“it’s not correct”: collaborative pedagogical activities using computers may not be that easy

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Abstract: This paper explores how Foreign Language Learners develop collaborative pedagogical activities during classroom pair work at the computer. Seven hours of interaction were video recorded, from which one segment is analyzed to demonstrate the learners’ multimodal embodied actions as they struggle to jointly constitute spaces for participatory classroom language learning or not. Through data analysis, it is given special attention to issues involved in (1) interactional problem solving in sequences of disagreements during the development of collaborative pedagogical activities, and (2) authorship, collaborative writing and how participants deal with it interactionally.

Keywords: Collaborative Pedagogical Activities, Social Interaction, Classroom Teaching/Practice, Teamwork, Computers

1. Introduction

This paper takes an interactional sociolinguistic (Ribeiro, Garcez, 2002) and conversation analytic (Duranti, 1997; Schegloff, 2007) perspective to describe how learners developed collaborative pedagogical activities in a Portuguese as a Second Language (PSL) classroom. I focus particularly on their co-construction of participatory contextual frames (or not) for language use during classroom language learning group activities involving computers with Internet. Through data analysis, it is given special attention to issues involved in (1) interactional problem solving in sequences of disagreements during the development of collaborative pedagogical activities, and (2) authorship, collaborative writing and how participants deal with it interactionally. In the end, I hope teachers may find some reflexive inspiration for their own classroom practice, aiming at an Education supported by a Technology that really targets a better more participatory world.

Data consists of seven hours of video recorded and transcribed interaction among PSL learners at various classroom sessions from October through
December, 2005, as students were engaged in the development of an electronic newsletter with the aid of information and communication technologies. Additional data came from field notes generated through participant observation as well as from electronic records made available by the virtual learning environment used in the project. For this presentation, we discuss one segment of talk-in-interaction featuring one pair of students: Dalva and Mauro.

2. Exploring collaborative pedagogical activities using computers in language classrooms

The analysis of the following excerpt between Dalva and Mauro demonstrates how difficult it may be to (1) solve problems together, which was part of the collaborative pedagogical activity of writing posts to suggest topics to the online newspaper; (2) deal with authorship issues without splitting up the pair when someone who is not the author of a sentence for instance criticizes the author (Bulla, 2007); (3) get into a conciliatory end in extended interactional sequences of disagreements (Loder, 2006) in a way that they keep on doing the collaborative pedagogical activity (Bulla, 2007). Dalva and Mauro ended up building up a dispute of who was the one who knew more, creating sequences of disagreement and dispute, with dispreferred actions, such as disagreeing, being done without softened elements by Mauro, and with Dalva insisting in maintaining the discussion. All these aspects culminated in an extended an aggravated sequence of disagreement, ending in silencing and rupture.

Dalva and Mauro were in front of a computer, collectively writing a post in the Online Forum to suggest topics for the Culture Section of the online newspaper, one of the sections they were responsible for. Mauro was typing. In the picture below, there is a frame from the video, which shows the camera focus, and the participants’ positions in the computer lab.
In the screen, in the virtual learning environment ALED, in the Forum, topic “Culture”, Mauro had written in the first line: ‘http://www.culturabrasil.pro.br/simbolospatrios1.htm’, and in the second: ‘pode ver você mesmo sobre a bandeira brasileira’ (translation: ‘you can see yourself about the Brazilian flag’). In the first seventeen lines in the translation bellow, we can see Dalva initiating repair two times: one in line 5, and another in line 15, with a code-switch to mandarin in the end. By doing so, Dalva demonstrates an orientation to review a specific sentence written in Portuguese by Mauro. Mauro only answers her question in line 17, after long pauses, not aligning with her suggestion to review that sentence until that line.

*it’s not correct* - Aula 3 - video 01 - 07.11.2005 - 16:45-17:05,03 (duração: 00:01:05,03)
During the pause in line 19 in the next part of the translation below, the disagreement is established between them through gestures: Dalva looks at Mauro, Mauro looks at her and moves his head from one side to the other two times, as a negative gesture. Then, right after this gesture, Dalva shakes her head four times quickly, as an affirmative gesture. In line 21, they try to keep the turn of talk as in a competition, as they keep talking at the same time.
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After Mauro’s second explanation concerning the meaning of the sentence he had written in Portuguese, in line 26 in the transcription below, Dalva demonstrates again that she did not agree with his explanations, or at least that she wants to keep the topic, that was, reviewing Mauro’s sentence. In line 39 we can see Mauro defending his idea for the last time, and in line 41 Dalva accounting for the end of their conversation about that topic but emphasizing her disagreement.

26 Dalva você pode ver
you can see ((Mauro looks at Dalva))
27 (1.0)
28 Dalva sozinho
alone/by yourself((Dalva looks at Mauro))
29 (1.8) ((Mauro looks at Dalva twice))
30 Mauro oôh [.hbc mys?elf 就是这样 yours?elf = like this

After that rupture, they did not go on working together, and it took a long time after that moment for them to talk to each other again. The way they dealt with their disagreement, Dalva insisting with her disagreement and then aggravating the conflict, and Mauro alluding to Dalva as if she did not know too much Portuguese, led them to not being able to develop the pedagogical activity as a group. This excerpt reinforces how difficult dealing with disagreements can be, reinforcing it as a dispreferred action. It also highlights how delicate corrections may be and dealing with other people’s creations in front of them. It requires a lot of maturity and willingness to be criticized.

4. Final Remarks

The excerpt analyzed demonstrates the learners’ multimodal embodied actions as they struggle to jointly constitute spaces for participatory classroom language
learning or not. Dalva and Mauro were not able to successfully develop the pedagogical activity, doing it really collaboratively. Developing collaborative activities, then, is not an easy interactional procedure, neither one that does not include disagreements, doubts and etc., but these are inherent to this kind of work, which can be done successfully (meaning achieving educational goals, including “team work”, for instance) if participants orient themselves to co-construct participatory contexts, in which everyone has voice and chance to participate in a way or another, and develop the activity as a group.

Pointing out other peoples’ possible mistakes may compromise the whole activity when it refers to collaborative writing if students are not prepared to face this kind of situation. Student’s must then be aware of the kind of activity they are about to engage in. There are some preliminary procedures teachers may undertake before carrying out collaborative activities with their students though, for instance: the teacher may talk to the students about authorship by asking students to look for concepts wherever they can, and discuss in a forum the different concepts they had found, aiming at building one or more concepts of authorship, created by the group. During this process the teacher must emphasize the importance of not underestimating each other’s contributions, trying to get what is best from each other, and aiming at the development of the activity. Teachers should also emphasize that disagreements may enrich the work, but students should always look for a solution. Teachers that propose tasks like collaborative writing should prepare students to deal with criticism: getting criticized not by the teacher, as students usually are, but by their colleagues for the sake of a better work may not be that simple and should be taught how to deal with it as they may not be used to.

As it could be noticed in the analysis of the segment of interaction involving Dalva and Mauro, even between friends collaborative writing may not be an easy task. I would say collaborative writing is not the problematic issue, but pointing a possible mistake in Mauro’s text was, which configured many attempts of corrections made by Dalva and many resistances by Mauro, culminating in a rupture. Bulla (2007) also analyses another pair that did not have this kind of problem Mauro and Dalva faced out. Besides other interactional aspects, this other pair was not dealing with a text written by any of them, like Mauro and Dalva, who were dealing with Mauro’s text. This other pair analyzed in Bulla (2007) were collaborative writing based on another classmate’s text, thus they did not have the kind of correction problem Mauro and Dalva experienced. That is why I emphasize that authorship is such a delicate issue for the author to be dealt with anyone else but the authors themselves. One pedagogical procedure I found it interesting to apply in collaborative writing activities is to avoid letting one author working with his/her text with someone who has not written that text; that is, a pair of students write together a text and then is going to work with another text that none of them is the author of it, being both at the same status to work with the text and the colleague. It seems to me that in pedagogical activities that involve a collaborative writing software either students have got to be emotionally well prepared, either students should not be organized in a way that they end up analyzing the text of the person with whom there are interacting (Bulla, 2007).
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