GRAMMAR AND COMMUNICATION IN PORTUGUESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE
A Study in the Context of Teletandem Interactions

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Abstract: This paper presents a study about the role of grammar in on-line interactions conducted in Portuguese and in English, between Brazilian and English-speaking interactants, with the aim of teaching Portuguese as a foreign language (PFL). The interactions occurred by means of chat and the MSN Messenger, and generated audio and video data for language analysis. Grammar is dealt with from two perspectives, an inductive and a deductive approach, so as to investigate the relevance of systematization of grammar rules in the process of learning PFL in teletandem interactions.

1 INTRODUCTION

The growth of the economic and cultural globalization has increased the need of foreign language learning. Portuguese, the eighth most spoken language in the world, stands as one of the important foreign languages (FLS) to be learned nowadays. The political and economic relations between the countries of the Mercosul,[1] for example, call for the spread and use of the Portuguese language. Moreover, the increasing number of foreign students in the Brazilian universities has determined the implementation of courses of Portuguese throughout the country.

The teaching of Portuguese as a foreign language (henceforth PFL) has expanded in past fifteen years, and it encompasses the development of course materials and of a national examination of proficiency in PFL, the CELPE-BRAS. However, professionals in the area of PFL still find difficulties concerning the "lack of human resources and

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[1] The alliance of four countries in South America: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

material brought up to date and according to didactic trends in language education" (Almeida Filho, Oeiras and Rocha, 1998, p.2). According to Kunzendorf (1987), this is because studies in PFL have not been properly grounded in a specialized theoretical framework. Therefore PFL constitutes an important area for field work and research so as to provide theoretical and empirical results for education in Portuguese.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the systematization of grammar in the process of learning PFL in a teletandem context. The participants are two undergraduate students of Letters in Brazil, the proficient Portuguese speakers who act as 'teachers', and two university students learning PFL in the USA. Interactions were conducted by means of the MSN Messenger, in scope of a larger project called Teletandem Brazil: foreign languages for all (www.teletandem.org). This project aims at providing language training for people who live geographically distant from each other, in addition to significantly bring people from different cultures to communicate. In this sense the project creates the opportunity for Brazilian university students to interact with partners from several countries all over the world in order to (a)

develop their proficiency in foreign languages and (b) teach PFL by means of online interactions. The Teletandem Brazil project establishes a virtual context for the teaching and learning of foreign languages at a distance, aided by computers. Teaching and learning happen concurrently in listening, reading, oral production and writing, with the aid of images and pictures.

The Brazilian interactants in the Teletandem Brazil project are university students of Letters – a BA course for teacher education in Portuguese and in FLS, who participate as volunteers, that is, their engagement in the project is not a formal requirement of their university course. In the USA, however, some of the interactants have to engage in the project as a compulsory activity of their courses of PFL.

According to Cziko and Park (2003), the learning of languages in-tandem requires two native speakers of different languages working in collaboration with the intention to teach and learn the languages involved. In this study the tutors of PFL are being educators to become language teachers and are also learners of English as a foreign language.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the principles for interactions in the Teletandem Brazil project is the autonomy of learners, since education is no longer under the responsibility of the teacher. Learners then become responsible for their own process of language learning. In this way, the teletandem experience allows for choices about goals, the content of learning and the resources to be used, offering the possibility of negotiation between the participants.

Another principle of teletandem is reflection, which, according to Schön (1983) and Mezirow (1991), bridges the traditional didactic asymmetry, in the sense that the student also becomes a 'teacher' and the teacher becomes as 'student'. Moreover, reflection offers the learners the possibility to negotiate the course of the interactions and, as a result, the route of their learning experience. A third principle of teletandem interactions is reciprocity, that is, both interactants are expected to act as language 'teachers' and 'learners' so that they can experience not only language development as learners but also how to behave as the partner who is more proficient in one of the languages involved. By

counting on language proficiency, on previous experiences in foreign language learning - and on teaching experience, if that is the case, and on reflection, the most proficient interactant (the 'teacher') can decide on the actions in order to help his or her partner learn a given foreign language.

In teletandem contexts the learner is expected to have an active role in the teaching and learning process, and s/he must therefore learn how to become an autonomous learner in order to accomplish the roles of teacher and student in such contexts. Learners can count on the help from their language teachers, and from another helper, a participant of the Teletandem Brazil project who acts a mediator. Mediation occurs in face-to-face meetings and also by means of electronic contacts between the mediator and each of the interactants. Issues concerning language, cultural and interactive aspects are dealt with in the mediation sessions.

In order to help learners to become proficient language users and develop skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, they must be exposed not only to opportunities to communicate in the target language but also be exposed to the grammatical rules that govern such language. Otherwise learners run risk of producing non-grammatical statements which may impair communication. As learning in-tandem presents a new way to learn languages, replacing or complementing classroom approaches to language teaching, this project aims at discussing how the knowledge of grammatical rules by the students helps in learning languages, as in the case of PFL. On the other hand we must point out that the main goal of interactions is communication, and grammar is seen as one aspect of communicative competence (Canale, 1983).

3 PROCEDURE

The interactions occurred by means of chat or audio communication, with the help of the MSN, and generated a corpus of written and spoken data. Oral data were recorded by means of a software called Easy Recorder, which is available on the Internet, free of charge.

A teletandem session lasts two hours on average. One hour is dedicated to each of the two languages used by the interactants. In principle each session comprises three parts: conversation, feedback on language and evaluation of the session.

The first part consists of a conversation in the target language, about one of more topics, and lasts around thirty minutes. In the second part, which

takes approximately twenty minutes, the interactants discuss the language used in their previous conversation and the more proficient interactant has the opportunity to provide linguistic feedback to his or her partner, with the help of notes written during the conversation or, in the case of written communication (chat), by referring to the previous lines of their interaction. The third part of the session usually lasts ten minutes and is dedicated to evaluating the whole session, focusing on the difficulties faced by the participant while interacting in teletandem and on suggestions for future action.

It has been observed in the data from the Teletandem Brazil project as a whole that most of the interactants initiate the contacts with their partners by e-mail, and then interact by means of chat, and only after a period of familiarization with each other they start using audio and video resources to communicate. Salomão (2006) analyzed diaries produced by interactants, which indicate that some participants felt somehow afraid or ashamed to start interacting by means of audio and video, due to either their lack of proficiency in the target language or little experience in using computer resources for communication. Benedetti (2006) states that there may be differences in the technical conditions available for the interactants. While interactants in Brazil can make use of their own home computers or use the equipment available in well-equipped laboratories at university, not all the interactants in the other countries had easy access to computers with microphones and video cameras.

In this investigation, an inductive and a deductive approach are used to study the systematization of grammar in teaching-learning of PLE in the context of teletandem interactions. Based on the deductive approach, first the student's inadequacies regarding the structures of Portuguese are checked, especially if statement undermine communication between the interactants, and those 'gaps' in the learner's knowledge of grammatical rules are addressed by the teacher in future interactions. Thus the teaching occurs from the difficulties and needs of students. For example, if during the interaction it is noticed that the learner does not have proper control over the use of imperfect past – a verb tense which has different uses and one of them is in combination with the Past Perfect, the teacher deals with the differences between the uses of the verb tenses in Portuguese.

By means of the inductive approach the teacher motivates the interactant (=the 'student')to produce sentences using a given grammar topic to be addressed during the interaction, that is, if the choice is verb tenses to express past ideas, the learner is asked to speak, for example, about past experiences. Such procedure helps the use of selected structures for authentic communication, and highlights the grammar topic to be addressed.

It is worth mentioning that since we deal with learners of PFL who speak English as their first language, there are differences - syntactic, semantic, phonetic and morphological - between the learner's mother tongue and Portuguese, a language of Latin origin.

The corpus of interactions was analyzed so as to raise and discuss the occurrences of difficulties the interactants in the USA had when producing the Portuguese language, namely the occasions in which lack of grammar competence disturbed or impeded clear communication.

4 RESULTS

In the following extract (Extract 1) we can observe how one of the the Brazilian interactants helps the North-American person deal with the perfect past in Portuguese (I-USA1 = the North-American person; I-BR = the Brazilian person):[2]

Extract 1

I-USA1: no passado, como conjugas os verbos
In the past, how do you conjugate the verbs?
I-BR: Você já aprendeu algum tipo de passado?
Have you already learned any type of past tense?
I-USA1: nao, nada
No, not yet
I-BR: Então, vou te explicar como funciona o Pretérito Perfeito, que seria semelhante ao Past Simple, certo?
Then I'll explain to you how the simple past in Portuguese is produced, which is similar to the simple past in English, all right?
I-USA1: sim
Yes
I-BR: Para cada pessoa eu tenho uma forma do verbo, como no espanhol. Eu amei. Tu amaste. Ele amou. Nós amamos. Vós amastes. Eles amaram. Esta é a conjugação do verbo "amar" no pretérito perfeito.
For each person we have a verb form, as in Spanish. I loved. You loved. He loved. We loved. You loved. They loved. This is the conjugation of the verb "love" in the simple past.
I-USA1: ah, mas você no usa tu e vós, verdade?
Ah, but you don't use "tu" and "vos", right?

[2] From Brocco, 2007. The English version of the statements is in italics.

I-BR: Todos os verbos regulares terminados em -ar vão formar o pretérito perfeito desta forma. Como o cantar, dançar, lavar, digitar, etc.

All the verbs that end in –ar Will form the simple past in this way. Like sing, dance, wash, type, etc

I-USA1: Sim, nós não usamos o "tu" e o "vós"

Right, we don't use "tu" and "vos".

I-USA1: SIM, COMO FALEI, LAVOU, ETC.

Yes, like I said, washed, etc.

I-BR: Isso mesmo.

That's right.

I-USA1: QUANDO FUI A PORTUGAL VI MUITO DE TU E VÓS.

When I went to Portugal I saw a loto f "tu" and "vos".

I-BR: Você usou o pretérito de forma correta.

You used the simple past correctly.

I-BR: Lá em Portugal eles usam muito "tu" e "vós", mas aqui no Brasil nós não usamos.

In Portugal they use "tu" and "vos" a lot but here in Brazil we don't (use these two forms).

I-USA1: muito bem, e os verbos -er, como são?

All right, and the verbs in –er, how do they work?

I-BR: Eu vendi. Tu vendeste. Ele vendeu. Nós vendemos. Vós vendestes. Eles venderam. Isso só para os regulares terminados em -er. Há muitos verbos terminados em -er que são irregulares. Por exemplo, ver, dizer, ser, ter, etc.

I sold, You sold. He sold. We sold. You sold. They sold. This is only for the regular verbs ending in – er. There are verbs ending in –er which are irregular. For example, see, say, be, have, etc.

I-USA1: SIM, E -IR SÃO: PARTI, PARTIU, PARTIMOS, PARTIRAM?

Yes, and (for) –ir (we have) departed, departed, departed, departed?

I-BR: Eu parti. Tu partiste. Ele partiu. Nós partimos. Vós partistes. Eles partiram.

I departed. You departed. He departed. We departed. You departed. They departed.

The North-American interactant (I-USA1) is able to infer the perfect past form for the verbs 'falar' (say) and 'lavar' (wash), and for the verbs ending in '-ir', like 'ir' (departed), which is an irregular verb. All the inferences made by I-USA1 were successful.

In Extract 2 we have an example of a problem USA1 has to use the correct gender of the article before the word "rio" (river), which is masculine in Portuguese, then it should be "do rio":

Extract 2 (from Brocco, 2007)

I-USA1: você sabe o que é St. Patrick's Day?
Do you know what St. Patrick's Day is?
I-BR: sim
Yes.

I-BR: o que acontece neste dia?
What happens on that day?
I-USA1: tudo está[3] verde, as roupas, as ruas e também é normal que a gente bebe muito.
Everything is Green, the clothes, the streets and it is normal to drink a lot.
I-USA1: veja esta foto **DA RIO** em Chicago
Have a look at this picture of the river in Chicago.
http://chicagomamaspot.typepad.com/photos/uncategorized/chicago_river_green
[...]

In Extracts 3 and 4 (from Custódio, 2007) we see examples of the difficulty to use the verbs "estar" and "ser":

Extract 3

I-USA2: **estão** aqui 9:30
It is 9:30 here

Extract 4

I-USA2: agora no Brasil **esta** verão
It is summer in Brazil now

A summary of the main difficulties faced by the other North-American interactant, I-USA2, which are similar to the problems presented in the interactions with I-USA1, is presented in Table 1:

To finish the data analysis we show the types and frequency of linguistic feedback provided to I-USA1 by the Brazilian interactant. We consider as feedback all types of reflection about linguistic items, including grammar, vocabulary, spelling, discourse and phonology.

Table 2 presents the frequency of the three types of feedback found in the data:

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[3] Instead of "tude está verde" USA1 could have used "tudo é verde". This example indicates his difficulty to use the verbs "estar" and "ser", which correspond to "be" in English.

Table 1: Difficulties in grammar in PFL.

GRAMMAR TOPIC	DIFFICULTY FACED BY I-USA2
word gender	I-USA2 does not use articles correctly.
verbs 'ser' and 'estar' in Portuguese	Since both verbs correspond to 'be' in English, I-USA2 cannot make clear distinctions in meaning.
Prepositions	I-USA2 had some difficulty to use some prepositions in Portuguese..
subject & verb agreement	I-USA2 had problems to use some verb forms because in Portuguese verb forms vary according to the subject pronouns.
Pronouns	I-USA2 has problems concerning both subject-pronoun agreement and to use pronouns after subjects.
affirmative & negative structures	In English it is possible to use "I don't think" + an affirmative sentence; in Portuguese you must say "Eu penso" (I think) + a negative sentence.
past tenses	I-USA2 had problems with the use of several past tenses.

Table 2: Types of linguistic feedback.

Types of linguistic items	Number of occurrences	Percentages
Grammar	44	28,4%
Vocabulary	78	50,3%
Spelling	8	5,2%
Discourse	21	13,5%
Phonology	4	2, 6%
	Total: 155	Total: 100%

The information in Table 2 reveals that most of the linguistic feedback (50,3%) focused on vocabulary, a rather expected fact. Foreign language learners usually need help to learn new words and when they face lack of words while the language learning process develops.

The amount of feedback on grammar, the focus of this investigation, was not very high. However, the frequency observed (28,4%), together with the cases of grammar mistakes raised in the corpus, suggest that grammar needs attention in foreign language learning.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate there is a place for teaching grammar in the process of teletandem learning of PFL. The deductive approach helped the systematization of grammatical structures, and sometimes the inductive approach was more useful. And the focus on grammar helped the North-American interactant progress towards a better command of written and spoken Portuguese.

Further investigation is needed in order to analyze larger corpora, from several interactants and perhaps from different target languages, and investigate the implications of focusing on grammar for language development in teletandem contexts.

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