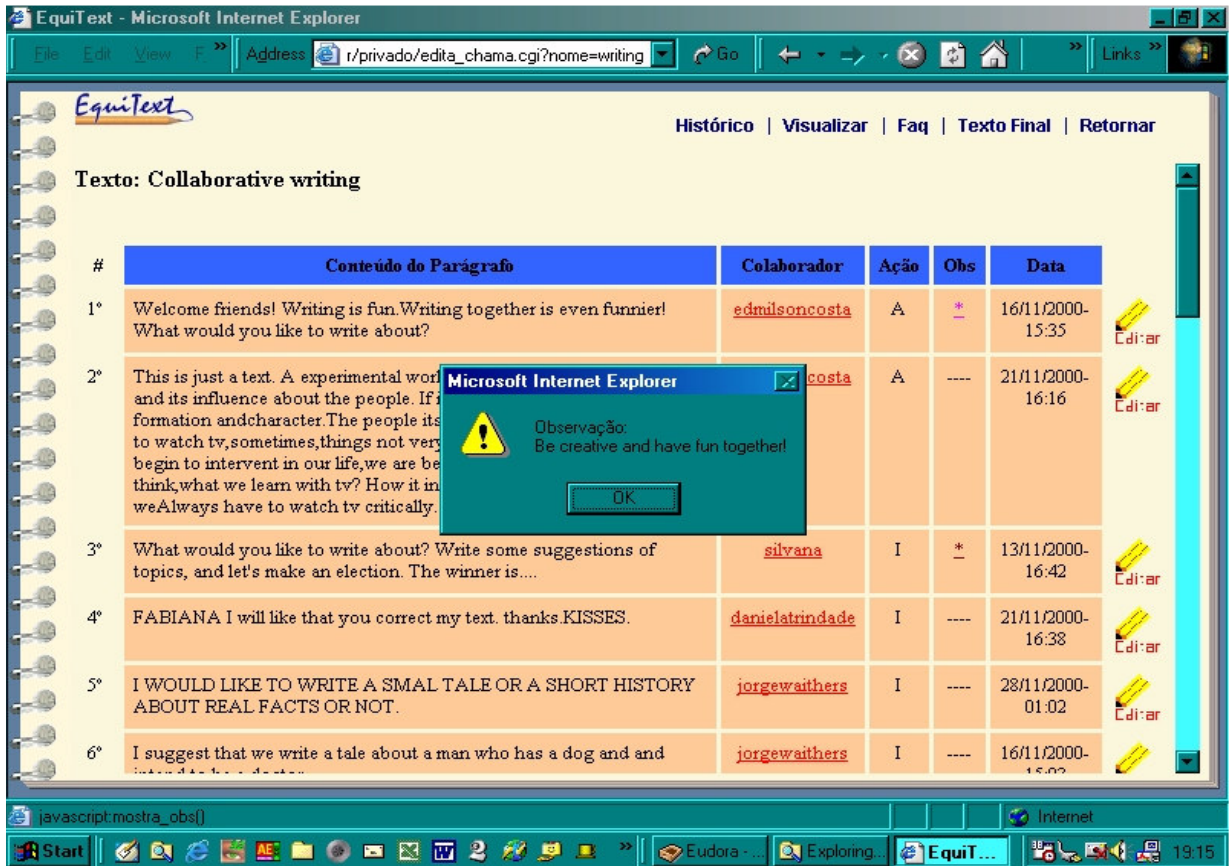
Fig. 2: This event illustrates an interactive text construction in *EquiText*. The little box displayed over the text in process shows one of its functions which allows adding short messages (reminders, comments on that particular paragraph in production) usually in oral language style. Available at: <http://equitext.pgie.ufrgs.br>.

5. Findings

Either *For-Chat* or *EquiText* are designed for more formal language styles (as in narratives, reports, scientific papers, and so on, as well as for less formal language styles as used in chattings, side comments, especially marked by punctuation marks, "emoticons", abbreviations, and other text resources utilized when the participant has some personal need for more affective exchanging. Both tools facilitate cognitive and affective processes as participants are encouraged by its design and mediation to write in with whatever means and information they have. Rules and deals may be established differently in the *For-chat* or in *EquiText*, but only with the consent of the entire group.

The Observation window in *EquiText*, displayed in Fig. 2, is a good evidence for that. Also Fig.1 displays the *For-chat* little personal faces, icons, and written texts intermingled by oral highlighted marks.

6. Conclusion

The question presented at first on how relevant is the role that oral language plays in such context simulating learning environments - either in *EquiText*, showing an experience with Foreign Language pre-service students or in *For-chat* with a bi-modal group of in-service teachers - seems to be answered positively by this methodology

which counts on the informality of the oral language to promote closeness and new encounters (cognitive, affective) by means of participants' sense of belonging to community, not real, but possible – an open stage where actors-participants play with new meanings and reinforce their own authorships in any language with whatever resources they have.

The following concepts will be fully developed and related to the passages above: interlanguage, first language and foreign language are to be found in Ellis (1997); cooperative/collaborative learning as well as sociological/individual relations, in Piaget's Sociological Studies (1973) and in Montagenero & Maurice-Naville's Piaget or the Intelligence in Evolution (1998): text and intertext as well as the dialogic relations between the subjects and the subjective relations between the "I" and "the other" towards the construction of personal authorship and meaning will be considered for the present study as per Bakhtin (2000, 2002).

At last, we believe that other language teaching strategies – either in first language or in foreign language settings, in conjunction with the digital technology available on the Web can improve learners' linguistic communicative skills. In addition to that, learners' intermingling oral language (usually less formal) in their writing activities on the Web (more formal in general) can be seen as qualitative gifts as a result of their closer involvement with each other while developing writing tasks either in EquiText or in *For-Chat*.

Thus, Brazilian students' communicative competence in English as a foreign language as well as in Portuguese, their first language, can be improved by interactions processed in EquiText and in *For-Chat* environment as their layout (see Figs. 1 and 2) facilitate the construction of communicative strategies in collaboration with other peers in order to produce shared knowledge while the text writing movements take place. Moreover, the construction of a collective of authorships that enhances writing skills among (future) teachers in Brazil is possible and provides their users with alternative, reflective and co-responsible modes of learning with new meaning.

In fact, both EquiText and For-Chat were designed to be alternative virtual environments for involving participants in their own knowledge construction while interacting (in other words, negotiating ideas, knowledge, worries, impressions, affections...) with each other: special gifts are given to participants while they intermingle the oral in the written style.

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