Chapter IV

Investigating Interaction in an EFL Online Environment

Vera Lucia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva
Federal University of Minas Gerais/CNPq/FAPEMIG, Brazil

Adail Sebastiao Rodrigues-Junior
Federal University of Ouro Preto, Brazil

ABSTRACT

This pedagogical and methodological chapter aims at contributing to increasing Web teachers’ awareness of the different ways teachers and students can make themselves “visible” in the virtual environment by describing three categories of footing in online educational forums, namely, social footing, teaching footing, and cognitive footing. The categories are explained in line with the definition of footing, originally presented by Goffman (1981) and extended to online environments by Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007). The data stems from a 60-hour online reading and writing course for undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language in Brazil and was selected having in mind the categories discussed throughout the chapter, with special emphasis on the role played by the teacher and her students during the course. The analysis has shown that footing can be clearly perceived as an interactive category for online environments by means of textual analysis, with special focus on the transitivity model developed by Halliday (2004) and the social, teaching, and cognitive presences investigated by Garrison (2006) and his colleagues.
INTRODUCTION

Face-to-face interaction has been investigated for a long time, with a main emphasis on speech acts (Austin, 1962), talk-in-interaction (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), and conversation (Grice, 1975). Another seminal work in this research field is *Forms of Talk* by Goffman (1981), especially his work on footing, which he defines as “participant’s alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self.” Goffman advocates that changes in footing are marked by shifts in tone, pitch, volume, rhythm, stress, tonal quality, and code switching. He says that “change in footing is very commonly language linked; if not that, then at least one can claim that the paralinguistic markers of language will figure” (Goffman, 1981, p. 128), in which gaze shift and facial expression play a part.

Online interaction, on the other hand, differs from face-to-face encounters because it lacks prosodic segments and the paralinguistic resources often found in talk-in-context. Although we defend that footing is a phenomenon which can also be studied in online interaction, we contend that new categories are needed in order to understand how it works in this new environment.

Online education has been using different kinds of online conferencing, such as messenger, e-mail, chat, and forum. What most interests this educational field is the kind of context where students and teachers interact in simultaneous modes (one to one, one to many, and many to many) at anytime, anywhere.

Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007) have investigated which roles the footings of participants play while they are interacting with their peers in online academic forums. According to them, “within online interaction, interpretive resources usually present in a given context are transferred to utterances produced by interlocutors in virtual interaction” (Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior, 2004, p. 175, our translation). We can take, as an example, the use of capital letters when virtual interactants intend to emphasize specific feelings. Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2007, p. 156) offer an example of this transference, when one of the students of an online course writes “Subject: HELP!!!!!!!!!!!” The capital letters and the exclamation marks point to the emphasis the student gave to her problem, as if she were crying for help in any difficult situation.

Moreover, nearly all paralinguistic features easily identified in casual talk (due mostly to the cues immediate contexts provide) become linguistic and discursive elements often used by interlocutors when they are virtually communicating with their peers, like, for instance, emoticons, interjections, punctuation, capital letters, and so forth. Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2007) have also given close attention to the generic structures of online forums and to which extent these generic features influence interlocutors’ alignments and their positioning in virtual interaction. One of the main findings Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007) have presented is the fact that online forums comprise a myriad of hybridized generic elements frequently perceived in the linguistic and discursive choices their users make.

On this basis, this pedagogical as well as methodological chapter deals with the way interlocutors in online academic forums build knowledge as they negotiate meanings while exchanging information with each other. We posit that this meaning negotiation becomes easier to grasp if interlocutors make their footings visible and explicit to their peers, by utilizing linguistic and discursive elements that necessarily lead to this explicitness. We also intend to explore further—building on the work of Garrison (2006) and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001)—the interactive elements often held by interlocutors and the discursive resources they bring to interaction as a means of overcoming the absence of contextual features within this sort of online communication. The chapter, thus, seeks to be a step forward in the analysis of online academic forums and their important roles to knowledge
Investigating Interaction in an EFL Online Environment

construction, whose interconnected parts are split into five sections:

1. The introduction, in which we present the aims of the chapter and its structure;
2. Theoretical background, in which we discuss and extend the notion of footing (Goffman, 1981) and the original and in-depth discussion we have held around this issue (Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior, 2004, 2007);
3. Method, in which we present how data was collected and the context from which it stems;
4. Analysis and discussion, in which we present some strips of online interaction and the roles footing play to the understanding of this kind of virtual interaction; and
5. Final remarks, in which we present the conclusions we arrived at for the moment.

FOOTING

In his seminal paper entitled *Footing*, Goffman (1981) introduced the concept of footing into the social sciences, opening up interesting possibilities of looking at social encounters and their interactants. Footing is more commonly related to participants’ alignments, their social projection, and the way they represent themselves while taking a role in a social encounter. Duranti (1997, p. 296) also posits:

“Footing, in other words, is another way of talking about indexing…the process whereby we link utterances to particular moments, places, or personae, including our own self at a different time or with a different spirit (e.g., emotional vs. distant, convinced vs., skeptical, literal vs. ironic).”

Duranti (1997) goes on providing general applications of the concept onto contextual features. Interestingly, however, is the fact that footing is naturally related to language, or “language-linked” (Goffman, 1981, p. 128), with special emphasis on phonemic clauses. Duranti affirms as well, as we could have noticed, that footing is a kind of interactive process whereby utterances represent the constitution of the social encounter in line with major contextual forces that undoubt edly play a part.

Still, when we pay close attention to online interaction, utterances as well as other semiotic elements—for instance, emoticons, capital letters, sounds, and so forth—are the only discursive signs capable of capturing the effects of interactants’ communicative intentions. Whenever there is intention, footing appears as the “process whereby we link utterances to particular moments” (Duranti, 1997, p. 296). Bearing this in mind, Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007) attempted to develop a methodology to analyze footing in online educational forums, with particular interest in how students responded to each other’s claims as the activity unfolded. In general, Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007), by focusing on discussions about online educational forums, found out that:

1. Epithets, adverbs, pronouns of treatment, capital letters, abbreviated words, and so forth, play a part for the establishment of footing as a significant element in online interaction.
2. Given its dialogical constitution, online educational forums naturally demand from its interactants the construction of discursive structures that necessarily lead to the manifestation of their communicative intentions, as the interaction unfolds.
3. A discursive topic is usually presented as the point of departure for the interaction, which in fact determines the subject of discussion and the interactants’ responses to it.
4. An online educational forum is a hybrid genre, since its formation encompasses a range of generic features from academic articles, essays, e-mails, and chats. This generic feature is an example of the complexities usually encountered in online
educational forums, because the whole interaction will be subjected to the limits as well as possibilities this mixture of genres raises.

5. Finally, lexico-grammaticalization, more specifically the transitivity system, as presented by Halliday (2004) in the continuum or cline of lexico-grammar, plays a significant role in the identification of footing in online educational forums, and its active participation influences the construction of footings in the ongoing interaction. Contrary to this position, Goffman (1981, p. 128) considers that “sentence grammar won’t help us all that much” to the investigation of linguistic aspects of footing. Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007), on the other hand, have shown that lexico-grammar helps identify the linguistic hints that signal interactants’ footings in virtual interaction.

Halliday (2004, p. 170) explains that “[t]he transitivity system construes the world of experience into a manageable set of PROCESS TYPES.” The transitivity model is formed by six interconnected process types, defined in Table 1.

Another point that merits closer examination is the power relations commonly achieved when footing is under thorough scrutiny. In his paper, Goffman (1981) touches very slightly on

Table 1. The transitivity model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Processes (verbs)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples of processes (verbs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material Processes</td>
<td>They construe “a quantum of change in the flow of events as taking place through some input of energy” (Halliday, 2004, p. 179), with mostly an action performed by a subject onto someone or something.</td>
<td>appear, emerge, develop, cut, modernize, brush, sweep, open, close, leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Processes</td>
<td>They construe “a quantum of change in the flow of events taking place in our own consciousness” (Halliday, 2004, p. 197).</td>
<td>see, notice, believe, expect, wish, hope, like, hate, perceive, think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Processes</td>
<td>They “serve to characterize and to identify” (Halliday, 2004, p. 210) general nouns, be they human or inanimate subjects.</td>
<td>be, become, remain, taste (like), turn into, represent, constitute, express, signify, stand for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Processes</td>
<td>They “are processes of (typically human) physiological and psychological behavior” (Halliday, 2004, p. 248), regarded as a mixture of material and mental processes.</td>
<td>smile, cry, laugh, listen, dream, breathe, sing, dance, faint, talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Processes</td>
<td>They “are clauses of saying” (Halliday, 2004, p. 252), usually contributing to the creation of narratives by setting up distinctive dialogues and reported speech.</td>
<td>praise, insult, say, speak, report, announce, question, inquiry, ask, criticize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential Processes</td>
<td>They only represent “that something exists or happens” (Halliday, 2004, p. 256).</td>
<td>exist, remain, stand, lie, emerge, grow, erupt, prevail, flourish, ensue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
this issue by discussing hierarchical relations between interlocutors. In this chapter, however, power relations will become all too visible when students interact with the teacher in the forum, since the teacher plays the role of moderator and consequently filters the interaction in order for it to serve the course’s aims. In this case, it is rather important for the teacher to be a “sage on the side,” as Warschauer and Whittaker (2002, p. 371) put it, and not a “sage on the stage.” It is true that students are eager to learn, but for this to happen they should be brimming with confidence and self-esteem. In what follows, these points will be viewed with critical eyes, principally because learning in online educational forums derives from the collaborative interaction between teacher and students. As a consequence, footing is the element that clearly shows how learning is taking place and how interaction unfolds while interactants are contributing to meaning construction.

**COGNITIVE, SOCIAL, AND TEACHING PRESENCES**

For the purpose of exploring further the notion of footing and its relevance to educational contexts, let us now consider the categories developed by Garrison et al. (2001). The authors state that in online education there are three essential elements, which they define as **cognitive, social, and teaching presences**. In our view, these presences could be interpreted as stances of footing, given their role to the construction of meaning in interaction when interactants are discursively construing the social encounter where meaning negotiation is taking place.

Garrison (2006), inspired by the work of Dewey (1933) on reflective teaching, defines cognitive presence as “the exploration, resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry” (p. 4). In another text, Garrison (2006b, p. 4) explains that “cognitive presence is the process of collaboratively constructing meaning and confirming understanding in a sustainable community of inquiry,” highlighting the importance of facilitation to maintain the construction of knowledge and interaction by means of discourse production. He adds that “facilitation focuses and guides the progression of the discourse as well as providing timely input and information, and summarizing development.”

We can identify cognitive presence when students exchange information, connect or apply ideas, counter argument, collaborate, monitor, reflect, and so forth. Cognitive presence can also be identified as a kind of footing, that is, the ability to project one’s self as a thinker, one who reflects upon what is being learned. In this case, mental processes play an important role to the identification of cognitive presence as a type of footing. An example extracted from our corpus clearly shows mental processes working as textual elements that ‘translate’ a cognitive footing: “I’m sorry I see [mental process] that I misunderstood the task’s purpose.” The mental process “see” translates into text a feeling of sorrow of one of the students attending the course.

According to Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001, p. 51), “social presence is the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as ‘real people.’” Later on, Garrison (2006, p. 2) describes social presence “as the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships.” We prefer the latter definition because the former gives much attention to the learner without, in fact, taking into account the essential role teachers play in the process of learning. Moreover, Garrison et al. (2000, p. 89) explain that social presence comprises three categories: emotional expression, open communication (e.g., risk-free expression), and group cohesion (e.g., collaboration encouragement). The authors (2001, p. 58) divide them into three categories: affective (emotions, sense of humor, and self-disclosure); interactive (reply-
investigating interaction in an efl online environment

...ing, referring, asking questions, complimenting, expressing agreement, and expressing appreciation; and cohesive (vocatives, inclusive pronouns, phatics, and salutation). As we will demonstrate in the analysis, these categories may be textually represented by mental, verbal, material, and relational processes. One example from our data clearly shows this representation:

Hi John, it was [relational process] nice to read [material process] your message. It was [relational process] touching because it is [relational process] authentic. Brief but straight to the point. I hope [mental process] you manage [material process] to see [mental process] them soon. Bye...John.

The student expresses her various footings toward her ‘classmate’ by employing different kinds of processes, like, for instance, affection (It was touching), cognition (I hope, I see), and actions (read, manage). These processes also point to softening strategies commonly used in online forums, through which interactants construct their discourses by means of modalization and politeness.

In our opinion, the categories Garrison et al. (2000) and Rourke et al. (2001) present can shed light on the notion of footing, since any (virtual) social encounter abounds with moments of collaborative talk, encouragement, and affective expressions, mostly represented by politeness strategies and lexicogrammatical elements, such as verbs (processes), epithets, prepositional phrases, and the like.

Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001, p. 8) define “teaching presence as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.” According to them, teaching presence is markedly present since the beginning of the course preparation, and “continues during the course, as the instructor facilitates the discourse and provides direct instruction when required” (2001, p. 8). Taking these authors as reference we can say that teaching presence has three categories: design (setting curriculum and methods), facilitation (sharing personal meanings), and direct instruction (focusing discussion, establishing time parameters, utilizing medium effectively, and establishing netiquette). We would like to emphasize as well that teaching presence is clearly perceived in educational environments, mainly in classroom settings, due to the influence exerted by curricula, evaluation, teaching methods, personal meanings, and focused discussions on the construction of meaning negotiations in any educational context, and virtual education is no exception.

Material processes, or processes of doing, seem to often appear in this kind of footing, since the teacher is expected to provide general instructions and give support to her students. Outstanding features of this kind of footing are represented by “disguised imperatives,” which commonly appear in declarative sentences and are generally constructed by material processes, as we may see in the following example: “Each one is supposed to select [material process] one of the suggestions for [the] next task.”

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Our corpus comes from a 60-hour online course on reading and writing in English that was taught at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil, over 15 weeks during 2006. The objective of the course was to offer authentic input and non-artificial opportunities for students to practice the English language. Those students were prospective English teachers, and it is usually difficult for them to find opportunities to use the language outside the classroom, so the Internet was a useful tool to bridge that gap.

To promote online interaction among students, the syllabus was designed to integrate technological and communicative functions to the maximum extent possible. The activities (introducing, giving advice, writing and reading different genres, etc.)
Investigating Interaction in an EFL Online Environment

can be found on the course homepage at http://www.veramenezes.com/rw.htm.

The course was organized around a discussion list where all the interaction among the virtual community—students and teacher—took place. The discussion list was hosted on the Yahoo!Groups site (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/readwrite/) at no cost, but with the proviso that advertisements would come together with the messages. All the messages exchanged during the course were filed away on a page created by the software. Figure 1 shows the appearance of the course homepage and Figure 2 the discussion list homepage as generated by Yahoo!Groups.

Students were assigned weekly tasks, and attendance to the course was only registered if each task had been posted until Wednesday. As the objective was to produce meaning, feedback focused on the content and not on the form of the task output. It does not mean, however, that the form was not important, but the university program offers the students different kinds of courses in which they have the opportunities to study the form in-depth.

Students were told to keep a copy of each task and choose, at the end of the term, five of their best tasks to be graded by the teacher (20 points each). They were told to keep in mind that it was the process rather than the product which would be analyzed for assessment and that there was no reason to be afraid of making mistakes as they could edit their tasks as many times as they felt necessary.

The theoretical basis for the course is anchored in the sociocultural theory and in the strong version of the communicative approach as described by Howatt (1985, p. 279):

“The ‘strong’ version of communicative teaching...advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself.”

For Howatt, the weak version could be described as “learn to use English” vs. the strong version’s “using English to learn it.” In choosing the strong version, that is, using the language to acquire language per se, one must emphasize the following aspects: student-centered teaching, with the teacher as mediator; focus on the content with an emphasis on interaction; the concept of language as an instrument of communication and...
not as a formal system; use of authentic material; and total tolerance for errors.

Interaction through discussion groups encourages participants to work in a cooperative way and at the same time allows students to preserve their individuality. As Littlewood (1981, p. 93) says: “The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them. It therefore requires a learning atmosphere which gives them a sense of security and value as individuals.”

The sociocultural theory was of paramount importance to the design of the course. First, because it sees learning as a cultural phenomenon, and second, because of the notion of a zone of proximal development, which Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defines as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through the problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” Although the concept was developed to describe how children learn, it has been applied to adult learning as well (see Lantolf, 2000). We would like to add to Vygotsky’s ideas the notion of collaboration developed by Freire (1970), in which this theoretician presents dialogue as the basis for his pedagogical proposal. Albeit Freire also takes into consideration the role leadership plays in the construction of knowledge; he clearly sees dialogue as the effective means by which educational actors furnish the collaborative transformation of the world.

**THE CORPUS**

Our corpus comprises 1,241 electronic messages exchanged among students and the teacher from August to November 2006. In order to select some excerpts which can exemplify the different kinds of footing, we used two different strategies: we read various messages and selected some of them...
to illustrate our discussion, and we also used the search mechanism available in the discussion list when we had in mind some keywords, such as processes, epithets, and nouns, which worked as discourse markers for footing.

**ANALYSIS**

Our analysis will identify the kinds of footings that display the three different, but interconnected virtual presences as proposed by Garrison et al. (2001): social, cognitive, and teaching. In general we can see that the students’ footings oscillate mainly from a cognitive footing (ask for help, share doubts, justify mistakes or absences) to a teaching one (give information, clarify others’ doubts, give feedback, express sympathy), since the course is not teacher centered in order to promote collaboration among the students. Social footing overlaps the other two, mainly when the students address the participants.

**Social Presence**

Social presence is manifested in the virtual environment by means of different kinds of footing. When we read the messages, the first example of social footing we noticed was *identity footing*, which was generally perceived when students used either their student or their classmate identities.

**Identity Footing**

Students display different identities when greeting the participants in the online community. The different greeting forms are hints for one’s identity footing. Students identify themselves as members of an online community (*Dear all; Hello everyone!; Hi everyone!*); or as students by addressing the teacher (*Hi Professor Vera*); as classmates (*Dear peers; Hey mates; Hi + name of a classmate*); or as both student and classmate (*Good Morning teacher and “classmates”; Hello Professor Vera and Classmates!*; *Hi Professor Vera and colleagues!!!; Dear Vera and classmates; Hi, Vera and classmates!*). The teacher, on the other hand, keeps her identity of a teacher by consistently starting her messages with *Dear students*, unless she is addressing a specific student.

Self-disclosure is another way to project personal identity. One of the tasks was named “Message in a bottle,” in which the students were supposed to write a message to be thrown into the ocean. Most of them wrote poetic or philosophical messages addressed to anyone who would find the hypothetical bottle. Nevertheless, one of them decided to review his own drama—two daughters living away from him in Japan—by writing the following message:

(1)

_I still hope that you decide to come back to Brazil someday…before I die. I still bring inside of me the hope of seeing you again. If you happen to read this message, please, get in touch. I love you and I never forget you!!!!_

This message was a starting point for several other messages directed to this specific student, who was held in deep affection by his classmates. This action of publicly demonstrated warm affection worked as a trigger for another kind of social presence, which is called *affective footing*.

**Affective Footing**

As soon as his classmates got the message, they showed sympathy by sending messages as the ones in (2), (3), and (4):

(2)

_Hi, John! Your “message in a bottle” is very touching! I hope your daughters “find it” and decide to come to Brazil! Cheers, Mary_
Hi John, I didn’t expect to read this kind of message!! I was so touched that I cried!! I hope they come back at least to see you!!!! Best, Mary…

Hi John, it was nice to read your message. It was touching because it is authentic. Brief but straight to the point. I hope you manage to see them soon. Bye…John.

It was interesting to observe that most of the affective messages were from female students and that male students were more economical in showing their feelings. In (4), for instance, one can see that the writer evaluates the message as a piece of writing, as if he were not touched by the classmate’s drama. However, in the last line he makes a wish giving support to the student. These characteristics are translated into text by means of transitivity, more precisely by the use of relational (“I was so touched”) and mental processes (I didn’t expect). The transitivity system, therefore, works as a means of textualization of footings, since online interaction uses primarily texts to represent emotions, feelings, and wishes.

Students express different kinds of emotions and they show the change of footing by using capitalization, repetition of characters, emotions, and punctuation. Capital letters work as a device for calling careful attention, as presented in (5), or for expressing prosodic features and intonation, like, for instance, “THAAAT” in (6). Repetition of punctuation and emoticons display feelings, as shown in example (7), where one may recognize whether or not the sender is happy for having received compliments from John. This example is interesting because capital letters indicate rising intonation, and the repetition of the letter “A” indicates vowel elongation:

P.S.: I’M SO SORRY BUT I COULD NOT JUST POST IT SINCE THE PICTURES WOULD NOT APPEAR. AS I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO DO IT, I SEND IT AS AN ATTACHED FILE. DO NOT WORRY BECAUSE IT HAS NO VIRUSES.

I recognize I’m not THAAAT poet, you know…(hahah), but I…can I say I really tried to touch your hearts.

Good morning, John!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Thank you again for all your compliments!!! : -)

Interactive Footing

Interactive footing examples can be found either in the teacher’s or in the students’ messages. However, given that the course is a collaborative one, many examples can be taken from the students’ postings, like compliments (examples (8) and (9)) made, respectively, by a student and by the teacher, as well as agreements, as shown in example (10). By the same token, the act of quoting others’ messages, like in examples (11) and (12), are common interactive footings in our forum:

Hi John! I found very interesting what you pointed out, that knowing how to scan and skim is very important for us as internet users : )

I must say I am really impressed by the quality of the texts you have been producing. Several aspects have called my attention: creativity, rich
Investigating Interaction in an EFL Online Environment

vocabulary, accuracy and literary quality. It is a privilege to work with such a good group.

(10)

I agree with you that they exaggerated in the effects in some parts of the movie.

(11)

John, I think we have to produce the graphics ourselves...As you said in you message, the sites just show you the models.

(12)

As Professor Vera said, your summary shows how motivated you are! Cheers, Mary.

In examples (9) and (12), the use of verbal processes, respectively, “I must say” and “As Professor Vera said,” indicates that the teacher gave rise to her feelings (“impressed”) by using reported speech, which shows that changes of footing are discursive-dependent as well. In the same way, examples (11) and (12) reproduce the words of another participant, expressing somebody else’s opinion. According to Goffman (1981, p. 151), “when we shift from saying something ourselves to reporting what someone else said, we are changing our footing.” Another change in footing is done with code switching. The teacher in our forum sometimes switches from English into Portuguese in order to force the students to pay attention to the course rules, as we can see in example (13):

(13)

Por favor, lembre-se de que quarta-feira é o último dia para enviar suas tarefas. (Please, remember that Wednesday is the deadline for the tasks.)

Code switching appeared in an interaction among two students in (14):

(14)

Sure John!
And, u r welcome! ;)
See ya!
Ni hao! :) haha

Example (14) is particularly interesting because the author changes his usual footing in the forum by using typical abbreviations often used in informal contexts on the Internet. This somehow individualizes the interaction between the two students and keeps the teacher away from the interaction. At the same time, the student closes his message with a Japanese greeting, an index for his peer about the experience he had in Japan, by adding emoticons and a paralinguistic representation, both representing smiles. In other words, both forms of code switching project a footing of intimacy between the participants and help to build their social presence in the educational forum.

Teaching Presence

The most expected alignment or footing of a teacher is that of the one who gives instructions, as can be perceived in instance (15). This “instruction-like footing” serves as an attempt for the teacher to project herself as someone who has the obligation to help the students, to assess the efficacy of the process, like in example (16), to help students to utilize the media effectively, clearly seen in example 17, as well as to set curriculum, as noticed in example (18):

(15)

Mary,
Welcome to our online course. All our tasks can be found on our homepage: http://www.veramenezes.com/rw.htm
Just click at tasks. Do not forget to read our instructions.
Any doubt, just get in touch.
Cheers,
Vera Menezes

(16)

Mary, We have received four identical messages.
Please, do not send it again. Vera Menezes

(17)

John, If your classmates’ tips did not help you,
try another free server for blogs.

(18)

Each student is supposed to select one of the suggestions for the next task.

When we analyze the examples from the data, it is reasonable to assume that the teacher, besides giving support and detailed instructions to her students, exerts her power by constructing her discourse using imperatives. Although power relations are present in her discourse, the teacher also softens her imperatives by means of modalization, as we can notice when she utilizes polite expressions like “Any doubt, just get in touch” in example (15) and “Please” in example (16). Even utilizing softeners to filter the force of her arguments, the teacher provides prime examples of her power over the students, which leads us to figure out that teacher footing is closely interconnected with power relations. Consequently, teacher and students express and negotiate their inter-subjective footings in the virtual environment through modalization. Those markers show how the participants in that online community try to protect their faces when they modalize their utterances.

Modalization is recurrent in teaching presence. Discourse markers such as I believe, I think, I am afraid that, I am sorry are used by the teacher to assess the students’ tasks and tell them that they have not accomplished the tasks as previously expected. By the same token, modalization serves as warnings to the students, principally when they are not observing the time parameters, as readily observed in examples (20) and (21). As far as we are concerned, by choosing these markers the teacher displays a friendly and polite footing, projecting a positive image of herself:

(19)

I think your first choice is too small to be called a scientific article. What about finding another good text to send to your classmates?

(20)

I am afraid you are not reading our e-mails because last Tuesday morning I sent a message reminding the group about the deadline.

(21)

I am so sorry, but the deadline for the task was Wednesday (yesterday). You should have sent your doubts before. Please, do your tasks earlier in order to avoid problems.

Using her power as a teacher, sometimes she does not modalize and changes her friendly footing into a more authoritative one and makes straight assertions, as we can see in example (22), an interaction between the teacher and Mary:

(22)

Teacher says:
(a) Mary,
This is not an article, but a book review.
Mary sends another text and writes in her message:
I believe this one is an article, right Professor Vera?
The teacher confirms:
Yes, now it is an article.

Cognitive Presence

Modalizing also appears in footings which project cognitive presence. As we can see, in example (22) the student also modalizes (“I believe” in (c)), but it seems that, due to the power relation differences, the student’s footing is different. When the teacher uses “I believe,” her option is to project a polite self, which did not happen in her interaction with Mary. But, when students choose to modalize their utterances, using “I believe,” “I am sorry,” “I am afraid,” it seems that their footings work as markers of humbleness or insecurity, as noticed in examples (23) and (24):

(23)
I’m sorry I see that I misunderstood the task’s purpose.

(24)
As to my second question, I’m afraid I did not make myself clear regarding my request on the words “skimming” and “scanning.” What I would really like to know is if there is a specific word in Portuguese for each counterpart in English.

Nevertheless, when the interaction happens between two students, the footing displayed by modalization is again of politeness, as we can see in John’s reply to Mary in example (25):

(25)
Mary, Thank you very much for your feedback! But I’m afraid that if we plant a tree for every mistake we make in our lives, suddenly there won’t be any space at all for us to live in this...

Cognitive presence can also be identified in footings which project one’s self as a thinker, one who reflects upon what is being learned, who wants to learn and collaborate. It is interesting to notice that cognitive footings are generally translated into text by means of grammaticalization, mainly by the use of mental processes, like, for instance, “I’m sorry” and “I’m afraid.” In contrast to what Goffman (1981) has negatively stated about the role grammar plays in footing identification, transitivity serves as a means of textual basis in the emergence of several types of footing in online discourse, mainly social, teaching, and cognitive footings.

CONCLUSION

The analyses undertaken have clearly demonstrated that footing is a social and discursive category that is only easily identified in online forums if textual analysis takes into account the presence of other elements within this category. The elements we refer to stemmed from Garrison’s (2006) work on social, cognitive, and teaching presences. However, these elements per se seemed to be insufficient to demonstrate how footing is present in online discourse, which made us draw on grammaticalization, with special emphasis on the transitivity model developed by Halliday (2004), in a bid to pinpoint in our data the prime examples of footing. The data have shown that three different but interconnected types of footing are usually found in online educational forums, that is, social, teaching, and cognitive footings, each of them playing specific roles to the construction of knowledge within this virtual environment.

As we could have perceived, the most common footing in our data is social footing, since students were concerned with ways of providing feedback and support to each other, irrespective of the teacher’s support. By the same token, students were able to adopt and improve “corporate”
identities, that is, a shared sense of mutual support and confidence.

Teacher footing was also present in our data, mainly noticed on the instructions and information given by the teacher. This kind of footing is of particular interest when one is attentive to power relations within online educational environments, which in fact leads to the role teachers play while performing their footing of instructors. Some special textual elements are common to this type of footing, principally modalizers and polite expressions, in order to soften the force of some words used in this footing modality.

Lastly, cognitive footing was identified in our corpus as a means of softening the force of some arguments made by the students throughout their interaction primarily with the teacher. In this modality saving face strategies were employed to secure students against possible “harm” during the course of the interaction. This is also true when students interacted with each other, since their aim was to maintain complete harmony among them and to provide a warm environment for holding their discussion.

This chapter, therefore, is expected to be a step forward in the investigation of footing in online contexts, which points to the need of future research on this issue. Besides, some other aspects such as gender and age differences might also be compared as far as footing is concerned. Course design might also be another influential factor in the elicitation of different virtual presences in an online educational forum. We are still learning how to behave in online educational forums, and research can show us what is underlying this online environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank our colleague Rita de Cassia Augusto (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil) for her comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

REFERENCES


Investigating Interaction in an EFL Online Environment


**KEY TERMS**

**Behavioral Processes:** “Processes of (typically human) physiological and psychological behavior” (Halliday, 2004, p. 248), regarded as a mixture of material and mental processes. Examples of behavioral processes include: *smile, cry, laugh, listen, dream, breathe, sing, dance, faint, talk.*

**Cognitive Presence:** Garrison (2006), inspired by the work of Dewey (1933) on reflective teaching, defines cognitive presence as “the exploration, resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry” (p. 4). In another text, Garrison (2006b, p. 4) explains that “cognitive presence is the process of collaboratively constructing meaning and confirming understanding in a sustainable community of inquiry,” highlighting the importance of facilitation to maintain the construction of knowledge and interaction by means of discourse production.

**Existential Processes:** Only represent “that something exists or happens” (Halliday, 2004, p. 256). Examples of existential processes include: *exist, remain, stand, lie, emerge, grow, erupt, prevail, flourish, ensue.*
Footing: More commonly related to participants’ alignments, their social projection, and the way they represent themselves while taking a role in a social encounter. In other words, footing “is another way of talking about indexing…the process whereby we link utterances to particular moments, places, or personae, including our own self at a different time or with a different spirit (e.g., emotional vs. distant, convinced vs., skeptical, literal vs. ironic)” (Duranti, 1997, p. 296). Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007) have investigated which roles the footings of participants play while they are interacting with their peers in online academic forums. According to them, “within online interaction, interpretive resources usually present in a given context are transferred to utterances produced by interlocutors in virtual interaction” (Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior, 2004, p. 175, our translation). Moreover, nearly all paralinguistic features easily identified in casual talk, due mostly to the cues immediate contexts provide, become linguistic and discursive elements often used by interlocutors when they are virtually communicating with their peers, like, for instance, emoticons, interjections, punctuation, capital letters, and so forth (Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior, 2004, 2007).

Material Processes: Construe “a quantum of change in the flow of events as taking place through some input of energy” (Halliday, 2004, p. 179), with mostly an action performed by a subject onto someone or something. Examples of material processes include: appear, emerge, develop, cut, modernize, brush, sweep, open, close, leave.

Mental Processes: Construe “a quantum of change in the flow of events taking place in our own consciousness” (Halliday, 2004, p. 197). Examples of mental processes include: see, notice, believe, expect, wish, hope, like, hate, perceive, think.

Relational Processes: “Serve to characterize and to identify” (Halliday, 2004, p. 210) general nouns, be they human or inanimate subjects. Examples of relational processes include: be, become, remain, taste (like), turn into, represent, constitute, express, signify, stand for.

Social Presence: According to Rourke et al. (2001, p. 51), “social presence is the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as ‘real people’.” Later on, Garrison (2006, p. 2) describes social presence “as the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships.”

Teaching Presence: Anderson et al. (2001, p. 8) define “teaching presence as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.” According to them, teaching presence begins with the course preparation and “continues during the course, as the instructor facilitates the discourse and provides direct instruction when required” (2001, p. 8).

Verbal Processes: “Clauses of saying” (Halliday, 2004, p. 252), usually contributing to the creation of narratives by setting up distinctive dialogues and reported speech. Examples of verbal clauses include: praise, insult, say, speak, report, announce, question, inquiry, ask, criticize.

ENDNOTE

1 In order to protect the students’ identities, the male students will be named John and the female ones Mary.