

OLDER STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND DIGITAL LITERACY THROUGH ONLINE TASKS

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ABSTRACT: We are surrounded by technology in almost every activity we perform daily and especially for the elderly there is a growing need to learn how to use computers in a way that makes them feel more integrated into the digital age. Besides, knowing English as a foreign language (FL) is a skill that is essential, especially when using technological devices. Therefore, this article investigates how teaching mediated by technology can be helpful for older learners' language development. Since there are few studies in this area (OHLI, 2007; SCHLEPPEGRELL, 1987), the aim of this article is to analyse and provide guidelines for the creation of online language tasks focused on the development of digital literacy and the improvement of FL learning of older students. This study discusses task design based on learning strategies and principles of computer literacy. Data gathered from online tasks built to improve the FL learning of an older student will illustrate the discussion triggered by this research. Finally, the paper will present some instances of use of the online material and opportunities for development of the student's knowledge through interaction with the teacher and with online English speaking peers, using online tools such as blogs, forums and software of synchronous communication.

62

KEYWORDS: Older learners. Foreign language learning. Online tasks.

RESUMO: A tecnologia está presente em quase todas as atividades que realizamos em nossas rotinas e especialmente, para os idosos, existe uma necessidade crescente de aprender a usar o computador de uma maneira que os façam se sentir mais integrados à era digital. Além disso, saber inglês como língua estrangeira (LE) é uma habilidade fundamental, ainda mais quando há uso de dispositivos tecnológicos. Por isso, esse artigo pretende investigar como o ensino mediado por tecnologias pode auxiliar no desenvolvimento linguístico de aprendizes de inglês como língua estrangeira. Visto que não existem muitos estudos nessa área (OHLI, 2007; SCHLEPPEGRELL, 1987), o objetivo deste artigo é analisar e proporcionar diretrizes na criação de tarefas para o aprendizado de língua estrangeira focadas no desenvolvimento de letramento digital e no aprendizado de língua estrangeira por idosos. Este estudo discute a elaboração de

tarefas com base em estratégias de aprendizado e princípios de letramento digital. Dados coletados das tarefas online direcionadas ao aprendizado do inglês como LE por uma aluna idosa irão ilustrar a discussão levantada por esta pesquisa. Finalmente, este trabalho apresentará alguns exemplos de uso do material online e as oportunidades para o desenvolvimento do conhecimento do aluno através da interação com o professor e amigos online que falam inglês, usando instrumentos digitais, tais como blogs, fóruns e software de comunicação síncrona.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aprendizes idosos Aprendizado de língua estrangeira. Tarefas online.

Introduction

This article is multidisciplinary because it is based on Applied Linguistics and Information Technology in Education to analyse how older students can improve their FL learning through learning tasks focused on interaction through digital tools. We believe that more fluency in the English language and more opportunities of computer literacy¹ can allow a personal fulfillment and sense of belonging of the growing group of Third Age students in the contemporary technological society.

There are not many investigations about foreign language learning, aging and the use of technology. A study by Ohly (2007) shows that learning a FL can motivate older learners to have objectives in their lives after retirement and to live a healthier life. There is also a study by Coryell and Chlup (2007) that demonstrates that using computer tools can speed up the foreign language learning and the development of new skills of Third Age students.

Studying metacognitive, cognitive, social/affective and communicative strategies are key factors in the learning of a FL by older adults, as Ohly states (2007). For instance, through inferring or guessing, the older adult is using a cognitive strategy that may lead to acquisition of vocabulary in a language. One reason for this to happen is that older students can learn vocabulary and grammar as much as people of other ages due to their highly developed cognitive systems, as Schleppegrell claims (1987).

Besides, according to Wagner, Hassanein and Head (2010) through computer literacy, older learners can have more contact with family and friends, reducing loneliness and

¹ In this article, the expressions *computer literacy* and *digital literacy* are used interchangeably.

achieving general well being. This is achieved, for instance, when they write their own blogs, exchange e-mails or participate in forums sharing their points of view and being more socially active. As stated by Burnett (2009), digital literacy refers to practices aimed at producing digital material involving any text that is based on the screen of an electronic device (computers, phones, tablets, etc.). For the author, the notion of digital literacy is linked to the idea of practice, since digital literacies emerge from varied social practices that take place through the use of digital devices.

Therefore, it is important for older adults to be acquainted with the practices and values of the cyberculture and to know better the English language in order to feel more integrated with technological tools. It is relevant to discuss and provide online language tasks with appropriate technologies, more adapted to older learners' needs in order to help them improve their foreign language learning and computer literacy skills. Moreover, they can also benefit socially creating more bounds with family and friends, as suggested by Dickinson *et al.* (2005).

The general objective of this article is to investigate how online tasks may provide opportunities for FL learning of older adults. Through the practice of online activities such as the exchange of e-mails, the participation in forums or the creation of blogs, the Third Age learner focused on this study was able to develop their FL through social practice on the web. One of the specific objectives of this study is to provide older learners with possibilities of interaction in English as a FL with their peers and family through the Internet. These experiences can allow them a great chance to improve their fluency in English through social web interaction. Therefore, older learners may work with online tasks, so that they are able to use web tools more confidently. As a result, it may be possible to see how Third Age students are able to research different topics on the Internet and to share opinions with other users more successfully.

Literature Review

According to Ohly (2007, p.87), a “greying society” is growing in which the process of learning is a key factor for “successful aging”. Social/affective and communicative

strategies (GRAHAM, 1997) are essential to language acquisition, and not only older adults but also individuals of all ages can benefit from the learning process of a language through interactional online resources. This way, they may feel more integrated into society and capable of communicating in their communities and the online communities across the globe.

The Internet fosters integration of communities through the global electronic space, allowing information exchange and interactions which contribute to learning motivation (GARCIA, 2001). Opportunities of learning and the interactions provided by online communities can weaken the sense of loneliness among older adults. Furthermore, the older adult learner is seen as a Person construct (WAGNER, HASSANEIN, HEAD, 2010, p.871) that is influenced by their environment (computer system) and can influence that context. Also the behavior (computer use) can influence and be influenced by the environment and the person. Considering all the above, which is based on the social cognitive theory (BANDURA, 1986), the Third Age student may be able to have more contact with family and friends through blogs, e-mails, forums, increasing different social interactions and collaborating to a better general well being for themselves.

It was found that older adults that use computers can have high levels of cognitive abilities, computer self-efficacy, computer interest and better quality of life (WAGNER, HASSANEIN, HEAD, 2010). Through instructional conversations with the teacher, based on online collaborative tasks which are later performed by the participants, learners may have opportunities to extend their knowledge of English as a foreign language, as it has been shown by Ellis (2003). According to Tharp and Gallimore (1991, p.2), instructional conversation is “a dialogue between teacher and learners in which the teacher listens carefully to grasp the students’ communicative intent, and tailors the dialogue to meet the emerging understanding of the learners”. In this case, the teacher or a more advanced student has the role of scaffolding the interaction dealing with the cognitive demands of a task and the emotions of the learner (ELLIS, 2003). This notion of scaffolding (WOOD, BRUNER, ROSS, 1976) represents the aid provided by the most capable individual of a pair to their peer. The more the older FL learner engages in communication through meaningful online

tasks, the more they may be able to develop the English language in diverse contexts with different individuals.

Besides, a positive aspect of an online task is the provision of authentic material for the foreign language learner. The older learner will interact with the authentic online material integrated in an online task with the purpose of improving their learning of English as a foreign language. In this regard, a Filatro (2007) state that learning based on information and communication technologies promotes autonomy and independence of adults. Therefore the older adult may learn English as a FL more autonomously, having the possibility of publishing material on the web related to an area of their own interest. Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten the importance of instructional and contextualized online tasks designed for the improvement of English as a FL. Filatro (2007) observes that the kind of task, the objective of the instruction and the need of the students need to be taken into consideration. Instruction includes orientation to the student, feedback and practice, usually provided by a teacher. Instruction that can work is the building of knowledge that uses communication to facilitate comprehension.

66

It is essential to highlight the importance of teaching in this process, because teachers will have the function of scaffolding the learner when he/she performs online language tasks in order to develop computer literacy skills and their FL. Foreign language students performing tasks with skilled teachers may maximize their opportunities for language learning through scaffolding and instructional conversation. Another important fact of online tasks is the promotion of learning without limit of time or place, as stated by Filatro (2007). For example, even if the older learner has some physical limitation, he/she can study English as a FL at their own homes at any time of the day.

For a long time, it was considered hard for an older adult to acquire a FL, especially speaking skills due to the idea of “critical period” (LENNEBERG, 1967), according to which the brain loses its plasticity after puberty. More recent research is suggesting that older adults when learning English as a FL can learn better than children, mainly vocabulary and grammar (Ohly, 2007). Older adults having more highly developed cognitive systems than children are able to make higher order associations and generalizations

and add new language input to their previous learning experience, according to Schleppegrell (1987). Also the use of long-term memory helps the older adult to retain new vocabulary and language structure. However, it is relevant for the FL older learner to study structure and vocabulary that will be used in real life experiences and of immediate use to them. For this reason, online tasks may include authentic material that can provide instances of English language grammar and vocabulary to help older adult learners develop their FL, including multiple modes of representation and instruction relevant to students' needs (GRUBA, 2004). Then the older learner will be assisted in their foreign language learning through the opportunities of online interaction which offer more input to the learner (ELLIS, 2003).

Although most cases indicate that increasing age indicates a decrease on computer use, the cognitive abilities can have a positive effect on older users of computers. When using the computer, the old language learner has a great tool to look and select information, to solve problems and exchange ideas. These aspects can increase the motivation to improve the FL learning as well as enhance digital literacy.

Another important factor of older adults' computer use is the improvement of the general well being, and the reduction of life stress and loneliness. Older home computer users are enhancing their quality of life, having more leisure time at home due to the recreational and social opportunities through the Internet (CZAJA, 1996). The way in which the older learner will study the English language and computer literacy skills, exploring their tastes and taking into consideration their abilities, can help them live more fulfilled and integrated into the modern society. Older adult learners that interact with other students, family or friends through the Internet while using more complex note writing on a screen are retaining and fixing information landmarks with the web (CURZON, 2005) and at the same time improving their FL learning .

The online tasks focused on this paper based on the definition by Nunan (2004) according to which a task is an action that involves students' comprehension, manipulation, production or interaction in the foreign language while focusing their grammatical knowledge on meaning rather than form. Through these tasks, learners can communicate in English as a FL, learning grammar more implicitly and using the web resources to enhance their FL

acquisition. Based on this research experience, what has been noticed is that for the older learner to improve his/her FL acquisition through online tasks, he/she must acquire basic technological skills.

Coryell and Chlup (2007) found in their surveys that less-accomplished computer users working with more accomplished ones were practicing their e-learning through transferable skills and with the help of an instructor. The instruction helped the students to connect their tasks in English as a FL and e-learning to their personal needs and learning interests with more real life situations. Besides, e-learning can allow the older students to overcome learning barriers and diminish the generation gap. Grandparents can exchange e-mails or chat on the Internet with their grandchildren that are, for instance, English language speakers, after acquiring computer literacy skills. E-learning, according to Stites (2003), provides more frequent and immediate feedback to the learner, because the Internet and the computer offer in real time text, audio and visual presentation. One factor that shows successful e-learning is that the improvement in skill and confidence were enhanced proportionally to the time that the students spent with computers, according to a study from the UK about the effective use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologie) in contexts of teaching and learning adults (MORIARTY, 2011).

The older learner that is studying English through digital resources can start to raise their self-esteem and consequently interact more fluently in the foreign language among online communities and with their family and friends. Nonetheless, technology should be used as a tool and be adequate to the literacy needs of the older learners (BELANGER, 1998). Otherwise the aim of improving the English language as a foreign language can not be achieved.

A central idea of “lifelong learning” has helped the Third Age population become more fulfilled when they reach retirement. While they are learning English as a foreign language through digital tasks, they are not only improving the language and computer skills, but also developing new identities that will satisfy them more completely (MARTIN, 2009). The elderly are people capable of keep thinking, learning and producing intellectually. Besides, the computer and the internet don’t replace the teacher, since they are tools with

pedagogical potential that can help with the processes of teaching and learning (WEHMEYER, 2006).

Methodology

The methodology applied in this study is qualitative interpretative research. A qualitative interpretative research is exploratory and subjective because it is the result of the researcher's possible interpretations of the data collected that are transformed into a textual form (DORNYEI, 2007). Moreover, this paper presents a case study which has a multidisciplinary approach (Applied Linguistics and Information Technology in Education).

We show samples of teaching activities used in the digital space with a volunteer private student (older adult learner) to illustrate some aspects of the process of English learning as a FL and the development of computer literacy skills. Hence this case study will illustrate aspects and explore experiences and feelings of a volunteer individual that engaged in digital tasks to improve her English as a foreign language. The volunteer private student is a Third Age student named Flora².

This research works with Applied Linguistics in a way that English as a FL acquisition aspects and use are related to social phenomena and the data collected, as Dornyei (2007) says. Besides, the field of Information Technology in Education has an important role in providing digital alternatives for the use of Internet tools to enhance the older learner's language learning.

Flora, the participant in the present study, was born in 1942. In 1953, she started to learn English in elementary school. In 1956, she got a scholarship from ICBNA (Brazilian North-American Cultural Institute) and studied there for two semesters. After that, she joined an English study group with an American teacher for a semester. In 1964, she had an opportunity to have conversations in English with her Australian sister-in-law, while visiting her in Rio de Janeiro for a year. In 2002, she studied as an English intermediate student at a language school for a year. Flora had little experience with web tools, but she was eager to learn more about technology. She usually exchanges e-mails with her friends and family. She

² Fictitious name due to ethical reasons.

also types some documents, and sends them to her colleagues from a NGO (non-governmental organization) that she participates in.

For this study, Flora had six classes of one hour and a half each. In the first stage of the investigation, she had a talk with the English teacher through Skype about her favorite kinds of music and singers/bands. Then she read about Barbra Streisand on Wikipedia and talked about her with the teacher. She did an online song activity (www.lyricstraining.co) and participated in a music forum sharing her opinion on the subject (posting it at <http://www.magle.dk/music-forums/>). In the next class, she looked for music reviews and interviews about her favorite singers. She read an interview with Tony Bennett and later she watched a video with him talking about his album “Duets II”. She typed the words that she didn’t understand from the interview. The private student and the teacher talked about this vocabulary issue through Skype. She also looked for music surveys on the Internet (www.websurveycreator.com; www.gotoquiz.com/music_survey_quiz), created her own music survey and sent it by e-mail to her friends. Later, she checked her e-mail and reported to the teacher through Skype her friends’ answers to her music survey.

70

Another important stage of the investigation is the building of her music blog. Firstly, she browsed different kinds of blogs on the Internet to get acquainted with the structure and language used in a blog. She used the websites www.howtomakemyblog.com and www.wordpress.com to start to build her blog and the teacher scaffolded her. She posted on the blog the music survey results that she did with her friends, then she kept using her blog as a diary of her English lessons.

During the classes, the teacher and the student were connected through Skype. The tools that were used were blogs (a web tool used by readers and writers to share opinions about different topics), e-mails (exchange of electronic messages), Skype (service provider that offers free calling file transfers, texting, video chat and videoconferencing), Wikipedia (online collaborative writing encyclopedia), forums (online discussion sites), wordposting (message published in an online forum or newsgroup). The data was collected and written on a log. Besides that, the student was interviewed by the teacher. The interview was about her previous experience with technology and English language learning. She also talked about her

perceptions of the classes, what digital resources she is able to use better now and in what way computer skills helped her improve her English as a foreign language.

Analysis

Each year the number of old people is increasing and they form an active Third Age group. In this sense, learning a FL through online resources can be a key factor for living a better life while ageing.

In the first class of this study with the volunteer student of English as a FL, it was clear how satisfied she felt after noticing that even at her age learning was possible. She hadn't studied English for some years, and after that class, she could remember how to speak and understand the English language, especially through the online tasks. That first class took one hour and thirty minutes, and she found information about her favorite singer, Barbra Streisand, on Wikipedia. She read out loud the text and talked about it with the teacher, through Skype. Then she did a song activity of her favorite singer online at www.lyricstraining.com. At the end of that class, as she sings in a choir, she sang along through Skype Barbra Streisand's song. It could be noticed how fundamental social/affective and communicative strategies are in the learning of English as a FL based on input and output through digital interaction.

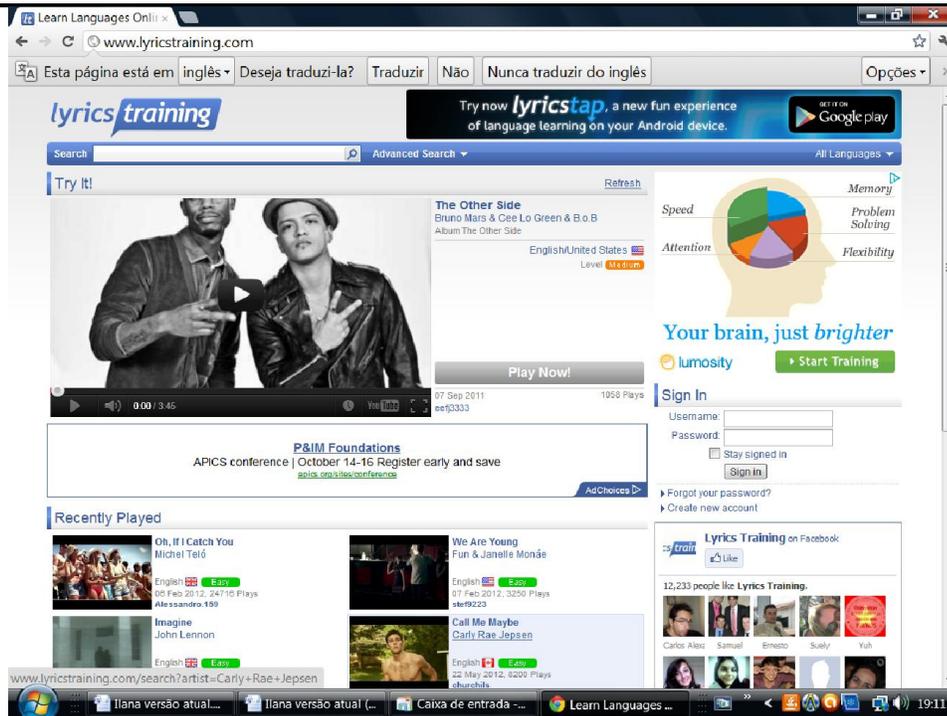
Flora was able to use the four skills while having the English classes through Skype. For instance, she read an article about Barbra Streisand on Wikipedia and talked about it:

Flora: *I was surprised of knowing that she is the only female artist in the top ten and also outside of the rock and roll genre.*

English teacher: *Weren't you expecting to read this about Barbra Streisand?*

Flora: *I thought that she's a great singer but the things I read exceeded...*

After that, she listened to a song by Barbra Streisand on the Internet and completed the lyrics online.



From: <http://www.lyricstraining.com>

According to Wagner, Hassasein and Head (2010), older learners that are computer users are better learners of a foreign language because they are more educated and have higher levels of cognitive skills, computer self-efficacy and computer interest. According to Flora, after the online classes she started to search with more frequency on the Internet for issues that interested her and that were in English. When having the online classes through Skype, she was very opened to new information and able to improve her communication in English due to her interest in computer skills. While watching Tonny Bennett's interview on the Internet, she asked how she could keep the new English words with their meanings in a computer file, for her to use it whenever she wanted to.

Another important fact about the learning of a FL through tasks focused on interaction via digital tools is the role of the teacher helping the student with cognitive demands and learner's emotions (ELLIS, 2003):

Flora: *It is more difficult for me to think in English and I want to speak faster.*

English teacher: *You need to take your time and try to read more on the Internet, watch programs and chat with your friends through Skype, using English as a FL.*

Flora: *I will try it. It is a very good suggestion.*

Flora was asking questions to the teacher to clarify her doubts, to pronounce better the words or to find out vocabulary that she didn't learn or remember. The teacher had an essential by helping the student with pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar difficulties faced by the student when dealing with digital resources:

Flora: *What word can I use to say "procurar informação" on the internet?*

English teacher: *You can use the verb "to search", "to look for".*

She sometimes felt the need to complete some of her sentences or needed help with vocabulary. The teacher participation and interaction with the learner during the class could elicit from him/her the English language needed through the online tasks designed especially to help the development of her foreign language:

English teacher: *What is your favorite kind of music?*

Flora: *It is a very difficult question. It is better to say what kind of music I don't like... Brazilian country music or funk. I like lyric songs and I know a lyric singer who lives in Porto Alegre and he is also my "maestro".*

English teacher: *He is also your conductor. Where do you sing?*

Flora: *I sing in a Jewish choir since 2005. I like very much to sing there.*

Instruction also gives the opportunity of feedback and practice that the new information (grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation) itself cannot demand. When the older learner has someone to interact with, he/she can check his/her performance and receive feedback from a teacher to help him/her improve his/her FL and computer skills.

Another consequence of using digital tools in a FL class is the increase of the contact of the older learners with family and friends through, reducing the feeling of loneliness:

Flora: *I felt like I went back to the time that I was a student. I could exchange ideas with my friends and they were also happy about it.*

It could be observed, during the online classes, the student interest in writing the music survey and contacting her friends to answer it. As said by Flora, she would talk on the

phone with some friends about the topics related to music topic covered in class, indicating her genuine interest.

Sample of the answers of one of the volunteer student's friend to her music survey.

1. When and where do you most like to listen to music? Home or any place when there is silence.
2. Since when did you feel that you liked music? Since I was a child, my parents enjoyed listen to music
3. What kinds of music do you prefer? Classical, and songs by famous American, Italian, French singers
4. Do you like to listen to music alone or together with friends? Alone and with friends if they keep silence.
5. Who is your favorite singer/band? The Who's, Beatles, Paul Mc Cartney, Barbra Streisand, Bob Dylan.
6. How often do you go to concerts/shows? About five per year.
7. Can you tell me about a music experience that you had? Paul Mc Cartney and Bob Dylan in Porto Alegre,

Filatro (2007) says that when learning involves technology and communication, the old adult learner becomes more autonomous being able to even publish texts of the area they are studying and are interested in. In this specific study, what happened with Flora was that she could create and publish her own material on the web, starting with opinions posted on a forum about music. Then she created her own blog about music, but as she didn't want to share it with all Internet users, she wrote the content for the blog on Google Docs and shared it only with some friends.

74

Sample of the blog content created by Flora



MUSIC IS LIFE

*Since I was a little girl I was involved with music. I played the piano from six to fourteen, but I didn't become a great piano player. On the other hand I turned into a music lover.
I'm going to post the lyrics from a beautiful music that came to my mind:*

WITH A SONG IN MY HEART

*With a song in my heart, I behold your adorable face
Just a song at the start but it soon is a hymn to your grace
When the music swells, I'm touching your hand
It tells me you're standing near, and...*

Filatro (2007) claims that online tasks provide learning opportunities for mature individuals so that they do not need to leave their homes and at any time they can study with computer resources. In this regard, we noticed that the volunteer student felt very comfortable with the online tasks and willing to continue with the English lessons through digital means. While creating her music survey to send to her friends, at the same time Flora was studying new vocabulary and grammar and using it in real life experiences of immediate use. Besides, while checking the e-mails with her friends' answers to the music survey, she realized that she was already familiar with the structure used for ordinal numbers and seemed to use them more easily (Flora even made comments about this specific issue through Skype with the teacher).

The use of authentic material (content on websites such as Wikipedia, LyricsTraining, CNN, SOS Blogs, Magle Music Forum, Youtube, among others) complemented the idea of providing real online tasks that supply the needs of the older learner to develop his/her English as a FL and the digital skills.

Another fact to be pointed out is that the online tasks should work as pedagogical tasks (NUNAN, 2004), involving students in understanding, producing and/or interacting in English as a FL, more interested in conveying meaning than manipulating form. The form is relevant, but it should not be focused before the task. It should be used naturally during communicative online tasks.

While doing the task of creating a music survey, she could interact with the teacher finding out what questions related to music should be asked. She could type the questions without worrying about grammar, but focusing on meaning. For instance, at first she showed some difficulty in the use of the past tense. Nevertheless, she was able to interact focusing on meaning and finally ended up realizing some of her mistakes by self-correcting and by paying attention to the teacher's feedback.

In the present study, during the online classes with the older student, it could be noticed that she needed some help with computer skills. The role of the teacher was also to guide her, in order to make her aware of digital possibilities which could facilitate her work. Additionally, an important point to focus, studied by Schleppegrell (1987), is to consider the positive aspects of learning, the progress that the learners are making and the chances that

they have to become successful language learners. Instead of just focusing on understanding the language, the core should be the students' production of language. Concerning this aspect, Flora communicated in English with her teacher and friends in spite of making few mistakes, because the most important aspect was a valid social interaction, as we can see below.

English teacher: *How often do you go to shows?*

Older learner: *I don't use to go to shows, but sometimes I go to some concerts that interests me.*

English teacher: *What was the last show that you have been to?*

Older learner: *Last month, I saw a concert of a Israeli singer David Broza .*

English teacher: *How was it?*

Older learner: *I like it very much!*

The student felt enthusiastic about the possibility of continuing to study and to learn new things (regarding language and digital tools).

76

Part of the interview with Flora

English teacher: *What was your favorite task of the project? What was your least favorite task of the project?*

Older learner: *It was very nice to me. I was full of enthusiasm and I'm still now. All was new to me and I loved everything I learned. Because of that I can't say what was the best or the least task.*

She was able to communicate in the FL through online tasks with different people from her community. Therefore she assumed an active participation through digital means, feeling more integrated into today's society.

Conclusion

This study analyzed opportunities of learning English as a foreign language and the development of digital literacy through online tasks by an older adult learner. It is possible to notice there is still little material which relates older students, English as a foreign language and Computing in education. Through this research, an important contribution was the development of online tasks which were applied according to the needs of the participant of the study. In this sense, the case study had a unique perspective, because it illustrated an older volunteer learner studying through online tasks designed to develop both English as a FL and computer skills.

By the end of the classes, it was possible to observe that the volunteer student was able to exchange e-mails, participate in forums and create a blog using English as a foreign

language mediated by computer tools. This experience seems to have contributed to the older students' improvement of English as a FL. Other older individuals that want to keep their well being and feel more integrated into the contemporary digital society can benefit from similar experience.

Overall, online material can be helpful for older learners' language development. When the Third Age learners are in contact with online tasks, they may have opportunities of linguistic enhancement due to the variety of genres they are exposed to, according to their needs.

Another relevant aspect is the finding that studying English as a FL is a lifelong project that brings a new world with new challenges, motivating older students to keep learning. Being able to learn new things related to language and digital devices can foster learners' abilities to reinvent themselves at any age.

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