UNDERSTANDING HOW THE CYBERCULTURE HAS INFLUENCED LEARNING STRATEGIES CHOICES BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The research project *Collaboration, Learning Strategies and Digital Literacy in Language Teacher Development* attempts to combine equity, resistance, and collaboration. The project aims at helping learners who have a lower level of English succeed in their ELT graduate course. Besides language development, the study attempts to promote learning strategies and methodology awareness, mainly related to the use of technology for teaching languages. This qualitative study may be considered a participatory action research (Brandão & Streck, 2006; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 2011), as all the participants (teachers and students) are part of the study, breaking barriers between researchers and subjects. It is a long-term study which began in 2014, and this presentation is only a part of it and focus on a better understanding of learning strategies choices. To do so, we conducted narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2015) in 2020 and 2023, in which participants were invited to talk about their study habits before entering university and the ones at their graduate course. Other instruments used were videos prepared by these learners and their participation on virtual learning environment (VLE) forums. Based on their narratives, we were able to compare their learning strategies choices before and during the Covid pandemic. The results indicate the following assertions: (a) Learners are not aware of what learning strategies mean, but they mentioned at least some of these strategies during the interviews; (b) Before the pandemic, they used technology mainly for research, as a resource of materials, and for social communication; and most of the strategies employed were (meta)cognitive and (meta)social ones. (c) During the pandemic, work and study depended on technology, so besides the learning strategies they already used before that period, they had to develop or adapt others, mainly (meta)affective strategies and (meta)motivational strategies. Based on these findings, we are now revamping the activities used in the project. The theoretical framework of the research includes discussion on learning strategies (Cardoso, 2016; Oxford, 1990, 2017, 2019); cyberculture (Santos & Weber, 2018); and the influence of the pandemic on education (Liberali, 2020)

Keywords: Learning strategies, cyberculture, social identities, teacher development, pandemic.

1. Introduction

This main objective of this presentation is to discuss the influence of the cyberculture on learning strategies choice, by comparing the ones employed by a group of students before the pandemic and during the pandemic. This participatory action research is part of the project *Collaboration, Learning Strategies and Digital Literacy in Language Teacher Development,* which attempts to combine equity, resistance, and collaboration. Equity because the main aim of the research is to help learners that have a lower level of English succeed in their ELT graduate course. As for resistance, as most of these learners have less privileged conditions and come from substandard quality schools, staying at university many times is much more difficult than entering it. As far as collaboration is concerned, the project consists of a participatory action research, in which all participants, teachers and learners, work together, searching for answers to our common challenges. Besides, as these participants are (future)teachers, another main objective is to develop methodology awareness and to discuss effective ways of using technology for the teaching of English.

2. Learning strategies

As mentioned by Cohen (2019, p. 31), "the construct Language learning strategies (LLS) has been defined – and consequently researched – in numerous ways over the years." Based on previous studies (Cardoso, 2016), my current working definition of LLS is the following: "conscious or automated actions carried out by learners in search of enhancement in the process of understanding, learning or retention of information" (Cardoso, 2016).

Just as it is difficult to reach a consensus on the definition of LLS, their classification is no less complex. For many years, I have adopted Oxford's (1990) classification, which resulted from compiling an extensive list of strategies identified in her previous studies. In this classification, the LLS are divided into two groups: direct strategies (directly linked to the learning process) and indirect strategies (also contribute to the processes of understanding or production, but not directly linked to them), as summarized in the following table:

Table 1. A summary of Oxford (1990) LLS Classification.

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES (LLS)	
DIRECT STRATEGIES	**INDIRECT STRATEGIES**
Memory strategies => responsible for creating mental links, applying images and sounds, efficient reviews and the use of actions.	**Metacognitive strategies** => responsible for centralizing learning (search for priorities), ordering and planning learning, as well as for evaluating the process.
Cognitive strategies => responsible for receiving and sending messages, for practice, for analysis and reasoning, for the creation of structures for reception (input) and production (output).	**Affective strategies** => linked to the decrease of anxiety, self-encouragement and emotional "temperature" control.
Compensation strategies => linked to intelligent guessing and overcoming limitations, both in oral and written production.	**Social strategies** => seek a good interaction with other students by asking questions, trying to cooperate with their colleagues and develop a good relationship with them.

More recently, based on studies on self-regulation, the complexity theory and motivational strategies, Oxford (2017) presented a new classification of strategies. In this case, there are only four strategies (affective, cognitive, motivational and social). All with their corresponding metastrategies (meta-affective, metacognitive, metamotivational and metasocial).

Oxford (2017) states that there is no rigid division between these strategies. Sometimes, the same action demonstrates the use of more than one strategy. For example, on an exam a student might be nervous because they can't understand the instructions for one of the activities. After a while he decides to ask the teacher for help. The request for help is social, but it is still affective (trying to calm down).

Another important point is that language use strategies often overlap with learning strategies. For example, if a student tries to understand the meaning of a word through the context, she is using a cognitive strategy of reading (of use), but also of learning.

Also influenced by studies on the complexity theory, especially by the works of Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, Oxford (2017) nowadays considers the importance of context in choosing learning strategies (ecological view). To represent this ecosystem, which recognizes that the student is inserted in different contexts and that these contexts also influence the choice of strategies, she uses the Bronfenbrenner's model presented in Figure 1 (Oxford 2017, p. 106).

During the pandemic, the change in the macrosystem was huge and urgent. We were obliged to isolate ourselves at home and at the same time increase the use of digital technology to work and study. The change in the macrosystem affected the institutions, such as schools and universities (exosystem) and the interaction between learners and other learners and their teachers (mesosystem) which directly affect their physical and mental health (microsystem). The most important strategy during the pandemic was focused on survival. Finally, the chronosystem corresponds to the time system. And time operates across all systems.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's theory of contexts (Oxford, 2019, p. xxix).
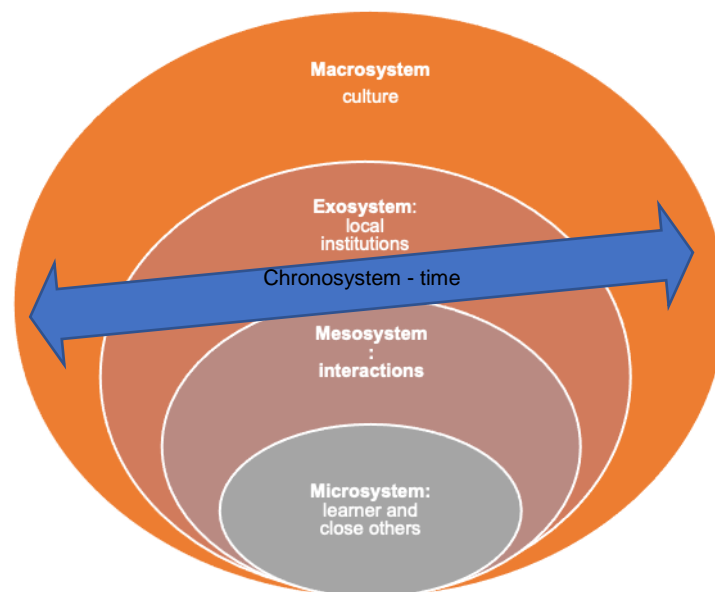
3. Cyberculture and Covid the pandemic as macrosystems

Santos & Weber defines cyberculture as "contemporary culture mediated by networked digital technologies in cyberspace and cities" (Santos & Weber, 2018). In this new digital culture, it is almost impossible to live without new technologies. Technologies transform not only our lifestyle, but our cultural relations of knowledge production. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, cyberculture could be considered a macrosystem, which may affect all the other systems.

However, the pandemic made us realize that cyberculture is not yet true for everyone, or that at least some are much more affected by the digital division. The pandemic brings not only disease and death (more than 700,000 in our country), but also joblessness, hunger and unequal access to education. The problem already existed before Covid, but the pandemic opens up social differences. Liberali (2020), discussing the concept of necropolitics (in the case of the pandemic of having to choose who lives to die), argues that we cannot admit necroeducation (who will have access to education and who will not). In many moments of this pandemic, necro-education linked not only to hunger, but also to digital exclusion, became very clear. Another point that became clear was that many of the teachers (perhaps most of them) were not prepared to work remotely. It was in this context that this study was developed.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach that seeks to reflect on the language acquisition process. Therefore, the influence of different factors in this learning process is considered. In the present phase of the research, we would like to focus on three factors: teaching and learning strategies, digital technologies, and the importance of the students' socio-historical context. The idea is to understand how these factors influence each other and, consequently, the language learning process.

Considering that cyberculture we live in and that the physical distance caused by pandemic forced us to use digital technologies, we would like to answer the following questions:

- How has the use of digital technologies) influenced learning strategies choices before and during the pandemic?
- How can digital literacy help in the development of a more collaborative, critical reflective approach to the language teaching practice, and consequently, to the language learning process?

In attempt to answer these questions, this ongoing study has been conducted since 2020.

4.1. Participatory action research

We consider the present study as part of a participatory action research project (Brandão, 1981; Brandão & Streck, 2006), since "researchers and researched are subjects of the same common work, albeit with different situations and tasks" (Brandão, 1981, p.11), being an attempt to know the practice itself to try to transform it, as we believe that practice and theory must go hand in hand. Research

participants are not simple users of knowledge produced by an external researcher, but knowledge producers who seek to improve pedagogical practice and/or their own learning process. For Kemmis and Wilkinson (2011, p. 41-43), in addition to the spiral circle of self-reflection cycles (planning, action and observation, reflection, re-planning and so on), participatory action research presents other fundamental characteristics: it is a social process; it is participatory; it is practical and collaborative; it is emancipatory; it is critical and it is recursive (reflexive, dialectical). We believe that reflection is not an isolated moment and that all phases of research require reflection, critical view and collaboration.

4.2. Participants and procedure

The research instruments consisted of narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2015) Virtual Learning Environment forums, questionnaires, and videos.

The first phase of the research was mainly that of choosing participants and planning the next actions. For the second phase, we interviewed six students in 2020: three who had worked as interns or monitors and three who were beginning to participate in the project. During the research (2021-2022), the last three ones prepared reports and videos about their experiences and answered a feedback questionnaire in 2023. In 2023, we also interviewed four participants of the project and finally they answered a feedback questionnaire.

The choice of participants to take part in the project was based on indications from professors, tests or the student's own interest in looking for monitoring or the project directly. During the narrative interviews, we mainly talked about their experiences studying languages before college and what they expected from the Literature course and/or the project (See Table 2).

Table 2. Script for the narrative interviews.

Time of the interview: Interviewer(s): (Describe briefly the project.)	Date: Interviewee:	Venue:
Information	Objective (Try to make them...)	Possible prompts
Personal information	Identify the participant	*Please, tell us/me your name, if you are still a university student and what is relation to the project.*
Studying English before university	Get to know their history before university as far as language learning is concerned.	*Tell us a little how you studied English before you entered UERJ.*
Information about their experience at UERJ	Make them narrate their experience at university.	*Now tell us about your studies during college.*
Exmanent and/or immanent questions (extra questions)	Mention the project, the use of digital technologies and/or language learning strategies (if they haven't already mentioned it/them.	*Talk a little more about the resources and/or strategies used in addition to those already mentioned, if you used them, of course.* *Tell us about your role in the CEALD project / how you found out about the CEALD project.* *(Other questions that may arise)*

For data analysis, we used the model proposed by Bortoni-Ricardo (2008): analysis by assertions. Bortoni-Ricardo (2008, p. 53) defines assertions as "an affirmative statement in which the researcher anticipates the revelations that the research may bring." These assertions may be modified during the research, depending on the progress of the study, and may also be divided into sub-assertions. In the case of the current study, we had the following initial assertion:

- The pandemic contributed to the recognition of cyberculture, as students and teachers were forced to establish new relationships with digital technologies, which consequently influence the choice of language teaching and learning strategies.

The analysis procedure consists of identifying in the narratives and responses of the participants references to the following interpretation themes: learning strategies, digital technologies and collaboration, always seeking to confirm, modify, or discard each of this initial assertion.

5. Findings and future work

After analyzing learners' narratives in the interviews and their comments on the VLE forums it was possible to subdivide the original assertion in the following sub-assertions: (a) Learners are not aware of what learning strategies mean, but they mentioned at least some of these strategies during the interviews; (b) Before the pandemic, they used technology mainly for research (i.e., checking the meaning of words and expressions and finding information about a specific topic), as a resource of

materials (i.e., reading texts, listening to podcasts, downloading music and videos), besides social communication (social networking), and most of the strategies were (meta)cognitive and (meta)social ones. (c) During the pandemic work and study depended on technology, so besides the learning strategies they already used before that period, they had to develop or adapt others, mainly (meta)affective strategies and (meta)motivational strategies; (d) During the interview another issue arose: social identities influencing learners' motivational and affective strategies

Something we can't help but realize is that the pandemic has completely changed many of our habits. Therefore, now it would be interesting to see how this pandemic period influenced our relationship with digital technologies and, consequently, with the strategies we use (we will use) in the post-pandemic period. During the pandemic, one of the most used ways to communicate was social media. The only way to study was via digital technologies, so very possibly we will never be the same after this period. And, therefore, this becomes one of the focuses of my future studies.

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