Strategies for Teaching and Learning in Virtual Environments: Comparative Study between Traditional and Distance Learning (DL) Systems in Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Language teaching has been changing with the evolution in technological resources. Distance learning (DL) has emerged as a solution to overcome physical and time barriers. This study investigates the receptivity of applied teaching and learning strategies from the student's point of view, establishes comparative parameters for quality analysis, teaching, and main differences that interfere on the varied Educational models. It presents an analysis of the learning progression evaluation criteria, based on principles such as performance, didactics, interaction, evaluation system and interactional models at a time of cyber culture. For methodological guidance with an exploratory approach, Likert scale questionnaire was used for qualitative results. The indicative analysis has shown that the DL student acknowledges the teaching-learning resources in a positive manner, in contrast to the traditional model. The need for a more human approach lies behind an even greater necessity: shifting the political view on teaching/learning under DL.

Keywords: teaching and learning; distance education; language teaching; teaching strategies

RESUMEN

La enseñanza de idiomas viene modificándose con la evolución de los recursos tecnológicos. La educación a distancia surgió como solución para superar barreras físicas y temporales. Se investiga la recepción de las estrategias de enseñanza-aprendizaje utilizada bajo el punto de vista del alumno, se resaltan parámetros comparativos de análisis de calidad, enseñanza y principales diferencias quelimitan las tipicidades didácticas. El trabajo presenta análisis de los criterios de evaluación del aprendizaje con base en los principios de aprovechamiento de estudios, didáctica, interacción, sistema de evaluación y modelos de interacción en la época de la

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cultura cyber. Para direccionar la metodología se cuenta con sesgo exploratorio usando cuestionario y siguiendo la escala *Likert* para investigación cualitativa. El indicativo de análisis demostró que el alumno de EaD reconoce, de forma positiva, los recursos de enseñanza-aprendizaje en esta modalidad, en contraposición al tradicional. La carencia por una relación más humana subyace a otra mayor: el cambio de la visión política sobre la enseñanza-aprendizaje EaD.

Palabras-clave: enseñanza-aprendizaje; educación a distancia; enseñanza de idiomas; estrategias de enseñanza.

RESUMO

O ensino de línguas vem se modificando com a evolução dos recursos tecnológicos. A educação a distância surgiu como solução para superar barreiras físicas e temporais. Investiga-se a recepção das estratégias de ensino/aprendizado utilizada sob o ponto de vista do aluno, levanta-se parâmetros comparativos de análise da qualidade, ensino e principais diferenças que cerceia mas tipicidades didáticas. trabalho apresenta análise dos critérios de avaliação do aprendizado com base nos princípios de aproveitamento de estudos, didática, interação, sistema de avaliação e modelos interacionais na época da cibercultura. Para direcionamento metodológico conta-se com viés exploratório com uso de questionário, seguindo escala Likert para a pesquisa qualitativa. O indicativo de análise demonstrou que o aluno de EaD reconhece, de forma positiva, os recursos de ensino/aprendizagem nesta modalidade, em contraposição ao tradicional. A carência por uma relação mais humana subjaz a outra maior: a mudança da visão política sobre o ensino-aprendizagem EaD.

Palavras-chave: ensino-aprendizagem; educação a distância; ensino de línguas; estratégias de ensino.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of internet, people are increasingly spending more time in front of the computer screen, performing all sorts of tasks. In addition, busy lifestyles have pushed people into searching activities that can be accomplished remotely, such as payments, applications and other myriad of contexts, including virtual courses. However, the autonomy provided by distance has brought with it a series of discussions surrounding the efficacy and seriousness of Distance Learning (DL), also known as e-learning.

Popular among those with little time to spare, virtual courses have always presented dynamic and objective characteristics. They are virtual, modern versions of the printed mail courses, fulfilling the demand for convenience and lack of time. However, obtaining support from the Brazilian educational system, especially as far as meeting the standards set by the Ministry of Education for university degrees, has always represented a challenge. After all, the adoption of a new standard for teaching and learning after so many years of formal education represents a shift in paradigm. In that respect, changing the way distance learning is perceived is still a work in progress.

However, due to a series of methodologies and pedagogical problems in Brazilian higher education, several institutions have adopted this form of

teachingas a practice for enhancing the offer of subjects in the curriculum. As a consequence, a few stereotypes have appeared, such as the impression that the new model trivializes teaching; or that students – now released from the requirement of physical presence in universities – tend to show below-average performance when compared to the traditional model.

Language teaching, already impacted by thenatural difficulties inherent to the activity, encountered similar challenges, such as getting students to actually learn a foreign language (FL) without leaving their home country. In the distance-learning model the challenge is enhanced as the model usually lacks face-to-face interaction. Some level of distrust in the quality of the system against the traditional oneis quite common among people who have never experienced a DL class. In this case, however, it must be taken into account that many schools of the traditionalmethod also carry an array of problems, and it is therefore necessary to evaluate any course's teaching/learning strategies – not just the model, whatever it may be.

As a result, it is necessary to evaluate how the Foreign Language (FL) teaching/learning process has been approached in virtual environments. In other words, investigate how the student builds knowledge of a FL, with all the limitations imposed by the physical distance between teacher and student. For that purpose, a qualitative analysis will be used in order to understand the main limitations of the most common evaluation method – the teaching-learning system.

Learning a second language helps students develop the possibility of making new friends, enhances the access to employment and, in some cases, allows for new business opportunities and even new possibilities in tourism and leisure, because with the language comes some of the foreign country's culture. It is important to note that language training goes beyond decoding the language. In addition to understanding the concept, it is also necessary to grasp the culture behind it. For that to happen it is necessary to teach how to think in the foreign language, i.e. communicate and interact. In the case of the English language, as in others, training is based on the following skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In that context, language training using the virtual model should find effective ways of checking all four skills with the same level of quality. With that in mind, an exploratory research of qualitative nature was conducted in order to examine the contrasts between the traditional and virtual models and to raise the paradigms that guide resources and strategies for the English language training in both systems, under the guidance to pursue means for optimizing DL in foreign language teaching/learning processes.

2. EVOLUTION AND DINAMICS OF DL IN BRAZIL

Distance learning is not new in Brazil. The first school to offer distance-learning courses on a national level was *Instituto Monitor*, in the 1930s (COSTA; FARIA, 2008, ALVES, ZAMBALDE, FIGUEIREDO, 2004).

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[4] Skinner's general theory.

At the time of DL's beginning in Brazil, mail was used. Students would read the material, answer the provided workbook at the end of each module and mail the answer sheet back to the school. Upon receiving the answer sheet, the school would forward it to an instructor, who would correct and grade it, and mail the results back to the student,so that mistakes could be checked. The process was slow, but it helped many generations. It had also many limitations, such as the lack of dialogue, especially in the case of language training, where interaction is fundamental to master reading, speaking, writing and listening skills. Oral practice was accomplished by a provision of records or cassette tapes for which there were transcription of dialogues and pronunciation exercises on the book. This old method did not allow for interaction between teacher and student,thus preventing the concept behind words to be successfully taught. Therefore, this was merely a repetition technique, or behaviorism[4]. In this model for English language training, as well as for other foreign languages, the student was not able to exercise pronunciation and check learning progression instantly and with the presence and aid of a teacher.

As communication technology evolved, DL moved to radio, and then to television and home video. More recently it has reached computers connected to the internet and assumed fully online capability[5]. The evolution of software production and educational systems has brought great advancements, in general terms, to distance-learning education.As a result,technology has spurred the creation of various interaction tools, such as Skype – which allows verbal communication – cell phones, forums, chat rooms for questions and interaction (with or without the use of video), discussion groups where teachers and students can collaborate and that allow for sharing of files and display of student's work, among others.

Distance learning, once considered impossible, currently counts on efficient strategies that make the virtual teaching model viable. Therefore, the molds for teaching-learning in DL have changed dramatically as they were forced to adapt to the limitations andrequirementsof the virtual model. Roughly, environment materialization and innovative educational methods, especially with the aid of digital technology, have optimized DL in such a way that teaching-learning would be awarded witha new policy in education.

Education is processed through communication in written and oral forms, by means of gestures, symbols or human interaction. As communication evolved, so did DL in Brazil and around the world. In 2010 there were nearly one million distance-learning students in higher education, as highlighted by Pereira (2010). This represents a numeric reality that tends to increase in higher education and in other educational levels, as well as open courses.

However, for Teperino (2006), distance-learning education in Brazil, despite all the advancements in the area, is still in its early stages and suffers from academic prejudice,

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[5] Ibidem.

renegade as mass, second-class education. From this perspective, it would be worth investigating the educational models and practices in order to reconsider the efficacy of the teaching-learning models and adopt new and more appropriate educational measures to each model.

3. TEACHING-LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Traditional language teaching is known for its didactics of preserving the four language skills: reading writing, listening and speaking. Therefore, usage of grammar is an indispensable work tool, as that's where the structure of a language is usually found. However, other tools have been created for enhancing vocabulary in a way that student and teacher would not be stuck to grammar as mere reproduction of scripted content followed by strict rules.

As observed by Richards e Rodgers (2001), many teachers have used books with short passages in foreign languages, containing vocabulary lists for silent and out-loud reading for content discussion. It is important to highlight that contextualization of culture in FL is also relevant, so that the student, stretching beyond vocabulary, is able to learn how to use the language in a certain communication situation. For that purpose, traditional teaching has adopted dialogue and discussion strategies in the classroom in an attempt to get the student to interact and speak.

Furthermore, usage of movie scenes and song excerpts are complemented with the teacher's intermediation for repetition and

listening comprehension of the FL, as well as creation of simulated real-life scenarios of daily situations, portraying contexts where the language is used. In that situation, the role-playing works as a strategy for persuasion and approximation of the student to the FL and the use of communication in a myriad of day-to-day situations, when the students are faced with the need of expressing themselves in "real life" situations, using the foreign language, with the focus on contact and interaction.

Other strategies are still quite valid, such as writing essays on chosen topics, out-loud reading and personal story-telling, (i.e. oral genre)with the purpose of getting the student to develop his writing and reading abilities and express his mind on family topics. In all levels of FL command, whether English or any other language, these strategies have challenged the virtual teaching model.

Generally, the traditional model of language teaching-learning process has its limitations, especially concerning the effectiveness of learning a second language without any actual time of coexistence with it. Many times students only dedicate a few days of the week to the FL, therefore greatly restricting the contact with it. In those terms, language teaching-learning contrasts between the traditional and distance-learning models meet equal conditions and therefore, carry no differences apart from the dedicated support.

In addition, different methods for teaching a language – English for instance– outnumber the problems faced by the virtual pattern. Thus, obtaining expertise in the foreign language of choice requires, above all, interactivity. Richards and Rodgers (2001)

also highlight that, essentially, the procedures used to teach Latin are still present in textbooks today, such as: grammar rules, vocabulary lists and sentences for translation. This methodology restricts speaking to oral reading, which does not build an active language system. Consequently, it does not providethe basis for actual communication.

For the authors, the objective behind studying a FL is learning to be capable of reading its literature and developing the mind. They believe that grammar translation is a form of observing details in grammar rules and follow applications of that knowledge. However, learning a new language is much more than simply memorizing rules and facts in such a way that one can understand and manipulate the FL's morphology and syntax.

Stern (1983, p.455) points out that, in general terms "the first language is kept as a reference system in the acquisition of the second"[6]. In that regard, it is important to highlight that strategies used in the traditional model have been transferred in one way or another to the virtual model after some adaptation and added Internet support. In that sense, such strategies have helped e-learning to reach its own reputation of efficacy in English language teaching-learning in Brazil.

4. TEACHING-LEARNING STRATEGIES IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS AND TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Teaching-Learning of Foreign Language, as well as of other contents, has had to evolve in the virtual environment in order to adapt to the cyber molds as adjustments became increasingly necessary. In that regard, as pointed out by Lévy (2001; 2004), the internet has opened new communication possibilities with different tools, with knowledge being built through exchange of experiences and the sharing of a new culture – cyber culture. In that aspect, knowledge building is limitlessto a degree where content, once enclosed and settled, crosses all boundaries in search of new horizons.

In that aspect, the DL student must adopt the virtual culture profile in order to fit into the active and participative environment of the model. In the same respect, the role of the teacher in digital media is directed to the organization, control and coordination of educational practices, adopting teaching-learning methodologies that follow the molds of multiple technologies. It must be considered that, in that case, such technologies are strong allies in motivating, illustrating, presenting and composing content for classes and making them attractive and interactive, as highlighted by Hack and Negri (2010).

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in DL is, in itself, a revealing new approach to teaching-learning, where the teacher is the mediator and the student has the opportunity to explore different types of media as learning takes place. In that case, multiple abilities are required from the teacher, given the need to reinvent strategies in teaching-learning using digital tools. Initially, an attempt to transfer strategies used in traditional models adapted to the virtual environment has been observed. However, interaction has become more predominant and,

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[6] Editor's Note: all quotations are originally in Portuguese and were translated by the RBAAD's translation team for this publication.

consequently so has the orientation of teacher practice towardsa principle of joint knowledge building. Therefore, it is necessary that the teacher creates his or her didactics considering multiple media. In that context, it can be stated that these tools are trying to "compensate" for the lack of physical presence for a better learning experience in the virtual world.

With the advent of DL, the teacher adopted his/her teaching methodology once exclusively focused on personal and collective contact in the classroom, to other forms and content activities for the FL in the digital environment. To meet that purpose, it was necessary to invest in digital tools as new strategies, such as the use of electronic mail, forums, social networks, applications and the Virtual Environment for Teaching and Learning (AVEA) [7].

Richards and Renandya (2010) remind us that an effective way of developing the oral production skill in a FL environment is the exposure to a visual stimulus for commentary. For example, it is possible to work with scenesfrom movie trailers, documentary excerpts or cartoons, YouTube videos, dictionaries and virtual games,and both printed and TV news in the FL for observation in oral communication activity. Reading and writing can be improved with the use of language from blogs, forums, and (in a certain way) all social networks so that the student can interact. Therefore, usage of ICT offers countless opportunities for interaction.

The impact generated by the transformations brought by ICT caused a new cultural concept to emerge – cyber culture, a new information market. Within that concept, the presence of technological elements in society is transforming the way in which individuals communicate, establish relationships and build knowledge. "Today, we are practically lived by new technologies" (NOVA and ALVES, 2002, p. 1). Nowadays, ICT are tools for a new generation and for the construction of knowledge.

The difference between traditional and distance FL teaching, in this context, is solely focused on the difference in support. In DL, Internet is the only contact. Therefore, it is fundamental that the didactic-pedagogical orientation is organized around the technological resources. Thus, DL in foreign language can have the same quality as the traditional system, as long as ICT is applied adequately and with the teaching process focused on interaction and language practice. Accordingly, didactic-pedagogical capacity building of the teacher is necessary for the correct and updated use of ICT and transference of adequate didactics to the distance-learning method. Another reason is that much of the research previously conducted off-line is now done on-line. Consequently, it should be expected that students would start perceiving DL as a natural system, not necessarily inferior or that provides lower quality support.

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[7] AVEA is a platform that contains subjects and their contents as well as all the tools that aim at establishing communication and interaction among those involved in the process of building knowledge in distance learning

In many of these virtual environments, all of the design work is aimed at keeping the student focusedon the learning process. In that case, it is not enough to simply adapt content to a presentation model, but to use real examples of an imaging nature, such as pictures, short movies, documentaries, and others, which help creating interactivity. In that aspect, it must be noticed that said technologies are used as sources for creating learning conditions over the content. In other words, coming up with creative ways of working the information.

In a certain way, DL represents a challenge for the teacher to renew his work and create means of recycling his Didactic Transposition (DT). Said concept has its origins in the Mathematics teaching didactics of Chevallard (1985), which brought the other sciences to the same principle: transforming scientific knowledge or object of knowledge into an object of teaching built in a more didactic language, as the author puts it. In that context, the author describes three types of knowledge: academic knowledge (*savoir savants*); knowledge to be taught (*savoir à enseigner*) and knowledge to be learned (*savoir appris*).

As far as language teaching is concerned, content is often taught by a professional with scientific knowledge of languages. However, the professional must also fulfill the pedagogical needs of the system in which he or she is inserted, adopting the methodological didactics in his/her teaching. In language training, the savoir à enseigner must include a transposition of form to be guided onto

the conversation practices and cultural knowledge of the foreign language (FL), in a way that lead will the students to social practices. Therefore, as pointed out by Chevallard (1985), didactics organizes learning situations, adapting concepts to the students level and to the pedagogical objectives.

5. METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research is characterized for being a primary study on a given topic. In exploratory research of qualitative nature, interviews are conducted with the people who are object of the study (SEVERINO, 2007, LUDKE; ANDRÉ, 1986). Therefore, the current study has focused on raising initial data using questionnaire technique in a distance-learning school, where students meet in loco on a weekly basis. In fact, the questionnaire was formulated under the Likert scale and standpoint so that impressions towards the efficacy of the virtual teaching-learning model could be measured and compared against those of the traditional model. The qualitative nature often uses a quantitative essence to complement the research, allowing for a more complete analysis (YIN, 2010). The possibility of undertaking a qualitative research of a quantitative nature was achieved in this study, aiming at a more efficient use of data, many of which were tabbed and quantified.

A field study was conducted at a traditional language school and with students from a distance-learning language-training program, in addition to an exploratory investigation in an English

Language undergraduate school, offering both traditional and distance learning models. The estigation was also extended to traditional and long-distance English courses. Data wascollected in individual questionnaires applied to students of said courses. For that purpose, the answers obtained from the questionnaire were compared by models of teaching. For ethical reasons, the research does not reveal the name of those interviewed, nor the schools in which the study was conducted. The questionnaire gave statements that could be rated from 1 to 5. The Likert scale was applied as it is standardized and worldly renowned, and offers an analysis criteria of both qualitative and quantitative natures.

The field study was conducted between May and August of 2012 in the greater Belo Horizonte, capital of the state of Minas Gerais. The questionnaire used initial basic questions, such as the first one, which asks if the student goes to a traditional or distance-learning school, which is important in order toisolateeach educational model. The next question asks the student's age. This variable factors the relationship with the type of learning or the student's choicein favor of one model or the other.In that aspect, it could be verified that DL students generally fall within the 30 to 40 year-old age group, while the traditional model is still more popular among the younger 13 to 29 year-old age group. However, the biggest concern was evaluating the perception that DL students have of the teaching-learning strategies in the virtual model. Comparatively, a strategy parameter was drawn between DL and traditional teaching of FL.

ANONYMOUS RESEARCH _ TEACHING-LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Thank you for participating!

1. Your takea traditional ( ) or Distance Learning ( ) program?

Name of program: _____

2. State your age: _____ and gender: ( ) Male   ( ) Female

3. How long have you been a studentof this program? _____

Are you happy with the program? ( ) yes   ( ) no   ( ) indifferent

4. Have you ever studied a foreign language through distance learning? ( ) yes   ( ) no

5. Have you ever taken any other distance learning courses? ( ) yes   ( ) no

6. Why have you chosen distance learning?

7. Why have you chosen traditional learning?

8. Rate the following questions, using a scale of 1 to 5, where:

1 = Totally disagree.

2 = Partially disagree.

3 = Indifferent.

4 = Partially agree.

5 = Totally agree.

Questionnaire:

8. "I like to study English", rate. ( )

8.1. "I believe that those who take distance-learning courses learn more than those taking traditional ones", rate. ( )

8.2. "I do not like to take distance learning courses", rate. ( )

8.3. "In distance learning courses, we feel lonely because everyone is far away", rate. ( )

8.4. "With the current resources in internet and communication, you can easily learn despite the distance", rate ( )

8.5. "It doesn't matter if it is traditional or long distance, the important thing is to study", rate.( )

8.6. "I prefer traditional English programs, there is a lot of face-to-face interaction and conversation", rate. ( )

8.7. "I learn a lot with a teacher or a tutor", rate. ( )

8.8. "I learn a lot more with my classmates", rate. ( )

8.9. "I learn a lot more with the course's material", rate. ( )

8.10. "My school has technology resources", rate. ( )

8.11. "I am promptly helped by the teacher or tutor", rate. ( )

8.12. "My school uses the internet as a learning support tool", rate. ( )

8.13. "In my school, I have learned through reading activities, but conversation is weak", rate. ( )

8.14. "My school has a good evaluation system", rate. ( )

8.15. "I learn from pictures and movies", rate. ( )

8.16. "I learn from reading", rate. ( )

8.17. "I learn from interacting with classmates and teachers", rate. ( )

8.18. "After finishing this course, I intend to keep on studying and will take a distance learning course", rate. ( )

8.19. "I can organize my time to study my course's subjects", rate. ( )

8.20. "I prefer language courses that have dynamic strategies of teaching-learning with technological resources", rate. ( )

8.21. "The didactic material used is adequate to the teaching/learning model", rate. ( )

9. I have suggestions for those interested in taking distance learning language courses and will write them on the back.

The analysis has was observed that 77% of those who had already studied English – whether in the traditional or virtual environments – are more prone to choose the virtual model due to the practicality, convenience and the audiovisual resources used in the distance learning method, as well as the dynamic didactic material and, at times, graphic computing resources.

In comparison, students of the undergraduate program, as well as those from regular English programs, equally value didactic-pedagogical resources used in both traditional and virtual models, and search for schools that provide them didactic development in addition to theory formation. In that aspect, it was observed that DL students acknowledge and praise the work developed by teachers and tutors in such schools, acknowledging and underlining the advancements of the model.

Behind the question that asks the students if they like to study English, is the intention of verifying accordance with the significant learning theory, which says that in order for a student to learn something more easily, it is necessary for there to be a "predisposition" – in other words, the student must be motivated for learning to take place (AUSUBEL, 1980).

The questions that followed referred to the way the student learns, both in the traditional and distance learning models – namely, if they are visual, reading learners, or need interaction with tutors, teachers or classmates and if the amount of interaction in their chosen model is considered adequate. Within that parameter, it was verified that 99% of those interviewed in both models consider interaction to be essential for distance learning courses, and that providers must strive to develop the resources made available to students, in order to improve the learning experience provided by the model.

After all, the absence of physical contact can be overcome by the presence of audio and video, according to information provided by those interviewed. In that case, videoconference is quite an effective option that can be used in the virtual model in order to address the need for face-to-face contact, and will be effective even if sporadically used. In the open-end questions, it was noticed that the biggest concern of DL students is regarding

teacher feedback. Many have reported that it is necessary to manage the student-teacher/tutor relationship because feedback often does not match the student's rhythm of work. Therefore, the distance learning model needs to find effective teaching-learning means geared for the fulfillment of needs presented by each program.

6. COMPARATIVE STUDY AND RESULTS

It was noticed that distance-learning students are older than those of the traditional model, both in language training and in undergraduate Language and Teacher Training programs. The average age difference between the two models (traditional versus virtual) is of in the order of 7.5 years. This indicates that distance-learning students of foreign language are generally more experienced than those of the traditional model, for both types of courses.

Students of the traditional school have shown not to be familiar with distance learning and, in general terms, seem to still live with their parents and not be inserted in the job market. The DL model, however, has more professional students who often have families and dispose of less time for studying.

As far as means for didactic teaching, both traditional and distance learning courses use text for reading, and audio and video files for pronunciation and listening comprehension practice. In the case of distance learning, the student is able to watch videos on the computer screen, whereas CDs and DVDs are usually the choice of traditional schools.

Writing is still very important in both models. In general terms, "texts, as much as spoken lines, refer to people's thoughts, feelings, memories, plans and discussions, and sometimes they tell us much more than the authors imagined" (BAUER; GASKELL, 2008, p. 189).

The students' impression on the efficacy of teaching-learning strategies applied in DL of the English language were provided by the answers to the questionnaire, created to verify the real needs of the virtual model. Using the Likert scale, it was verified that the interactive strategies are the ones obtaining better recognition from the distance-learning students, given the countless resources used by instructors to attract students and avoid evasion in DL. With objective questions, the study has shown that audio and visual resources are attractive work tools that facilitate learning, especially in the distance-learning model, according to the student's point of view.

The vast majority of students, 93% of both the traditional and DL models, are visual learners – it must be mentioned that older models of educational platforms focused onthe use of text for teaching. As technology and communication evolved, sound and videos were inserted. More recently, the use of resources such as Skype, which allows live conversations between student and teacher (or between students) to take place, has also been embraced. Using new resources, the learning process has been facilitated and a tendency can be perceived among distance-learning students to evaluate in a positive manner the interactions between students and teacher. In the student community, interaction isa cause for learning improvement. After all, as stated by Vygosky (2011), social interaction causes learning to take place.

Distance Learningas an educational model, has profited from the evolution of internet, which provided improvements in the possibilities of interaction whether by forums, chat rooms, Skype, video casts, podcasts or by the more recent virtual reality environments, such as Second Life.

The evolution of the web consists of the internet's web pages interface. Web 2.0 provides interactive tools which are used by Facebook, Skype, MSN, forums and chat rooms. The DL programexaminedfor this study uses Skype, which is a technology that allows students to interact though low-cost video streaming. This is in accordance with the answers of 100% of all DL students, stating that their programis online-based – unlike students from the traditional model, whose answers indicate that their schools do not commonly use of the internet.

Distance Learning supporters have been striving to think of new ways to explore the same principles upon which traditional teaching is built, using the tools offered by the virtual environment or even searching for new strategies tailored for the new model. Thus, the teaching-learning process was not limited to the classroom only, but has crossed its physical boundaries, offering students the building of knowledge in their own private environment. Virtual tools, although essential to DL, are not exclusive to that environment. They are often used in the traditional system to attract students' attention and stimulate the use of the foreign language in various interaction contexts.

One of the most important aspects for the distance learning programs to become more adapted to their students' reality is the use of good instructional designs. This kind of work offers strategies for providers to include educational theories and use tools such as storyboards – which present the organization and sequence of workin a visual and fast manner. Through the designers' work, it is possible to develop activities that draw the students'attention and get them to be part of the context in order to diminish evasion and enhance satisfaction.

For interaction to happen, it is important to consider the role of the agent – the nucleus or inductor of the process, which can be the teacher in the traditional model or tutor in the DL model. In either one, 87% of the students have highlighted the importance of such interaction, giving it the maximum rating of 5.

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social networks and chat rooms provide an interesting form of dialogical interaction, considering that the FL student practices the language in fast-paced conversations. This strategy consists of presenting students with ways of living the language within their own country and reality, and showing functional and interactive means for learning. Also, some schools have been finding these resources through the use of conversations with a native speaker, with the purpose of improving speaking abilities among studentsin more advanced levels.

In that sense, technological resources offer help in overcoming physical barriers that were once considered unavoidable. Usage of games in the virtual environment has also lead to means of learning, both inside and outside the classroom, and students are able

to find ways to improve their knowledge of the foreign language in different contexts.

It seems that in the analyzed schools, the use of Web 2.0 and its tools is causing the DL model to gain terrain in language teaching. In this case, the use of new tools must also be associated with Instructional Design strategies, so that programs more adapted to the students' needs can befashioned.

With all the technology and change in the use of teaching-learning tools, DL is increasingly conquering more market ground, allowing for flexibility in teaching. Nevertheless, all advantages and issues of the model should be considered. Authors Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that there is no standardization indicatingthat the use of grammar, sentences and vocabulary in textbooks are more important for beginner or advanced students. In fact, this is a common process of teaching-learning within the traditional on-site learning model.

The existence of both models is largely beneficial to the teaching of foreign languages, as some students will adapt better to one model versus the other. Thus, there is room for both to coexist and the greatest beneficiary is the student, presented with an array of options allowing a better learning experiences. Whichever is the case or model, it is essential that the student has the will to learn and take responsibility for his or her own learning process, actively searching for the relevant information.

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[8] TN: all titles were freely translated from the original version.

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