

STUDENTS' BELIEFS AND ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY / CRENÇAS DOS ALUNOS E COMUNIDADES DE APRENDIZAGEM COLABORATIVA ONLINE: UM ESTUDO DE CASO

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Abstract: This case study aims to discuss the beliefs of English language learners regarding the Busuu online learning community. We investigated how the autonomy and collaborative learning affect language learning based on the concepts of beliefs coined by Barcelos (2007), Barcelos and Abrahão (2006), Dewey (1933), and Riley (1996). The results show that although the students realize the advantages of studying in a virtual environment, they still consider the presence of a teacher and the English Language classroom very important. Therefore, it is necessary to provide moments of reflection to create a reinterpretation that leads to attitude changes, towards an autonomous and collaborative learning mindset.

Keywords: Beliefs. Online Learning. Collaborative Learning.

Resumo: Este estudo de caso objetivou discutir as crenças dos aprendizes da língua inglesa acerca da comunidade de aprendizagem *online* Busuu. Investigou-se como a autonomia e a aprendizagem colaborativa permeiam a aprendizagem de línguas, com base nos conceitos de crenças cunhados por Barcelos (2007), Barcelos e Abrahão (2006), Dewey (1933) e Riley (1996). Os resultados mostram que, embora, os alunos percebam as vantagens de estudar em um ambiente virtual, eles ainda consideram muito importante a presença de um professor e da sala de aula de Língua Inglesa. Por isso, é necessário proporcionar momentos de reflexão para gerar uma ressignificação que leve a mudanças de atitude, para a formação de um aluno autônomo e colaborativo.

Palavras-chave: Crenças. Aprendizado Online. Aprendizagem Colaborativa.

1 Introduction

Studies regarding Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been spread in different educational contexts, particularly in research on language teaching and learning. The literature in this area is full of assertions that ICT have great potential to assist students on their learning both inside and outside the classroom (LÉVY, 1993; MORAN, 1995; NUNAN, 1999). Despite ICT studies not being new, some teachers still insist in ignoring the fact that technology may be a great ally of the autonomous teaching-learning process, therefore, schools are not the only place for knowledge building.

Given that, this article aims to investigate the English language students' beliefs regarding the learning process of an additional language on the Busuu learning online community. It also intends to analyze the role of the student on the collaborative learning community. Based on the previous objectives, the following questions were raised: How do learners make use of this online learning community in their everyday lives? What are learners' beliefs on the effectiveness of using this community when learning English? What is the role of the student in the collaborative learning promoted by online learning communities?

In the following sections we will discuss some theories that support this study, the methodology, the findings and conclusion of this research.

2 The role of the Collaborative Learning and the ICT in Language Teaching

The incorporation of technology in language teaching is neither new nor posterior to the emergence of the internet. The pedagogical practice has always led teachers to rethink their role and their didactics in the classroom. Nowadays, we realize that information is more accessible therefore, our attention lies on what you do with the information acquired. Lévy states that,

[...] new ways of thinking and living are being elaborated in the world of telecommunications and informatics. The relations between men, work, intelligence itself depend, in fact, on the incessant metamorphosis of informational devices of all kinds [...] one can no longer conceive scientific research without a complex apparatus that redistributes the old divisions between experience and theory. In the late twentieth century, a knowledge by simulation emerges, one that epistemologists have not inventoried (LÉVY, 1993, p.7).

In addition, for Moran (1995), technologies may bring a new fascination to school, opening its walls and enabling students to search and talk with other students from the same city, country or abroad, at their own pace. The key issue concerning the use of new technologies in foreign language classes is to create methodologies that incorporate them in the teaching-learning process far beyond the walls of school, so that you can prepare students to overcome the complex demands of a globalized society. It is not just about having access to information and technology, but developing autonomy in the search and selection of information, and in the production of knowledge that leads to solving real problems. The incorporation of new technologies in classroom involves the formation of learners who are able to broaden the horizons of knowledge outside the classroom.

Although the concept of collaborative learning seems to be recent, the idea of producing knowledge through collective construction has a long history. In the sociohistorical theory of Lev

Vygotsky, learning always involves the direct or indirect interference from other individuals and personal reconstruction of experience and meaning. The theory implies that knowledge is initially outside the subject; it is through the interaction and the relationship with others and the society that he/she will internalize the concepts about the world. It is through social exchanges that the subjects reconstruct their concepts of the world and act in it, being influenced by the other, for learning awakens a variety of internal development processes, that are able to operate only when the child interacts with people in his/her environment and when in operation with his/her partners (VYGOTSKY, 1991, p. 60).

The basis of collaborative learning are on the interaction and exchange between students, aiming to improve the competence of group work. Students help one another, by working together and with the teacher as partners, and it is expected for the learner to be autonomous and manage his own steps in the building of knowledge. This model of learning is not dependent on ICT to occur, but the computational resources available and how the Internet has been developing promotes the establishment of new collaborative learning environments.

According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), the notion of Learning Community (and here we include the concept of online learning community) means much more than a group working remotely, it must be understood as a group that has a common goal, basing its activity in regular and mutual exchange of information. For these authors the structural elements of communities of practice have three crucial features, namely: domain, community and practice. Communities of practice, including the virtual ones, can engage in collective/interactive learning on a particular topic and deepen their knowledge on various subjects, interacting frequently and regularly. The collaboration itself may involve reflection and mutual support, pursuing to build knowledge by sharing the risk, eliciting full cooperation of the members of the group.

3 Language learning beliefs: a brief overview

Since Horwitz's (1985) study on beliefs regarding language learning, surveys have been conducted by many well-known scholars, such as Riley (1996). These researches are mostly closely related to the effects on second and foreign language learners' beliefs. The academic concern on the study of beliefs in second language learning came through a paradigm shift within Applied Linguistics (AL). The focus has shifted from product to the process itself once the learner holds a special place in the classroom.

In AL the term "beliefs" has varied meanings. According to Wenden (1986, p. 163), beliefs are "opinions that are based on experiences and opinions of people we respect and influence the way they [the students] act."

For Dewey, beliefs "cover all the issues that still do not have certain knowledge, giving us the confidence to act, as well as the issues that we accept as true, as knowledge, but may be challenged in the future" (DEWEY, 1933).

Riley (1996) proposes the term "culture of learning", which consists on the beliefs and values that may influence the behavior and attitudes of students.

In addition, Sigel (1985 *apud* PAJARES, 1992, p. 313) points out that beliefs are built in our minds and not by other factors, being as "mental constructs experiences, often condensed in what can be considered a scheme or concept, and has the truths that guide the behavior."

Despite the considerable number of studies and concepts on the term "beliefs", for this research, we chose the concept coined by Barcelos and Abrahão (2006), which considers beliefs as

[...] a way of thinking, as constructions of reality, a way of seeing and perceiving the world and its phenomena, co-built on our

experiences and resulting from an interactive process of interpretation and (re)signification. As such, beliefs are social (but also individual), dynamic, contextual and paradoxical (BARCELOS; ABRAHÃO, 2006, p. 18).

This concept is adequate for this research because it helps to analyze the beliefs of students through their experiences and interaction with the virtual learning environment, as these beliefs can be both social and individual at the same time.

Barcelos (2007, p. 112) categorizes the beliefs according to their characteristics:

- Dynamic: beliefs are not static. They can undergo changes over time and even within a given situation.
- Emerging, socially constructed and contextually located: once they are born out of a context of social interaction and relationships, beliefs incorporate such social perspectives.
- Experiential: being a cognitive process, the beliefs are born from their constructions and reconstructions experiences.
- Mediated: beliefs are mediation tools intended for the regulation and mediation of learning processes, as well as for the solving of problems.
- Paradoxical and contradictory: beliefs assume a profile, which is social, shared and uniform; nevertheless, meanwhile, they are individual, emotional, diverse and unique products.
- Related to the action in an indirect and complex way: those involved in the process not always act according to their beliefs, even though they guide their actions.
- Not so easily distinguished from knowledge: aspects such as knowledge, motivation and learning strategies sometimes are confused with beliefs.

It's possible to notice that learning English is largely influenced by learners' beliefs. You cannot ignore the cultural reality that influences identity formation of a classroom, nor separate the linguistic needs of students from their social needs (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2001, p. 544).

Considering that the online learning communities are composed of students and that they are imbued with their beliefs, it is necessary for us to investigate the role of beliefs in the teaching and learning process. It is even more necessary to investigate the role of beliefs when we consider the large and growing autonomy that virtual communities have brought to language learners. That's because in this new age of technology and information sharing, the students' view on the nature of language, the learning of a foreign language, as well as their experiences in education, now have a central and indispensable role in the learning process of the English language.

4 Methodology Research and instruments of data

The methodology chosen for this research is qualitative, more specifically a case study, since it emphasizes specificities of a phenomenon in terms of its origin and its rationale (NUNAN, 1999), and also because this research is carried out in a specific group, focusing in a given situation, in this case, the learning process through an Online Learning Community – OLC (YIN, 2001). The researchers interviewed 10 students at a Language Center. However, for this work, we chose only five due to the amount of data. These students are adolescents and very familiar with all kinds of technology. They received an open-ended questionnaire containing 20 questions. In addition, it was conducted an open-ended interview in order to elucidate some ambiguous answer from the questionnaire. During the interview they were encouraged to reflect upon their experiences as a learner of an online English Course. In this study, the questionnaire was divided in three groups as followed:

Table 1 – Questionnaire

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	QUESTIONNAIRE
1. How do learners make use of this online learning community in their daily lives?	1. How often do you access Busuu? How much time do you spend in each study session?
	2. Do you participate simultaneously in a classroom course? Why? Do you make use of physical learning materials (books, textbooks, dictionaries)?
	3. Do you take part in other online learning communities such as Busuu? Have you got a steady routine for studying? A fixed access time? Where do you usually access the site from?
2. What are learners' beliefs on the effectiveness of using this community in learning English?	4. What is your opinion regarding the effectiveness of the site? Is it enough? Is it necessary to complement?
	5. Are the exchanges with native speakers through the site valid for the acquisition of the English language?
	6. Which of the four skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening) can be developed using a community such as Busuu? How do you practice each one of them?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	QUESTIONNAIRE
3. What is the role of the student in the collaborative learning promoted by on-line learning communities?	7. What is the role of the student regarding his/her own learning in these communities?
	8. How do these exchanges between users/tutors promote learning?

4.1 Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis and interpretation of data are two processes that are closely linked. The objective of the analysis is to organize and summarize the data so that you can provide answers to the problem of the research. This interpretation, in its turn, seeks for a broader sense of the responses by means of the connection to other previously obtained knowledge. In this study, all the data was analyzed and interpreted together considering the nature of the case study in question. The responses were analyzed individually, but within the context of the argumentative lines of approach of each of the three research questions.

5 Findings

The data obtained from the participants' responses was divided into three parts, and it addresses to the objectives of the research, explained

in the introduction. In the first part we will analyze the students' beliefs concerning the first research question ("How do learners use the on-line learning community in their daily lives?"), which will be called the "first line of approach". Shortly after, in the "second line of approach", students' beliefs related to the second research question will be analyzed ("What are learners' beliefs on the effectiveness of using this community in learning English?"). Finally, the "third line of approach" will examine students' beliefs related to the last research question ("What is the role of the student in the collaborative learning promoted by online learning communities?")

5.1 Students' beliefs: first line of approach

In this first line of approach the students' beliefs concerning the first research question will be analyzed: "How do learners make use of this online learning community in their daily lives?"

Table 2 – First line of approach – Question 1

1. How often do you access Busuu? How much time do you spend in each study session?	
S1	"I visit the site about twice a week. I usually spend an hour or so, since I log before my classes at the UFT, then in addition to English I have the priority of my course."
S2	"Four times a week or more. Usually two or more hours."
S3	"Weekly. When I use the platform of study, I usually spend three hours, once a week. "

It's noticeable that the time devoted to language learning by each of the participants varies in a significant way. While S1 spends eight hours per month, S2 commits thirty-two or more monthly to the learning of ESL; S3, in his/her turn, dedicates 12 hours per month. The difference of the dedication of time for each student to learn En-

glish is quite considerable. Learners manage their schedule and devote time to the study of ESL, according to their possibilities. This is quite latent in the speech of S1 when he/she emphasizes the priority of his undergraduate course in comparison with the learning of a second language. These excerpts show that online learning may provide

more flexibility on their schedules, facilitating the process of learning. It's possible to infer that the flexibility given by this model of learning may

leave the students more motivated to study English, not seeing the online collaborative learning as a hindrance.

Table 3 – First line of approach – Question 2

2. Do you participate simultaneously in a classroom course? Why? Do you make use of physical learning materials (books, textbooks, dictionaries)?	
S1	“Yes, because I heard about Busuu before entering the classroom course, and I would not give up either, obviously the more knowledge the better. I use the actual course material.”
S2	“Not at the moment. I had to drop out of my course at LC (Language Centre) because they didn't offer a class at a time I was available. But I'm interested in taking a classroom course soon. And materials, I use the dictionary and sometimes the book I used to work on at my English course.”
S3	“Yes. I believe it is important all the possible immersion in the language in which you want to be fluent. Therefore, the meeting of studies on virtual platforms and classroom learning commune for a better use and contact with the language. Yes I have books and dictionaries.”

Regarding the use of the OLC by the interviewed students, one can see that they are either applied in conjunction with a classroom course or alone, but accompanied by the feeling that the classroom course is required and necessary. We can infer the belief of the students proposed that the online course is not enough to ensure their learning. The S1 understands that the OLC and the classroom course complement each other and do not abdicate either of them, S3 thinks that concomitant use of OLC and classroom courses complete one another and “commune for a better use

and contact with the language”. S2, the only one that does not participate in any classroom courses, gives signs that he/she will join one soon. Regarding the didactic material, all of them use physical material, such as books and dictionaries. In this sub-section, it is notable that the students still make use of physical materials, besides the online course. This factor is positive because they interconnect different sources of study, so that one does not exclude the other. Even in the possession of the physical materials, the students keep studying on the online courses.

Table 4 – First line of approach – Question 3

3. Do you take part in other online learning communities such as Busuu? Have you got a steady routine for studying? A fixed access time? Where do you usually access the site from?	
S1	“I have enrolled in two other communities, but did not continue because. I did not have time. I usually use the site when I'm at UFT, using my own computer. I have no fixed schedule of study or access time. I only have a prefixed schedule in the classroom course.”
S2	“Yes. Besides Busuu, I study English using English Experts. Since I do not come back home for lunch I take this time to access the site from work. Sometimes I study in the evening, then I access it from home.”
S3	“Yes. I often participate in virtual communities with tools with audio and video among participants that leads them to communicate. Such participants are located in numerous countries. I have no routine or fixed schedule of study. One of the benefits of the study in a virtual environment is that you stipulate your own schedules based on your routine. If I've been pretty busy this week I can double my studies the following week. I access preferably from home.”

The extracts reveal a more open attitude about the use of ICT in the teaching-learning language process, demonstrating a real incorporation of these tools into their daily study. The respondents browse on the internet not only from their schools, but also from their homes and workplaces. We also see that the flexibility of time is understood by students as one of the great advantages offered by the OLC. These responses show us students increasingly concerned with connectivity, and for whom the

information is indispensable, since it shortens time and space and promotes an horizontalization of information.

5.2 Students' beliefs: second line of approach

In this second line of approach students' beliefs concerning the second research question will be analyzed: "What are learners' beliefs on the effectiveness of using this community in learning English?"

Table 5 – Second line of approach – Question 4

4. What is your opinion regarding the effectiveness of the site? Is it enough? Is it necessary to complement?	
S1	"It has many good elements that provide learning in an intermediate level. But I think the site alone is not enough, I mean, only if the student is a real nerd [...] you know that guy that has an ability to learn the language? If not, the classroom course is important. We have the teacher to solve our doubts and correct pronunciation at the exact time we make the mistakes. And if we do not understand, he explains again in another way"
S2	"As for effectiveness, I have my doubts; the site is a bit confusing. Certainly the site is not enough. I have no doubt that we need classroom courses to complement the lessons on the site, because this method is not enough for every students, there are several ways of learning, what works for one is not guaranteed to work for everyone. I cannot explain, but the presence of the teacher gives the student safety. It seems that the site is not designed for me; the classroom teacher knows exactly where I need to improve and tells me what I need to study."
S3	"Every learning activity in which you seek for excellence should mandatorily have the greatest possible contact with various forms of approaches offered. Neither the virtual learning environment nor the classroom course environment are self-sufficient, because both need complement to be effectively absorbed by the student."

S2 says he/she has no doubt about the need for classroom course because each student learns differently and that "what works for one is not guaranteed to work for everyone." The analysis of data collected with this question pointed out

that all the participants making use of an OLC or more perceived it as an important tool, but incomplete to the teaching of ESL. This is a revealing fact in the behavior of learners regarding the use of new tools for collaborative learning.

Table 6 – Second line of approach – Question 5

5. Are the exchanges with native speakers through the site valid for the acquisition of the English language?	
S1	"I think so, but I have to be honest. I've never used this tool on the site. I'm not fluent yet, I am in a beginning level. But when I'm speaking better I am sure that talking with a native or with another person who speaks English well will help."
S2	"It depends on the level at which the student is, but all contact with natives is valid."
S3	"Without a doubt. The exchange of experiences and conversation with native speakers and other speakers is of enormous importance. It is through this contact that immersion and absorption of the language are performed in a more practical and comprehensive way"

Here we notice two antagonistic behaviors towards exchanges with proficient or native speakers. While S1 responds that he/she has never used the tool on the site because of embarrassment, since he/she is still in the “beginning level”, and S2 points out that the tool is useful depending on the “level at which the student is”, S3 makes a judgment extremely

positive about the exchanges between users of the OLC. We can infer that he/she believes he must have an advanced level of proficiency in order to participate in the online course, because the learner sees this OLC as a tool for oral practice, in which the student may participate only if he/she can maintain a “fluent dialogue” with native speakers.

Table 7 – Second line of approach – Question 6

6. Which of the four skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening) can be developed using a community such as Busuu? How do you practice each one of them?	
S1	“I believe that reading and writing are the most favored, once skills such as speaking and listening are much easier developed when you have a teacher in a classroom course, considering the details one must be attentive to.”
S2	“Mainly writing and reading. To develop speaking, I think the student needs a teacher. He teaches things that we memorize easier.”
S3	“All skills can be developed in virtual platforms. Nowadays these virtual environments have tools that can manage and evaluate your speech, if it is correct or not and the level of fluency. Writing is also assessed by the mediators of the platform. Reading and understanding are most commonly used, and have efficacy in their analyzes.”

Regarding the skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening) required achieving proficiency in a language, the participants shared relatively approximate opinions. S1 and S2 understand that the skills of reading and writing are the most commonly developed in a community such as Busuu, S1 stresses that oral and comprehension skills are best developed in regular classes, “when you have a teacher”. S2 states that he/she “needs a teacher to teach things”. In contrast, S3 holds that it is possible to develop the four skills in an OLC as they provide tools that meet the students’ needs in the four criteria of proficiency.

Comparing the answers to this question and the previous one, we see a significant contradiction. To the last question, S1 and S2 stated that speaking would be best developed in the classroom with a teacher. However, in the previous answer, they stated that the exchanges with native speakers are very good for the acquisition of ESL. Paying attention to S1’s statement, “when I’m speaking better I am sure talking with a native [...] will help”, and S2 when he/she says that

every exchange is valid, but “depends on the level at which the student is” we realize, again, a constraint and an embarrassment in the students for not being fluent yet, for not speaking “well”. You can observe the insecurity created by the difficulty of understanding and the limited vocabulary of students from beginner’s level, which prevents them from understanding the oral exchanges with native speakers as a tool for building knowledge and language acquisition. This behavior leads to the belief that one must be “ready” to participate in an online chat with a native speaker or even a proficient speaker. The students refuse to participate in interactions while they are not speaking “well”. Until then, they understand that they must “learn what is correct” in the classroom and from the teacher.

In addition, it is still possible to see in these reports a relevant student behavior regarding the role of the teacher in the language learning process. Although they are digital natives, used to receive floods of information, it is noticed that, in a general context, they do not suffi-

ciently developed filters capable of promoting autonomous learning as a support for the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. The respondents argue the need for the teacher to “teach” some of the skills observed. They advocate for traditional teaching, which is teacher-centered.

5.3 Students’ beliefs: third line of approach

In this third line of approach students’ beliefs concerning the third research question will be analyzed: “What is the role of the student in the collaborative learning promoted by online learning communities?”

Table 8 – Third line of approach – Question 7

7. What is the role of the student regarding his/her own learning in these communities?	
S1	“The most important one, since the absence of a classroom teacher lays the learning responsibility to the student interested in the language. He/she has to learn by herself all that he/she is supposed to.”
S2	“The main role, because these courses are usually for students who cannot afford a classroom course, so they are responsible for their own performance.”
S3	“The main role of students in these virtual communities is being self demanding regarding the definition of their own schedules, and the fulfillment of these, as well as the control of their activities and the efficiency and effectiveness of their studies. Questions such as: Am I really learning English this way? Can I learn new items and solve my doubts with this system? Such questions are made, and they should be, when students usually join studies through virtual platforms. The most interested and the most dedicated teacher in these platforms is yourself.”

Participants were unanimous in stating that the role of the student in platforms like Busuu is of utmost importance. Each user was categorical in stating the students’ full responsibility for their own learning in the “absence of a teacher”. S1 says that, in the absence of a teacher, students have to understand by themselves what they need to learn; S2 asserts that students who cannot afford a classroom course, who cannot afford a teacher, are responsible for their own learning in an OLC. S3 points to the responsibility of the student for the definition of study schedules and their fulfillment, carrying out the activities, and for the effectiveness of their

studies. For S3, students are even responsible for questioning and checking the efficiency of their learning strategies, because in an OLC the student herself is “the most interested and dedicated teacher”.

Observing the assertions, it is easy to notice a behavior that disclaims the responsibility of one’s own learning when there is the presence of a teacher. Students understand themselves fully responsible for their learning only when the figure of the teacher is not involved in the process. It is important at this point to bring up again the discussion on autonomy.

Table 9 – Third line of approach – Question 8

8. How do these exchanges between users-tutors promote learning?	
S1	Through the exchange of cultural and personal information, and curiosities, for example. However, it depends. When talking to a native speaker, I guess, you can develop your speaking more. Nevertheless, as I said, I’ve never tried.
S2	You can learn several new words, slangs and pronunciation.
S3	Through correction of speech and common practices of the language rather than the normative grammar of the language.

Although, previously, participants have placed that reading and writing are the two most developed skills in an OLC, when questioned about the gain relative to interactions between user-tutors, the statements are uniform: speaking, especially, benefits from these interactions. S1 believes that progress takes place through the “exchange of cultural and personal information, and curiosities”, although he/she has never tried it. S2 sees that there can be improvement in vocabulary and pronunciation. For S3, in his/her turn, the improvement exists because of the “common practices of the language rather than the normative grammar”. We notice that the collaborative learning can effectively happen through OLCs, although users still sees them with some suspicion. In these responses it is noticeable a traditionalist profile which still hopes that learning should come from the top to the bottom, from teacher to student, and not that knowledge should be constructed horizontally among students and teachers and among students and students.

6 Conclusion

In this research, the learners were exposed to an online course; however, they do not feel prepared to work collaboratively and autonomously with this tool. Regarding to the effectiveness of the OLC Busuu, we realized that despite the students’ perception that the online courses have some advantages – such as the contact with the targeted language, flexible schedule, and interaction with other English learners’ speakers –, the students still see the website as an insufficient tool to promote English learning. In addition, they demonstrate demotivation due to the absence of a teacher (person) who “leads the process” of learning. Although they are considered “digital natives”, the students did not dispense nor abandoned the traditional educational environment.

It is worth highlighting that the students believe it to be necessary to speak English fluently in order to communicate with a native or a more proficient peer, instead of seeing him/her as an

ally in the learning process. That belief projects the idea that the process of learning is difficult or impossible to accomplish. Therefore, it is important to develop the sense of autonomy in the students, and to promote reflexive moments of resignification of these beliefs by explaining that learning a language is a process that embody collaboration, self-commitment, and autonomy.

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