THROUGH THE EYE OF THE TEACHER: MEMORIES OF AN ELETRONIC GAME BASED ACTIVITY

ATRAVÉS DO OLHAR DO PROFESSOR: MEMÓRIAS DE UMA ATIVIDADE BASEADA EM JOGOS ELETRÔNICOS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present reports of a continuing education course offered to future English teachers in the city of Rio Branco. The motivation for the development of the course came from an opportunity to share experiences of the course Trace Effects Online Teacher Training offered by the American English Institute in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oregon (UO AEI). Based on social-interactional theory perspective in which knowledge is constructed in a social environment, the inclusion of the game in the classroom can develop collaboratively the construction of new knowledge on various subjects, and thus providing the student a cultural transformation (GEE, 2007; ALVES 2005 and others). In this bias, the report itself is to present the results of a resarch that can contribute to English teachers and trainees, favorable methods to the process of teaching and learning using technology in the classroom, believing that some foundations may be planted seeking to improve the training of teachers to deal with the use of this feature, especially the game Trace Effects, improving therefore their teaching practices.
Keywords: Video games, Role Playing Game, Trace Effects, English language.

RESUMO

O presente artigo tem como objetivo apresentar relatos de um curso de formação continuada oferecido a futuros professores de língua Inglesa na cidade de Rio Branco. A motivação para a elaboração do curso veio de uma oportunidade de compartilhar experiências vivenciadas no curso Trace Effects Online Teacher Training ofertado pelo American English Institute in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oregon (UO AEI). Embasadas teoricamente na perspectiva sócio-interacionista em que o conhecimento é construído em um meio social, a inclusão do jogo na sala de aula pode desenvolver colaborativamente a construção de novos conhecimentos sobre os mais diversos assuntos, possibilitando, assim, ao aluno uma transformação cultural (GEE, 2007; ALVES 2005 e outros). Neste viés, esse relato em si trata-se de apresentar atividades que possam contribuir aos professores e alunos estagiários de LI, meios favoráveis ao processo de ensinar e aprender utilizando-se da tecnologia na sala de aula, acreditando que, alguns alicerces poderão ser plantados na busca da melhoria da formação do professor ao tratar-se da utilização desse recurso, especificamente o jogo Trace Effects, aperfeiçoando, portanto, suas práticas pedagógicas.
Palavras-chave: Video games, Role Playing Game, Trace Effects, língua inglesa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's students were born and are part of the digital era, they are considered "Digital Natives" [1]. They can typically be found doing their homework while texting, listening to music or posting on Facebook. There is a reason for that they are multi- task.

We face the challenge to teach people who have had and still have an extensive contact with the computer and video games, individuals who were able to experience a completely new way of entertainment through video games, modeling their predilections, skills and offering them great potential for learning. Prensky [1] believes that there will come a time when it is essential to add games in the teaching process, since learning will be not only more enjoyable and fun but more effective.

The landscape of technology allows the "digital natives" to be and to interact with others. Communication flows easily in this technological universe in which all of them are active characters using the English language as their support. The educational system cannot ignore this fact, students have changed significantly and using the same old teaching methods with the new generation students will not work successfully because they do not go back.

Despite the common use of technology that the students do in their everyday life, we still have a big percentage of teachers who are trying to accept or to use it in benefit of education, not to mention

the ones that struggle fighting against the technological revolution. The main objective of this article is to present a teaching method used to improve the listening and speaking skills of English as a Second Language - ESL students through the Role Playing Game - RPG game Trace Effects.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

We live in an era of great progress in creating new technologies that cause changes in various fields of human life, influencing economic practices, political, cultural and social concepts. As time goes by, we are becoming increasingly familiar with the Information and Communication Technologies - ICT, and they become an integral part, fundamental and necessary for the functioning of many areas.

Among the various spheres which adopted permanently ICT, there is the use of them in the educational field, the teaching-learning process and distance education. They are present in the classroom as a way to make teaching more creative and effective inciting interest in learning.

There are several multimediatic resources used in foreign language learning environment, especially English. The use of music, movies, podcasts and videos are already quite common in the classroom, however, our proposal is to use a still underused tool in the teaching branch, but very promising, which are electronic games, more specifically role playing games.

Not every video game can be used in the classroom, some may appear inappropriate according to its content but to Cruz [2] there is a video game genre that is ideal for using in English classes, RPG games. They are games in which the player has to play a character and join an adventure in search of a goal. In addition, the player is exposed to many dialogues and written texts during the game, and as he collects information talking to other characters he advances toward the final goal of the game.

One of the great advances that digital technologies brought was the possibility of interaction and creation. Today, not only through video games, but other forms of entertainment, people can participate and control more actively what happens in the story using not only their imagination, as well as their ability to make choices affecting their outcome [3].

We face the challenge of teaching students born in the digital age, they are part of the group of people most affected by technological advances, people who were born surrounded by technology, Prensky [3] defines them as "Digital Natives" not because they have or know how to handle these new technologies, but because of their attitude towards them, always wanting to have access to that emerge with the confidence that they will always learn how to deal with these new technological tools.

They are young people who have had and still have an extensive contact with the computer and video games, individuals who were able to experience a completely new form of entertainment through the video game, modeling their predilections, skills and offering them a great potential for learning. Prensky [1] believes that there will come a time when it is essential to add games in the teaching process, since learning will be not only more enjoyable and fun but also more effective.

When we talk about video games, we usually never make the association between games and learning, however, according to Gee [4] games have learning principles, and what really makes them so motivating and interesting games are the challenges and learning contained therein. Some games feature with long, complex and difficult activities, just as many contents in school, with the difference that in the case of games, players are fully motivated and engaged with the activities. They are who decide and command.

Among the principles of learning present in video games made by Gee [4] are: Identity, video games captivate the player through their identity, they become committed to the new virtual world in which they will live, learn and take action; Interaction, nothing happens in the game until the player do an action and make decisions from these, the game reacts giving them feedback and new challenges. In the game the words and actions are contextualized in the virtual universe enabling this virtual-world player interaction; and Production, even in the simplest of levels players help to write the games according to their actions and decisions, "players are producers, not just consumers".

Video games are not just for entertainment, it is reality that educators are trying increasingly to incorporate video games into their lessons, not only to attract the attention of students as well as a way to improve the way the contents are worked on courses as medicine and law. "English as a Foreign Language Teachers should be able to take advantage of this technology and use it to help students" [2].

In an English class in a computer lab, for example, students would play and during that time would be exposed to dialogues in English, they may hear different English accents thus helping in the development of listening, and in the same way as they would be exposed to written text, their reading skills will also be developed [2]. Moreover, Cruz [2] proposes a series of activities that allow work on the four skills, reading, writing, listening and oral production, within the context of role playing games.

Therefore, taking into account this time of great efforts for the development of English proficiency of our students, we think that this activity can show us if we can use games in our favor.

We worked with a group of five learners who are future English teachers between 3º to 7º semester of the course of English of Federal University of Acre. The students' goals are to learn how to use the electronic game Trace Effects as an educational tool for the teaching process, since most of the students are so engaged in technology.

For this research, we used two large rooms of the *Colégio de Aplicação* of Federal University of Acre, with capacity for 30 people. The first one is a regular classroom, with 30 academic seats (a chair with a little table hooked on), one computer, one printer, large Windows, a book case with about 100 books in English, a whiteboard, a data projector, a teacher's desk and also an amplifier box sound. The second is a computer lab that has 30 computers organized in six rows with six large computer desks holding five computers in each table of each row (we do not have a headset for them), a data projector, a teacher's desk and a whiteboard.

In this research, we analyzed how five students/ future English teachers can use the game Trace Effects as an educational tool in the teaching process aiming to improve the listening and speaking skills of English as a Second Language - ESL through RPG. According to Gee [4]:

> The secret of a videogame as a teaching machine isn't its immersive 3-D graphics, but its underlying architecture. Each level dances around the outer limits of the player's abilities, seeking at every point to be hard enough to be just doable. In cognitive science, this is referred to as the regime of competence principle, which results in a feeling of simultaneous pleasure and frustration - a sensation as familiar to gamers as sore thumbs. Cognitive scientist Andy di Sessa has argued that the best instruction hovers at the boundary of a student's competence [4].

Based on this assumption, we developed a research in which trainees and researchers work together establishing this relationship between theory and practice, readjusting the actions, when appropriate, in a continuous process of self-

reflection in which the students participate collaboratively.

2.1 WHAT ABOUT THE GAME?

We chose the game Trace Effects for this research because it was developed by the US State Department to assist as a tool in the English learning process. In addition, the game already has a version for the teacher a range of ready-made activities that resemble small didactic sequences to use in the classroom, as well as an aid manual to the teacher and a number of other suggested activities.

The fact that the game provides so many teaching resources influenced much to the choice of the same, as it makes completely feasible to use it in the classroom. Another important aspect is that the game is easily accessible to students. The game can be played online by anyone who is interested, you just need to create an account on the game website and play for free. Not only available on the Internet, the game was also installed in the computer lab computers used for classes, and the students could have access to a copy so they could install on their personal computers and play at any time without the need of an internet connection.

Trace Effects is divided into seven chapters, but each with a different theme that can be played independently without interfering with one another. The story of the chapters are set in different regions of the United States, Trace will go through these territories and interacting with various people in order to fulfill his missions, and who guides each step and decide every word that Trace says is the student. Trace is the main character in the game and the one that every student will represent in this virtual world.

The game Trace Effects enables complete immersion in a foreign language, all texts, references and tips on how to play are in English. In the game, the student is fully exposed to oral and written texts in English, providing a great practical exercise of reading and listening skills. When approaching another character in the game, an interaction button comes into play, on the computer keyboard it would be the letter "E", by pressing the key, a range of phrases appear, the student then reads the options and choose the one that he/she finds more appropriate. By making the choice, the character, Trace, orally reproduce the chosen sentence. It is important to note that for the student to choose the speech of the character, they have to understand what he is saying, choosing phrases randomly will not work, and the character will end up not being able to complete the objectives of each chapter.

During the game, it is imperative that the student maintain dialogues with other characters. One of the great things about the game is the interaction. Like any good video game, Trace Effects also has a score, and the more the student character interacts with other characters and the more appropriate are the words chosen by the student, the higher the score will be. Thus, giving more points according to the number and quality of the interactions the game makes the player to be more focused at the time of the dialogues, making a

more careful and complete reading of the options and choosing more carefully their lines.

All the answers of the other characters are given through oral reproduction and by doing so, the players stay with the most attentive ears. If they do not understand what they listened, they can always repeat the audio, if doubt persists, the game offers a tool that allows the player to see in writing what was said. The players can also have at any time during the game, access to a script of all the dialogues held by them until then within that chapter.

In this activity the chosen students played chapter 1,2 and 3 of the game. The computer lab was used for this activity. Our plan was to play with all the students for 2 hours for each chapter. As they played the game, we did not interfere anyhow in their game learning process. The game itself is divided in 7 chapters, each one aiming a textual genre, grammar point, and social skills. For each chapter played the students wrote a journal, answering the following questions (some of these question can be find in the student game journal in the Teacher Edition DVD of the Trace Effects game): 1. What chapter are you playing? 2. How long did you play? 3. What was most interesting or fun? 4. What was the most difficult? 5. Did you find difficult to use your technology skills to play this game? 6. List the textual genre presented in each chapter that you played. 7. How can you use the context in each chapter that you played in your classroom? 8. Pick a focus point- a textual genre, grammar point or a social skill. Can you prepare a class activity with it? Write on your journal. 9. Can you use the extra activities found in Trace Effects game to enhance the learning process using the board games, the digital activity, the Language Practice, the World Soup and Phrases in Space? Share your ideas in your journal. 10. When you finish the chapter. What character in the chapter did you like best? Why? This step was repeated for any chapter of the Trace Effects game that the student picked to play, following the timeline organized for each activity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After finishing playing the chapter, and students completed their jornal, we collected all the data. At this point, the research was placed at the regular classroom following the timeline mentioned before. We interviewed the five students, collecting their ideas and thoughts about the game and the teaching process. We organized a 2 hour meeting for this activity.

After the interview, a process of analyzing started to provide students with effective feedback. A meeting of 2 hours in the classroom for sharing the work collected took place. For this activity, we used the computer, the data projector, the whiteboard, the sound box, and the teacher edition DVD of Trace Effects game, to show the material collected and the results.

From the collected data the majority of the students answered that the inclusion of the electronic game Trace Effects as an educational tool in the teaching/learning process in English was

effective. The reason why is because it can give them a horizon to create a variety of activities using vocabulary, grammar point, culture and textual genre, plus the reading of images.

They also said that the game is a new effective tool because students are totally immerged in technology and the context of the game, and being a role playing game, makes it more interesting. According to Cruz role plays are associated with pretending to be someone else [2]. This is exactly what a Role Playing Game is. In RPGs, players take control of a character and embark in journeys, and this makes students feel that they are in control of their own learning, they make the decisions which make them realize that they are responsible for their actions in and out the game.

4. CONCLUSION

After the feedback meeting, one of the many things that we concluded is that the game have taught all of us not only linguistic aspects such as English gramar, text genres, but also created a growing sense of responsability, making us realize that we need to appreciate the place where we live, to take a better care of the environment, to keep respecting people even though we do not agree with them, and also learn more about other cultures, not only the American culture, since the game introduce

us to a great range of English speakers from diferentt places of the world.

We heard from all of the trainees that participated on this reasearch that all of these aspects will from now on be on their teaching methods. They are going to take in consideration their identity who they are and where they live. They realized it is important to study about other cultures because that makes you reflect on your own and technology paves the way toward this connection in a multi collaborative manner.

Moreover, we are sure this is going to take a huge impact on these students, not only in their professional life as future English teachers, but also on their way to be better citizens of world.

5. REFERENCES

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