



## Continuing Education of English Language Teachers in Sao Paulo State Public Schools in a Virtual Environment

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### Abstract

*The Sao Paulo Network of Teaching Formation Project (REDEFOR) is an agreement among UNESP, UNICAMP and USP and the Sao Paulo State Department of Education that aims to offer semi-presential courses (blended learning) of continuing education (post graduation) Lato Sensu for the public schools teachers from Sao Paulo State. Altogether 16 courses of specialization are offered right now. This communication focuses on the course of English language specialization, under the auspices of specialists from UNESP. The main objective of the mentioned course is the improvement of English teachers in service offering a deep linguistics, theoretical, methodological, cultural, and experiences that give support to the teaching process. The virtual environment TelEduc subsidizes the activities of the course. This learning environment is a dynamic way in which interaction takes place using synchronous and asynchronous tools. The course is organized into four modules, each one of them been composed by two disciplines of 45 hours, which totals 90 hours of workload per module. This study aims to present extracted data of the monthly reports of course activities and events, developed by coordinators, tutors, and specialists with the purpose of systematizing the report and evaluation of the events occurred along the first six months of the course. The criteria of analysis surfaced from a comparative reading of the works posted by the students in their virtual portfolios (grounded theory), in the forums of discussions, and in the logbooks from those students available on TelEduc environment and recorded in the monthly reports. The methodological procedures used for collecting and analyzing data on the construction of the course follow the qualitative basis. This specialization course that is already in the module 3 has shown satisfactory results. This can be asserted on the teachers' speeches and reports in the virtual environment TelEduc.*

### Introduction

This study aims to present extracted data of the monthly reports of course activities and events, developed by coordinators, tutors, and specialists with the purpose of systematizing the report and evaluation of the events occurred along the first six months of the post graduation in English Language course, part of Redefor project.

The São Paulo Network of Teaching Formation Project (REDEFOR) elaborated by the São Paulo State Department of Education, together with the three State universities - Universidade de São Paulo (USP), Universidade de Campinas (UNICAMP), and Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP) – aim to continually train the teachers that work in public elementary and high school, seeking the teachers' professional improvement as well as that of several subjects that compose the curriculum, in addition to propitiating greater linguistic and theoretical knowledge and their applications in the classroom.



The specialization course (364 hours) for 650 active teachers that teach the English language seeks the construction of an oral and written competence in the target language and the existence of didactic activities based on teaching approaches that support the existing relationships between knowing and doing, in other words, the theoretical content and practical applications. It also aims to lead the teacher to reflect about his/her practice and seek new strategies for teaching and learning a foreign language.

The course was planned to be distant-based by using the virtual learning environment AVA UNESP. This environment uses TelEduc as the administration system of the online activities and aims to not only make the content available, but in addition to cooperative learning, aid the teacher implement information and communication technology (TICS) in his/her classroom by means of experiences lived in coexistence with technology. The course also has monthly 3-hour present-based meetings held at the schools where the teachers work in order to exchange evaluative experiences and activities.

The expectation is that the teachers in training deepen their knowledge about the different concepts of teaching/learning languages, consolidate the acquisition/enlargement of the lexical repertoire and grammatical knowledge as well as the development of reading comprehension and oral and written production starting with a critical reflection of the theoretical and methodological based teachings.

Therefore, the content was developed starting from the Proposed Curriculum of Modern Foreign Languages – English, elaborated by the São Paulo State Department of Education in 2008 and, at this moment, the São Paulo State universities are helping the Department of Education implement this new curriculum through the offering specialization courses.

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The course is organized in four modules, each one composed of two 45-hour disciplines, totaling 90 hours per academic work module. Each module is 10 weeks long, totaling 40 weeks of presential and distance study during twelve months. These modules will be a unit of independent study, which makes flexibility of study possible. In the end, the student will present a Final Term Paper, the result of research performed during the twelve months of the course. The distant-learning activities include the reading of the content made available on AVA/TelEduc; consultation of the indicated bibliography; analysis of videos and suggested sites; participation in discussion forums mediated by online tutors; participation in work groups and the performance of evaluative activities.

For this course we elaborated the following disciplines:

**Module I – Reflections on the theory and practice of teaching and learning Foreign Languages (FL)**

Discipline: Approaches, methods and social-interactionist perspectives in the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

Discipline: Multiple languages and discursive genders

**Module II – Language and Culture**

Discipline: Reading and writing I

Discipline: Reading and writing II

**Module III – Media Resources and oral communication**

Discipline: Understanding and oral production



Discipline: Information and communication technologies – ICT applied to FL

### Module IV – Research in FL: grounding and planning

Discipline: Scientific research methodology

Discipline: Research on teaching and learning English as a foreign language: tendencies and perspectives

### TelEduc

It is an environment to accomplish distant courses through the internet, which is utmost support in the innovations within the educational process. It was developed at the NIED (Nucleus of Computer Science Applied to Education) under the orientation of Professor Dr. Heloisa Vieira de Rocha, of the Unicamp (Universidade de Campinas) Computer Science Institute. This environment is free to public schools.

The environment presents two diverse faces, that of the student and of the professor, containing administration, coordination, and communication tools.

The student does not have access to the administration tools, thus giving control and management to the course teachers/trainers. In this field registration is performed, starting and ending dates of the discipline are available, and the evaluations and access frequency of those enrolled are located (intermap).

There are several coordination tools and the trainer has total freedom to use them according to the needs of the course. The Agenda, Course Dynamics, Environment Structure, Support Material, Reading, Activities, Obligatory Stop, Frequent Questions, and Groups make up of this group.

The Profile, the Mural, where messages are posted, the Journal, the Portfolio, the Electronic mail, the Chat room, and the Discussion Forum are part of the communication tools.

At AVA Unesp, the student follows the weekly calendars, downloads the files for reading and activities for the discipline, accesses the videos and sites through links, posts mail and finished exercises, participates in discussion forums and relates with his/her colleagues and team of mediators of the course.

Access to AVA is accomplished through a password that identifies the student so as to guarantee the security of the posted information.

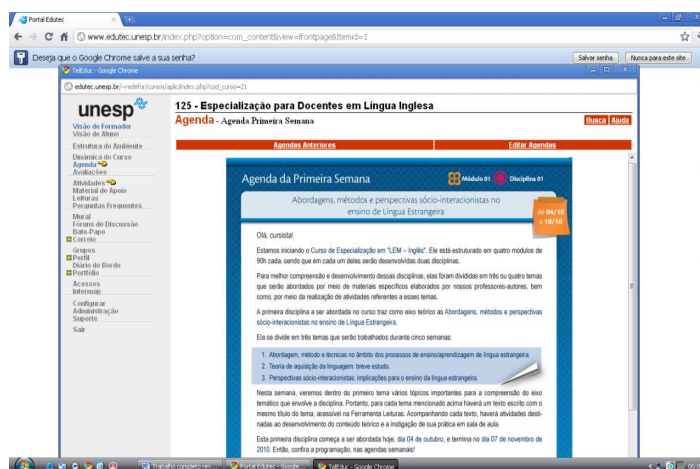


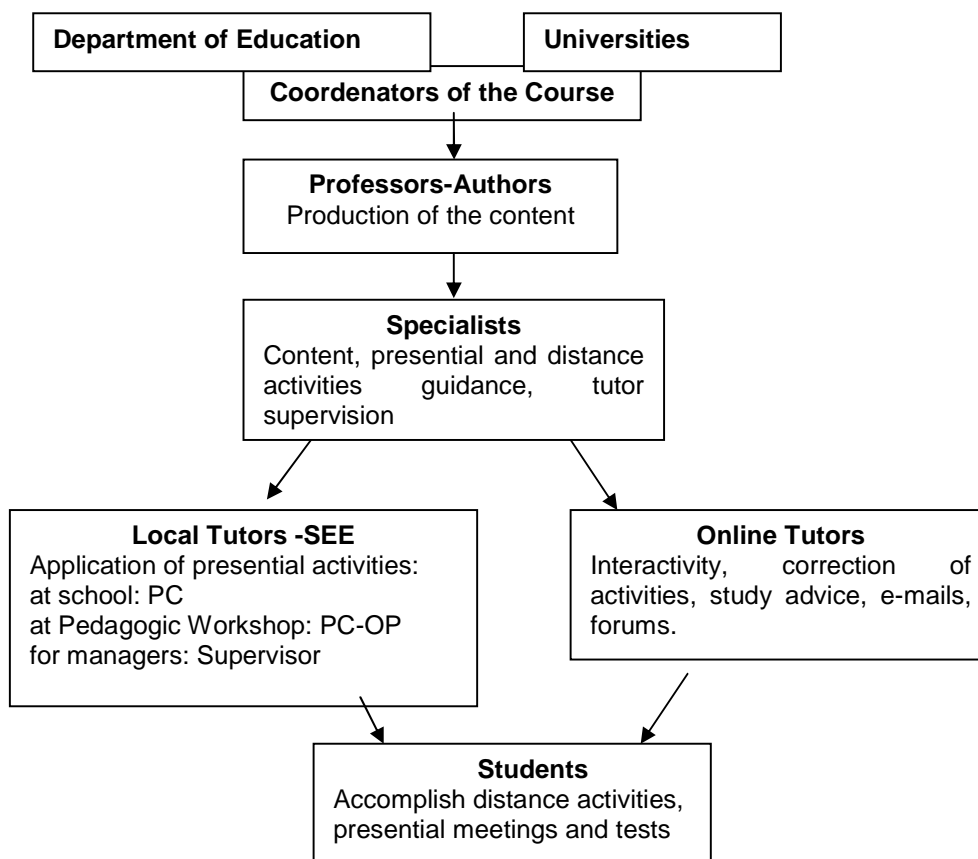
Figure 11 – TelEduc – Course agenda

### Network of Trainers

The course has a coordination in the Department of Education and another in the university, which is responsible for the administration, involving teacher selection, elaboration of discipline content, and accompaniment of the tutors and students.

All components of the team were selected by presenting documents that prove their title (masters and doctorates), teaching experience and English language proficiency, through the TOEIC exam (*Test of English for International Communication*).

The professors/authors, all with Phd, elaborated the content of each discipline and are guiding the professors/doctors which we call "specialists". The specialist professor guides the online and presential tutors, who in turn guide the student/student teacher that teach elementary and high school. In addition, we also have the Final Term paper advisor and presential advisors. The organization chart below helps the explanation.





## **Work progress**

The public network in the State of Sao Paulo has an average of 4300 English language professors spread throughout the State and in this pilot project, which began on the 4th of October, 2010 and is scheduled to end on the 26th of October, 2011, 650 are taking the course. They enrolled in the Board of Teaching and will attend the presential classes at the school in their city where the educational coordinators are also participating in an online course for manager training. The continuous training course is concomitant to the workday.

To construct this course, the Department of Education performed a "needs analysis" through questionnaires (a qualitative base research) together with the professors of the public network, investigating their difficulties, desires and needs. The course was planned after having analyzed the collective data.

The second group of the Lato Sensu specialization course will initiate on October 1st, 2011 and intends to qualify the 3650 English language teachers that were not included in the pilot project.

At the beginning of the course, the professors/students received instructions through manuals on the Didactic Regulation and Orientation of the Course and an operational manual from AVA Unesp.

Until this time, the students have already had six presential meetings, a presential evaluation of the contents in modules 1 and 2 and are taking the discipline in module 4 (last module) which is made available in the virtual learning environment.

## **Methodology and Data Collection**

This study used qualitative base methodology supported in the "*Grounded Theory*" (GT) or the Data-Based Theory (DBT) which aims to understand and explain the reality of a determined situation starting from the analysis and extraction of the meaning of the information of observed phenomena, analyzing, for instance, the "*how*" and "*why*" participants act in certain contexts that generate knowledge. This theory tries to answer questions such as, "*What's going on?*" and "What is the main problem of the participants and how are they trying to solve it?".

The data collected in the investigation are organized in conceptual categories that make it possible to explain the studied phenomenon. According to Borgatti, "The basic idea of the grounded theory approach is to read (and re-read) a textual database (such as a corpus of field notes) and "discover" or label variables (called categories, concepts and properties) and their interrelationships".

GT was developed by American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strass in the 1960s when they worked together studying the sociology of the diseases at the University of California. This theory became an important branch of qualitative sociology.

GT presents inductive characteristics; the analysis gradually appears after initial data collection. Concerning the deductive character, the theories appear in the context of the explanations and to explain an event theoretically is equal to deducing a statement that describes these events, starting from some premises (FIELD & MORSE, 1985, in Cassiane 1995).

In this research we are observing the events reported during the course of the monthly reports, focusing primarily on the recurring topics as the table below.



Reports' date		Major Recurrences	
Months	Years	Topics	Description
Oct., Nov., Dez.; Jan., Fev., March, April, May	2010/ 2011	Technology use	It addresses the different levels of the students computer literacy
		Content comprehension	Types of questions from course participants
		Interaction	students x students; students x content; students x tutors; tutors x specialists x coordinators
		Students' manifestations on the course	e.mail from the students evaluating the course

During the first month of the course, some students reported difficulty accessing the platform because they had little ability with computers. Below are some excerpts from speeches of course participants posted on the platform and later written in the monthly reports of the occurrences.

On adaptations to the reality of distance education were recorded several speeches from students, for example: a) "For me this experience is totally new, so I had to adapt to the tools and environment. On the other hand, was not as difficult as expected. The platform is very simple which makes the job easy";

Participant teachers' difficulties accessing the tools of the environment:

b) "I can not post my work in portfolio, how can I do that?"

Other difficulties presented by the students related to access to the environment were: access to manuals; the readings tools, the links that did not open; questions about how to access the detailed directions on how to perform each activity, how to associate the activity to the evaluation, how to prepare the headers activities, how to use the logbook, among others.

Difficulties of course participants regarding the understanding of the content:

In this daily movement of the messages exchange carried in the "mail", some questions about the content studied have emerged as, for example, the students have some difficulty in relation to the English language.

Since the beginning of subjects 4 and 5, related to the modalities of written and spoken English, there was a sudden and evident decline in the number of posts and shares in the platform, due to the difficulty that most of the course participants in producing displays in English, either orally or in writing. This difficulty is noticeable by the quality of production, the decline of the posts, by explicit statements of difficulty and the constant need to confirm the understanding of what is presented to them in English, such as statements of activities, for example: "*Hello my dear! Isn't be better to send us the instructions in Portuguese?*"

Today, the problem of adapting to TelEduc platform (presented in the report of October 2010) was almost completely overcome. The tutors have worked in harmony, seeking to resolve as promptly as possible doubts and questions of their pupils.

This fact can be observed by the large number of messages that circulate every day in the group environment, both in the search for answers to questions from course participants, and to share ideas, messages that can be exploited by fellow tutors.



The relationship between co-workers (tutors, specialist and coordinators) is also narrower in the sense that all exchange information on their own initiative to conduct teaching in their classes, also exchange e-mails discussing alignment guidelines for correction of forums, textual productions, etc..

This collaborative and proactive stance between these tutors (intensified since the report of November / December 2010) have been very positive for the learning of the course participants and to the pedagogical and management of coordination.

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