



FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION ON THE WEB: WHICH TEACHER? WHICH STUDENT? WHICH LANGUAGE?

A AQUISIÇÃO DE LÍNGUAS ESTRANGEIRAS NA WEB:
QUAL PROFESSOR? QUAL ALUNO? QUAL LÍNGUA?

LA ADQUISICIÓN DE LAS LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS EN LA WEB:
¿QUÉ MAESTRO? ¿QUÉ ALUMNO? ¿QUÉ LENGUA?

Erica de Cássia Modesto Coutrim

ABSTRACT

The introduction of Internet in educational practices is strongly affecting learning, teaching strategies, and the language itself. A non-human element is modifying the way people learn and interact. The new empiricist and new materialist views refuse the Cartesian thought that established a binary that serves as a framework for the social sciences and the education, and assumes that agency is not restricted to the human action. The objective of this paper is to show that the transfer of the teaching-learning process of foreign languages to the virtual environment goes far beyond the mastery of technology. It was intended to identify the complexity of introducing the Internet to learning activities, bearing in mind the inadequacy of archaic and hierarchical relations and of a learning process that treats languages and students as inert elements. Brazilian students who learn German were observed, but the limits of the qualitative methods weren't enough to analyze these new thoughts on the reciprocal influence and agency of all elements included in the process. For this reason, the philosophy as a method, the new materialism as a framework, and the 'onto-ethical-epistemological' (Barad, 2007) turn as an alternative to the way we relate to subjects and objects were applied. The results indicated that there is a persistence in maintaining established roles despite the belief regarding the significance of the non-human in this new context. In face of that resistance, a mix of false expectations and false results have been established, thus producing nothing 'new' in a new environment.

KEYWORDS: Internet. Foreign language acquisition. New materialism. New empiricism.

RESUMO

A introdução da Internet em práticas educacionais para aquisição de línguas estrangeiras vem afetando fortemente os processos de aprendizagem, as estratégias de ensino e a própria linguagem. Um elemento não-humano vem modificando a maneira como aprendemos e interagimos. As visões neomaterialistas e neoempiristas indicam que o poder de ação já não se restringe ao ser humano - como aponta o dualismo cartesiano, que estabeleceu um binário que tem servido como enquadramento teórico para as ciências sociais e para a educação, em particular. Pretende-se demonstrar que a transferência do ensino-aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras para a Web extrapola o domínio de ferramentas tecnológicas. A complexidade desse processo, considerando a inadequação de relações hierárquicas e arcaicas para o ensino, assim como de um processo de aprendizagem que trata línguas e alunos como elementos inertes. Estudantes brasileiros de alemão como língua estrangeira foram observados e entrevistados, mas os limites dos métodos qualitativos não foram suficientes para analisar esses novos pensamentos sobre a influência recíproca e poder de ação de todos os elementos incluídos no processo. Por isso, a filosofia como método, o novo materialismo como enquadramento teórico, assim como a virada "onto-ético-epistemológica" (Barad, 2007) mostraram-se como alternativas adequadas à forma como nos referimos a eles. Os resultados indicaram que ainda existe uma persistência na manutenção dos papéis estabelecidos, apesar da crença na significância do elemento não-humano nesse novo contexto. Diante disso, produziu-se uma mistura de falsas expectativas e falsos resultados, tendo como resultado "nada de novo, em um novo ambiente".

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Internet. Aquisição de línguas estrangeiras. Neomaterialismo. Neoempirismo.

RESUMEN

La introducción de herramientas en línea en las prácticas educativas está afectando el aprendizaje, las estrategias de instrucción, y el idioma mismo. Un elemento no humano está modificando la manera en cual las personas aprenden e interactúan entre sí. La consideración empirista y materialista rechaza el pensamiento cartesiano e establece que la agencia no está restringido a la acción humana. Demonstraremos que la transferencia del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de idiomas extranjeras al entorno de aprendizaje virtual va más allá del dominio de herramientas tecnológicas. Fue destinado a identificar la complejidad de la introducción de Internet a las actividades de aprendizaje tomando en cuenta las deficiencias de las relaciones arcaicas y jerárquicas que tratan idiomas y estudiantes como elementos inertes. Estudiantes brasileños de alemán fueron observados, pero los límites de métodos cualitativos no fueron suficientes para analizar la influencia recíproca y la agencia de los elementos incluidos en el proceso. Por este motivo, la filosofía como un método, el nuevo materialismo como un marco, y el ‘onto- ético – epistemológico’ (BARAD, 2007) dirigen como una alternativa a la manera que relacionamos al sujeto e los objetos fueron aplicados en esta consulta. Los resultados indican que existe todavía una persistencia en mantener las funciones establecidas a pesar de la creencia al respecto de la importancia del elemento no humano en el nuevo contexto en lo cual fueron incorporados. Frente de esta resistencia, una mezcla de falsas expectativas y falsos resultados han sido establecidas, por lo tanto produciendo nada “nuevo” en un nuevo entorno.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Internet. Adquisición de idiomas extranjeras. Nuevo materialismo. Nuevo empirismo.

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of the foreign language learning and teaching process has not been expressively changed over the last five millennia. Despite the technological and methodological innovation and the development of researches involving education and other fields of expertise, the process still favors the dialectical relationship between teachers and students, as well as a limited view of the language. In this process, the language itself has been seen as an instrument for communication of information from an addresser to an addressee through a particular media.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The new materialistic perspective identifies the materialism of language due to its identity or vibrancy (BENETT, 2010), considering the materialization of all bodies, human or non-human (BARAD, 2003).

For Barad, matter is both discursive and material, and everything in the world can be perceived as an ‘onto-ethico-epistemology’, as ontological, epistemological, and ethical (as well as political) at the same time. Everything then, subject and matter, is in constant entanglement denying any separate entity. (TESAR; ARNDT, 2016, p. 195).

Similarly, the new materialist view elevates the technological devices and the Internet to a more relevant position, by considering their materiality and their role as instruments for trajectories individuation. The contact between different people, different cultures and different experiences through the language may contribute to creating singular individuals who can develop their individual experiences in a virtuous circle of knowledge. Given this fact, we could presume that the agency of the language and of the Internet are as significant as the agency of human for the foreign language acquisition process.

This new materialist perspective refutes the idea of the teacher's sovereignty as a transmitter of indisputable ideas, practices, and information to students who learn an almost immutable language, unilaterally. Actually, it establishes the creation of new relations in the foreign language acquisition process not only between human beings and language, but also between human beings, languages, devices, and the Internet in a reciprocal and continual relation of agency and transformation, thus eliminating the dialectical boundaries between subjects and objects.

3 A DIALECTICAL HISTORY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS

In an interview during a conference in Brazil, Manuel Castells (2015) defended the benefits of the Internet for educational purposes by making the following statement: "The learning world of young people and students has been increasingly divided into two parts: school, which gives you a diploma, and the Internet, with informal groups, with which people can really learn".

Castell's statement assumes a dispute and the consequent victory of the World Wide Web over the conventional school (physical) for meaningful learning purposes. The search for new ways of learning is due to many doubts emerging from the effectiveness of the traditional school. On the other hand, scholars from many fields of expertise, teachers, and technology developers claim that the transfer of the traditional school environment to the virtual environment can be the answer for most of the educational problems, such as demotivation and lack of autonomy or interest.

We understand that the transfer of language learning and teaching practices from the face-to-face to the virtual classroom may cause continual changes in the environment, as well as significant modifications of all human and non-human elements present in the process. Therefore, we are not simply talking about equipping schools with computers and tablets, but also to get an understanding of which roles teachers and students have assumed in this new environment. Thus, it would be pertinent to consider the philosophy as a method in order to study these connections in a way that eliminated the boundaries between all the biological and non-biological elements involved in the foreign language acquisition process.

This notion is subversive. The dialectical view given to the foreign language acquisition process has begun many years ago, and such perspective is still prominent today. From 3000 to 2500 B.C., Acadians learned the Sumerian language not only through the contact with the conquered people but also in schools dedicated to the teaching of cuneiform. The school environment was almost sacred, and the relationship between teachers and students followed a unilateral model of "content delivery."

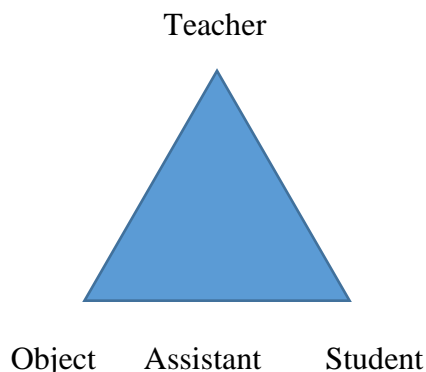


FIGURE 1 - Foreign language teaching and learning relationship between Acadians and Sumerians
Source: The autor

At school, the teachers (*père l'École*) taught the students (*filis de l'École*) who copied the presented pictures. The teacher's assistant (*grand frère*) had the function of controlling and correcting the activities done by the students, who had to memorize it. The relationship was formal and unidirectional: Teachers, holders of linguistic and moral knowledge, transferred it to students, who had to memorize and reproduce what they learned in school.

Similarly, the teaching of Maat and ancient Greek in Greece was given by dictation, copying, and memorization under the command of a teacher who used to do it unilaterally.

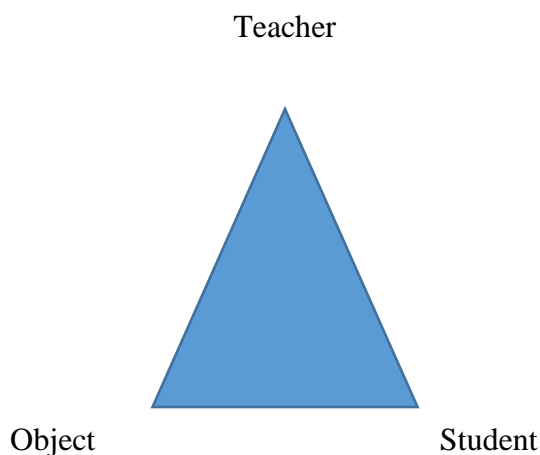


FIGURE 2 - Teaching of Maat and classical Greek in ancient Greece
Source: The autor

Here, it was also up to the student to only transcribe the guidelines of the Egyptian doctrine, as well as the characters and a few grammatical exercises. The teacher also had a centralizing role. As for the Egyptians, during 500 B.C., to whom the ancient Greek was taught as an official language, but with the characteristics of a foreign language. Since that time, the language spoken by the Greeks, the Koine, differed from that of Homer. The school also allowed the student, under the exclusive guidance of a teacher, to explain snippets and

episodes of classical authors' works, especially singular works such as Iliad and Odyssey (IX-VIII B.C).

Generally, the Greeks did not consider Latin a worthy language to be learned. In fact, they considered it a barbarous language. The Romans, however, learned classical Greek as a second language, as a form of social prestige. From 200 A.D., a bilingual education system was instituted in Rome, obviously intended for a privileged part of the Roman civilization.

Nevertheless, the pedagogical framework established the formal teaching of Greek and Latin to the apprentices of that time. Then, the primary school teacher had the function of reading and writing letters of the alphabet, syllables, and words on the blackboard (the use of the blackboard dates from this time). Also, from the age of 11, students used to attend grammar school, where the rules of grammar and writing styles were taught from classical poems, which were followed by declination and verb conjugation exercises. It was only at an advanced stage of higher education (from approximately the age of 15) that students were given the opportunity to dialogue with their teachers after intense teachings on rhetoric art.

Despite the timeline distance, the relationships did not change significantly in regards to the teacher, language, student, devices, and environment. Teachers still have a monopolized role. They behave as the subjects who act on the passive objects, teaching an inert language through inert devices. Regardless of the many theories and methods that suggest different learning-teaching strategies, the classroom routine is still manifesting the same old processes. Students do not have a significantly active role in the foreign language acquisition process. The content must be followed regardless of the needs, specificities, and difficulties of the students. In sum, a language is taught as a rigid entity.

The above descriptions significantly distance themselves from the idealized form of teaching foreign languages on the Web, according to a new materialist and new empiricist perspective. Defenders of teaching with the use of the Internet advocate a non-hierarchical teaching and a collaborative environment, in which students and teachers share the search task and selection of information, and learning. Every element (human and non-human) should be inserted in a network of mutable information, thus sharing the search for meaningful learning.

4 NEW MATERIALISM AS A FRAMEWORK FOR THE VIRTUAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PROCESS

In the article entitled “New Materialism – Framework for the Internet of Things”, Miranda Bruce (2015, p.1) explores a series of questions in order to identify the materiality of non-biological elements. For example: “What is the object capable of doing? What does it make me capable of? How does it change the capacity of the space we are in? How does it challenge our usual hierarchy of human bodies over non-human bodies?” .

The researcher intends to question the absolute and established idea of superiority of human over non-human elements by demonstrating the agency of both of them.

The concept of power in Foucault's writings can be very useful in order to investigate the contrast between the material agency and the sedimented effects of human action. However, Barad (2007), for example, defends that Foucault's work ignore the properties of non-human forces, stressing that:

For both, Butler and Foucault, agency belongs only to the human domain, and neither addresses the nature of techno-scientific practices and their profoundly productive effects on human bodies, as well as the ways in which these practices are deeply implicated in what constitutes the human. (LEMKE, 2014, p.6).

Thomas Lemke (2014), in contrast, tries to demonstrate Foucault's materialist view by focusing on the concept of government of things:

The things government must be concerned about, La Perrière says, are men in their relationships, bonds, and complex involvements with things like wealth, resources, means of subsistence, and, of course, the territory with its borders, qualities, climate, dryness, fertility, and so on. 'Things' are men in their relationships with things like customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking. Finally, they are men in their relationships with things like accidents, misfortunes, famine, epidemics, and death. (LEMKE, 2007, p. 96).

If a reciprocal effect relationship between human and non-human or material and non-material exists, we have to consider that the second type of elements does not have a passive role in its relations with the human.

From the new materialist point of view, a language also has a materialist aspect. In other words, a language would not be only an instrument for transmitting messages from a sender to a receiver who interprets it, according to the dialogical principle (BAKHTIN, 1986). Actually, every message transmitted by language has the intention of causing a direct effect on the physical, historical, social or individual world.

Starting from observations of socio-historical or biological events, philosophers – such as Deleuze, Manuel DeLanda, and Rosi Braidotti, among others – have been questioning the dualistic relationship between subjects and objects.

The new materialism is an increasing alternative, which proposes a review of the classical philosophical questions: Who is the agent? How does the agent act? The new materialist theoretical foundation considers the matter whether biological or not, according to its capabilities and constitution; i.e., as embodied memories with agency power that put the dialectic “into question.”

A dualist analysis may be insufficient to examine the Web, given that the information gathered on the Internet are transmitted by electromagnetic wavelengths and that the form

and the speed with which such information are transmitted and retransmitted have affected our way of thinking, existing and relating to others substantially.

If we consider the materiality of the Internet and the language, we can suggest a change in the way we used to analyze nature and the relationship between the elements involved in the acquisition of foreign languages on the Web until now. A new materialist analysis challenges the dualistic approach that has been given to studies on foreign languages acquisition, including a new key element in the process. This study intends to show that the Internet acts mainly as the agent as well as the environment.

A study on Internet usage in foreign language classes does not only imply the analysis of the change from the physical to the virtual environment; most importantly, it refers to the analysis of the knowledge production process on the Web, given the capabilities of the environment itself and the elements inserted in it, a circular relationship in which everything and everyone are modified in some ways.

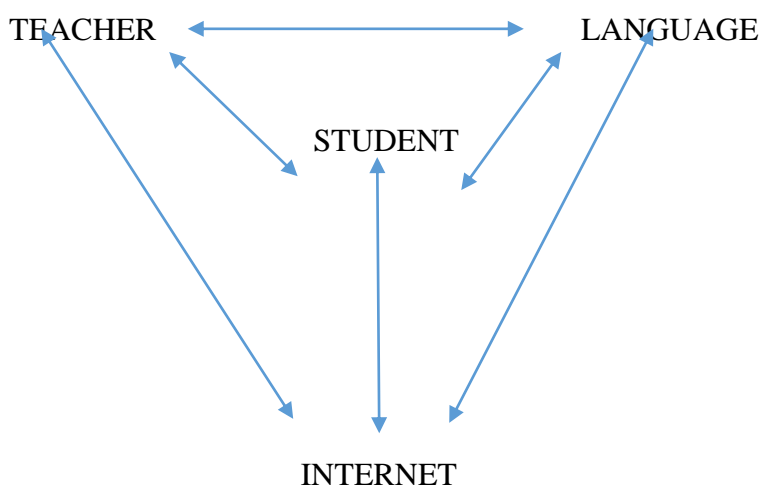


FIGURE 3 - Foreign Language Acquisition process, according to a new materialist view
Source: the author

The application of the new materialism as a method emerges as a valid possibility of understanding the new configurations and relations in foreign language acquisition process on the Web. These relations are not the same anymore, and they will not be the same in the future. The development of methods and learning strategies must consider these constant modifications and highlight the language learning and teaching process as a perennial issue to be constantly confronted, according to the characteristics of the students, teachers, environment, and devices.

5 METHOD

The aim of this research is to describe and analyze elements in transformation, elements that are related and that change constantly. It required that we had to adopt a post-qualitative method that goes beyond boundaries of the qualitative method. It does not mean we have not used surveys and other investigation approaches. It means that the research and its analysis have not been delimited by methodological parameters.

Philosophy as a method brings theory into the practice and ontologies into the research processes. Philosophy as a method represents a potential yet functional oxymoron and intriguing paradox forcing readers and users of methodology to give up their potentially fixed and overly normative uses and definitions of a 'method.' When philosophy is brought into a method, method can no longer be treated as an objective set of procedures, automated activity, or predetermined, single, and simplified task. Instead, philosophies create movement and diversity within 'methods' when thinking and doing blend and interact continuously and seamlessly. (KORO-LJUNBERG et al, 2015, p. 618).

We intend to show that this analytical study is able to serve as a support for reflection on the integration of communication technology through the Internet in the educational environment. The purpose of this research is holistic and its character is instrumental. We intend to show to what extent the elements (human and non-human) affect each other in the process and the results of these modifications.

In this regard, 48 German teachers of three private and public K-12 schools in Brazil have had their classes observed and they have answered a survey on their perceptions about the use of Internet in foreign language classes.

6 RESULTS

The research indicated that the foreign language teachers (even the youngest among them) were more comfortable using printed rather than digital materials to teach students. All the teachers answered that they have not received formal instruction to include ICT (Information and Communications Technology) in the classes (neither at the university nor at school, as training). The results indicated that the teachers believe the technology has been changing the way students learn, but it did not have significant changes in the way teachers teach. A vast majority of the respondents consider that the students are more used to working with technology and that today they question both the learning methodologies and the contents that are used to teach them in class. The educators also believe that the Internet makes the students more absentminded, since they would be distracted most of the time or perhaps thinking about social networks during classes or even when they use ICT at school.

In the paragraph above, we can detect that the use of technology at school has contributed to making the teachers more defensive. They have been confronted with the new

technologies, but they are yet to receive appropriate methodological preparation to deal with them. On the one hand, the teachers are usually predisposed to use ICT, but on the other hand, they do not understand yet what real difference the use of ICT can make in the school environment.

We presented here only the teachers' perspective about the changes that occurred after the introduction of ICT at school; from their point of view, it is possible to identify that the students demand urgent modifications in the teacher-student relationship, methodologies, and contents.

In one of the questions, we asked the teachers about the biggest problems of applying ICT in the classes. 30% of them affirmed students use the devices and the Internet to do something else during the classes; 40 % assume the students do not know how to use or refine the information found on the Internet (according to them, there are only one or two popular sources that are reproduced). The other 30% assume the students have difficulty in interpreting the information found on the Internet.

The language was another interesting analyzed element. All teachers claim that the students have been using the foreign language they learned in classes to do real tasks, not as an exercise, but as a way of performing real tasks, such as making a room reservation at a hotel or talking to people on Facebook. In contrast, the teachers claim they are still teaching the students according to the workbook content, which is not always related to the students' social context or interest.

7 CONCLUSION

The inclusion of ICT in foreign language classes has been a contentious issue in pedagogical research and practice. In this article, we intended to assert the coherence of philosophy as an appropriate method to discuss what the transformations have been causing (and that will probably still cause). This perspective demands an onto-epistemological analysis that undoes the boundaries between theory and practice to the understanding of such a process of changes. Similarly, we tried to demonstrate that educational practices that insist on the hierarchical position of teachers, on the passivity of students, and on the inertia of language and Internet tools give rise to theoretical and methodological misunderstandings. There is a huge expectation for more creative, autonomous and collaborative classes, but until now there are a few significant changes in the practices used by teachers to impart knowledge.

There is a belief that ICT may cause a complete revolution in schools, thus solving most of the problems that make students learn a language for years without being able to use it efficiently. Actually, the ICT and the Internet have a huge potential to transform the schools' environment, but 5000 years cannot be easily deleted by buying devices and

licenses. This modern technology has been transforming the way students contact people, read, write and share information. The materiality of the language has been reinforced by the use of ICT. The students want to learn a foreign language in order to execute specific tasks, that is, to really perform tasks and not only to pass an exam. Using the new materialism as a framework for analyzing the foreign language acquisition process through the Internet is a feasible possibility of dealing with problems that a dialectical view does not support anymore. The new literacies, technologies, and relationships demand such analysis that comprehends individuals and their relations with devices and environments, which may transform significant aspects of their lives and, in this case, their learning characteristics.

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ERICA DE CÁSSIA MODESTO COUTRIM

Mestre em Letras (Língua e Literatura Alemã) - Universidade de São Paulo, USP – Brasil

Professora de língua alemã no Colégio Visconde de Porto Seguro, São Paulo – Brasil

E-mail: ericacoutrim@usp.br

Recebido em: 15/12/2015

Aprovado para publicação em: 30/06/2016

Como citar este documento:

COUTRIM, Erica de Cássia Modesto. Foreign Language Acquisition on the Web: What teacher? What student? What language?. **ETD - Educação Temática Digital**, Campinas, SP, v. 18, n. 3, p. 553-563, ago. 2016. ISSN 1676-2592. Disponível em: <<http://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/etd/article/view/8646110>>. Acesso em: 29 ago. 2016. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.20396/etd.v18i3.8646110>.
