Online discussion forums: a tool for stimulating language teachers' interaction and reflection

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ABSTRACT. Teachers' approaches and decisions in the classroom are guided by their *beliefs* on what it means to teach and to learn, which are formed along their lives both as students and as teachers. However, only the experiences lived by the teachers do not guarantee their professional development (Celce-Murcia, 2001). *Reflection* is an important tool in teachers' development – through individual inquiry and collaboration with others, teachers can learn from their experiences. In the teacher education field, reflection is understood as a process of self-analysis and self-evaluation in which teachers should engage regularly as a way to interpret and improve their professional practice (Ali et al., 2014). In order to become agents of reflection, it is advisable that teachers reflect on their beliefs and pedagogical practices, which can lead to the construction and reconstruction of meaning about their classroom decisions and actions. Considering the importance of reflection in teacher education, in this paper, we discuss the interactive potential of online discussion forums in a graduate course to foster language teachers' reflection of their beliefs and classroom practices. Beliefs are opinions and ideas students and teachers have about the processes of teaching and learning languages (Barcelos, 2001). Teacher beliefs have been extensively studied as an attempt to understand teaching practices, since beliefs can influence behaviors because of the mediating effects of beliefs on the ways of teaching via their impact on decision making (Lin et al., 2014). With the rapid development of computer mediated communication, online forums have become more usual in classroom settings to promote students' critical thinking, knowledge construction and language learning autonomy (Kaur, 2011). The data analyzed in this paper were collected with a group of seven language teachers and one professor in a graduate course entitled "Beliefs in language learning/teaching: affective and contextual factors", offered in a Federal public University in Brazil. The Moodle platform was used

in complement to the weekly face-to-face interactions that happened in the course. By means of guidance and online and offline reflection, students were able to share experiences, articulate and reconstruct knowledge in order to support a certain point of view, as well as discuss their beliefs and confront them with their colleagues' beliefs. Data collection methods include a questionnaire, online discussion forums, and an in-class group discussion session, which was tape-recorded. The data analysis process draws on content analysis methods (Gillham, 2000), as well as on computer assisted techniques using the software WordSmith Tools (WST). The findings point out that understanding, interpreting and confronting beliefs can be a path to the transformation of teachers' reflective and teaching practices. When contrasting their beliefs with other people's beliefs, teachers can trigger a process of self-analysis of their roles as language teachers. They also emphasize that the use of online discussion forums as a pedagogical tool can contribute in this direction.

KEYWORDS: *Beliefs, Reflection, Online discussion forums, Moodle*

Introduction

This paper arises from the need to investigate new educational possibilities involving the use of digital technologies, and the several contributions diverse tools may bring to the development of language teachers' reflective practice.

There are several research studies in Applied Linguistics dedicated to the examination of teachers' *beliefs* and their impact on teacher education. These studies are carried out in an attempt to comprehend what happens in language classrooms, how teachers and students interpret their experiences, and what the role of *reflection* is in the formulation and reformulation of their professional practice in light of teaching and learning theories. In this perspective, Conceição (2004) highlights the importance of reflection in teacher education, since it allows teachers to think about their previous learning experiences, their beliefs and the way these beliefs can influence their actions. Teachers' beliefs are considered indicators of certain behaviors because of the mediating effects they exert on the ways of teaching via their impact on decision making (Lin et al., 2014). For example, teachers who believe that collaborative learning brings greater benefits than learning alone would tend to include more group work in their lessons than teachers who see little or no learning value in collaboration. Moreover, teacher beliefs are regarded as one of the most valuable constructs for teacher education. It is well known that a number of teachers find themselves isolated in their job settings "often hindered by their working conditions to talk to their coworkers and develop collaborative projects" (Collins, 2009, p. 15). The same happens with teachers in graduate programs, where they usually work in isolation on their research projects. Thus, research studies focused on the teacher learning process that emphasize ways of encouraging reflection are important and they need to be widely carried out. The challenge remains on how to promote meaningful ways to foster teachers' reflection, both in face-to-face and in virtual classes, or even in the combination of both (blended learning settings). Considering the relevance of reflection in teacher education in undergraduate, as well as in graduate programs, this paper aims at exploring the role of online discussion forums in a graduate course as a tool for stimulating language teachers' reflection on their beliefs and classroom practices. With the

rapid development of computer-mediated communication, online forums have become more usual in classroom settings to promote students' critical thinking, knowledge construction and language learning autonomy (Kaur, 2011). This study was mainly driven by the concepts of beliefs, language teachers' reflective practice and the use of online discussion forums in the teaching and learning process in higher education.

Reflection about beliefs, experiences and language teachers' practice

The relevance of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action for the professional development of language teachers has long been studied in Education and in Applied Linguistics (Schön, 1983). Undoubtedly, the technical model, which dominated the teacher education field for years, brings few or no advantages to teacher development due to the fact that it is characterized by exceedingly theoretical and normative actions in order to train teachers to implement methods and techniques efficiently. This is not enough to prepare language teachers to work in the contemporary teaching reality, characterized by diversity and ambiguity (Soto et al., 2012).

With the constant scientific and technological advances, knowledge becomes fast outdated, and it forces us to reconsider the concept of teacher education as an ongoing process instead of a complete end state. No longer is it possible to think that teachers' professional development ends once their period of preservice formal education is over. Those advances are also experienced in the classroom settings, which today are seen as spaces marked by change, unpredictability and complexity. Thereby, premade recipes on how to teach will never be enough to prepare language teachers for their daily challenges. Teachers should have flexibility and sensitivity to adapt their decisions and actions to classroom adverse circumstances and choose the appropriate solutions to their teaching contexts; this means they should adopt a "critical and creative methodology, always renewable and renewing" (Mateus, 2002, p. 4). Besides, teachers must have an attitude of permanent learners; this involves curiosity, pleasure in discovering new approaches and techniques to help their students to learn, and courage to put away old teaching formulas; we believe those steps are possible to develop from a reflective behavior.

Araújo and colleagues (2013) suggest focused reflection as a constant assignment for the teacher, whose goal is not restricted to examining experiences and practices in order to find answers. It is the never-ending process of searching for answers that can be emancipatory for teachers, since it allows them to comprehend their actions rather than only reproduce what has been taught in teacher training courses. Reflection also enables teachers to constantly shape and reshape their beliefs about what it means to be a teacher. To be effective, reflection needs to lead teachers to make sense of a given situation so that they can understand their practice from different viewpoints (Loughran, 2002). In order to instigate this meaning-making process, reflection about beliefs, together with reflection about teaching practices and routines have been suggested in teacher learning.

In accordance with Barcelos (2007), in this paper, we understand reflection about beliefs as a process that goes beyond reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action; it can cause changes in beliefs and/or practices. The critical exploration of beliefs and experiences can encourage teachers to take into consideration alternative ideas and distinctive ways to deal with their contexts of work.

Reflection about beliefs is a key principle in this paper since teachers' planning, decisions and actions are highly influenced by their beliefs: "what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and

believe" (Richards, Lockhart, 1996, p. 29). This happens because beliefs – opinions and ideas that students and teachers have regarding the teaching and learning process – are characterized as being both cognitive and social. They arise from our experiences and problems, our interaction with the context and our capacity to think about what surrounds us (Barcelos, 2004).

Beliefs can guide our actions. Thus, teachers' beliefs influence their decisions regarding goals and the use of materials, as well as their patterns of classroom interaction, roles, and classroom practices. Therefore, reshaping teaching beliefs is a prerequisite for instructional innovation. Teachers must alter their beliefs and adopt new teaching models to meet the demands of innovation (Lin et al., 2014).

The beliefs teachers hold are derived from different sources, such as their own experiences as language learners and their classroom experiences about what works best to students' language learning (Richards, Lockhart, 1996; Borg, 2003). In this respect, according to Dewey (1933, p. 139), environment can shape experiences: "when we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it, then we suffer or undergo the consequences". Experience is not a cognitive state, but it involves an active-passive component of trial and consequence. For Dewey (op. cit.), learning does not occur without reflection.

Miccoli (2010, p. 137) proposes that experiences are important to the comprehension of teachers' and students' beliefs, because there is a strong relationship between the individual and the social context. Thus, understanding teachers' beliefs and experiences enable us to comprehend "the meaning teachers make from past events in different teaching or learning situations, so that we can explain the relationship between these experiences and the beliefs teachers express in these contexts".

In line with the view of reflection by Ali and colleagues (2014), we agree that reflecting through interaction with others is more beneficial than reflecting individually, as it guides teachers to a more profound analysis of their own perspective. At the same time, it is noted that when pursuing reflection, collectively or individually, it is crucial to conduct data collection that enables the examination of beliefs and teaching experiences. Several instruments have been used in the teaching education field to achieve this goal: a) portfolios; b) classroom observations; c) diaries; d) autobiographies; e) life story sessions; f) questionnaires; g) reports; h) reflective sessions; i) case studies; j) action research and k) group discussions. Taking into account the new challenges and perspectives in language teacher education and the contributions technological tools can bring to this process, in this paper, we suggest an alternative tool for the elicitation and reflection of beliefs: the online discussion forums.

The use of online discussion forums in the interaction and reflection process

Since virtual learning environments (VLE) started to be explored in the field of language teaching and learning, one of their main potentials is, undoubtedly, their capacity to bring people together, and to provide unequal means of interaction and communication. As Palloff and Pratt states (1999, p. 16), in the online classroom, students "interact with knowledge, with the learning environment, and with the other learners". Thus, interaction, which is conceived as mutual action among individuals, is a key factor so that teaching and learning occur in VLE. Considering the diverse tools available in VLE to promote interaction, in this paper, we focus on the use of online discussion forums.

Nelson (2010) stresses that digital technologies can bring improvements to the quality of teaching and learning by mentioning some advantages of the online discussion forum – one of the simplest technological tools teachers can handle in order to expand discussions beyond classroom settings. First, he explains that participation in discussion forums provides opportunities for responsible and active learning. According to Hopperton (1998), this is because taking part in discussion forums requires students to be actively engaged with the course content, and through interaction with their classmates, they can share their experiences and work together in the negotiation of meaning.

Second, in the discussion forums, messages are stored and quite often can be distinguished by themes. Consequently, they can be revisited and commented on as long as the forum is open. By reviewing their posts, participants have more opportunities for reflection. Unlike face-to-face interactions, students do not feel pressured to give an immediate answer.

Third, discussions are non-linear; this means that online forums provide learners greater flexibility, autonomy, and control over the time they have to think, reflect and respond, although ironically they may also bring challenges for managing the higher level of focus, self-motivation, independence, and initiative required for this mode of study (Swan, 2004).

Nault (2008) also identifies four strengths that motivate teachers to use online discussion forums, whatever their targeted pedagogical purpose is. First, they democratize interactions by allowing individuals to contribute to discussions in progress at the appropriate moment within a specific timeframe. Second, they support learning activities likely to lead to results in team or group work, which would be otherwise difficult to achieve individually. Third, they stimulate critical thinking by requiring students to organize and register their ideas in writing. Thus, students have to reflect on the content of their message and provide arguments to support their point of view, which can sometimes be more productive in terms of the quality of thinking compared to a traditional classroom activity. On this point, according to Warschauer (1999), reflection and interaction overlap in forum communication. Text-stimulated forum discussions involve the expression of thoughts, presupposing reflection upon messages before posting them, as well as the exchange of ideas with others. Discussions allow students to construct knowledge together by reflecting upon and sharing their experiences and perspectives, providing feedback to one another, clarifying ideas and negotiating meaning. They also give participants the opportunity to reflect on their classmates' contributions while creating their own understanding about a topic.

Finally, online discussion forums lead to a better understanding of the stakes involved in electronic communications, such as the respect for rules of ethics, the adoption of an acceptable attitude, the respect for the opinions of other participants, and the need to respond within a reasonable timeframe.

The affective dimension also finds support in online discussion forums, once they encourage trust, self-regulation, along with students' disposition to reveal experiences, thoughts and interpretations. Warschauer (1999) states that among the numerous potential benefits of computer-mediated communication in comparison to the traditional role of computers in the classroom is that it may enhance student motivation, by providing a less threatening means of communication, especially for shy and introverted students, stimulating international contact, and facilitating work on meaningful projects for students.

In order to maximize the potential of the discussion forum, the teacher must accept to play the role of a guide rather than that of an expert. This means shorter interventions in the form of questions, clarification, or suggestions of divergent viewpoints, thereby creating room for the students to

express themselves. Online discussion forums significantly change the nature of interaction, de-emphasizing teacher input and accentuating interaction and collaboration between peers. The instructor is also a facilitator and a participant in the discussions in this environment, and should not be seeing as having all the knowledge and answers to questions (Jonassen et al., 1995).

Nalley (1996) makes the point that courses that include online discussion forums maximize student learning by promoting student involvement and feedback from teachers and students, and inadvertently providing an outlet for students to voice expectations, frustrations and joys, otherwise saved for program administrators. However, to be effective, weekly participation in the discussion forum should become a requirement within a course.

The features of online discussion forums may allow the constitution of a virtual community of learners by creating a sense of belonging to students, more integration and group cohesion and an identity for the group. A virtual community of learners is a social network that emerge on the internet, whereby groups of participants form relationships and exchange knowledge and experiences. In this matter, online discussion forums can be understood as a virtual community of learners.

Methodology

Data were collected with a group of seven language teachers and one professor in a graduate course entitled "Beliefs in language learning/teaching: affective and contextual factors". The course was offered in a graduate program in Linguistics from a federal public university in Brazil. The Moodle open source learning platform was used in order to complement the weekly face-to-face interactions in the course.

The data analyzed in this article come from online discussion forums, an in-class group discussion session, which was tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed, and a questionnaire. The in-class face-to-face discussion was conducted at the end of the course and it was based on a belief's inventory. From the inventory, language teachers' views about aspects of language teaching and learning were identified and they were interpreted by the participants who had to reflect on the implications of these beliefs in their teaching approach. Possible changes in language teachers' beliefs that may have occurred during the course were also debated in the session. The questionnaire was administered via Moodle. By answering open-ended questions, participants had to evaluate the use of Moodle in the course, explaining to what extent the tasks and online forums contributed to the understanding of the concepts and theories covered in the course.

The data analysis process draws on content analysis method (Gillham, 2000), as well as on computer assisted techniques using the software WordSmith Tools. WST is commonly used in Corpus Linguistics for lexical analysis, and it helped us in reading and organizing data through the identification of key words and concordance in the forum messages. The following figures illustrate the concordance of the key word "aluno" (student). As a key word, "student" was one of the most frequent word in the texts/forums. By clicking on the word "student", we have access to a list of all the sentences in which this word appears (Figure 1). If you wish to access the source text, in order to read the word or sentence in the original context where it appears, you just have to choose and click on a sentence (Figure 2):

Figure 1. WST Concordance of the key word "aluno"

Figure 2. WST Concordance of the key word "aluno" - Source Texts

The organization of data by using the WST was the first step in content analysis. By applying a set of techniques to explore documents, content analysis allows researchers to identify the main concepts or themes in a given text (Oliveira et al., 2003). Themes summarize content and can be evoked from a sentence or parts of a text in the form of a statement. They are organized in categories, which are built from research questions and the theoretical framework that guide the study. The aim of content analysis is to categorize data by introducing a certain order to the content of messages, according to definite criteria.

The data obtained from the online discussion forums in Moodle were considered primary. By using triangulation for comparing data from different sources in order to confirm or disconfirm an assertion (Bortoni-Ricardo, 2008), we contrasted the primary data with those obtained from the in-class group discussion recording and the questionnaire.

Results and discussion

In this section, we present and discuss results of the study, which reveal the interactive potential of online discussion forums to foster language teachers' reflection of their beliefs and classroom practices. Through interaction in online discussion forums, participants were able to prompt each other's reflection in light of theories discussed throughout the course. As Gimenez (2004) argues, collective reflection is more emancipatory for teachers than self-reflection alone. The interactional frame afforded by the forum allows participants to mobilize experiences and to build an anchor for the reflection of their teaching conceptions. Thus, the engagement in the forums leads to the development of teachers' reflective capabilities. In confronting their beliefs with those of their colleagues, in the forums, the participant can "trigger a process of self-analysis of who he is as a teacher" (Anjos-Santos, Cristóvão, 2013, p. 284).

In the following excerpts, we can see that participants discuss their role as language teachers and by doing so, they reveal their beliefs about the teacher's role in motivating students.[1]

One of the students (P3) posts her opinion about the topic; a classmate (P1) replies her post, arguing that P3's statement seems contradictory. The next day, P3 reviews her post in the forum, and realizes how her classmate's intervention made her think about her statement:

> P1: I think one of the teachers' role is exactly to stimulate in students the desire to learn. The point is: how can the teacher create ways to foster students' desire to learn? How can teachers encourage students both inside and outside the classroom? [F]

> P3: (P1), I guess it's always possible to show students language possibilities, yet, there'll still be some students who will not be interested in learning the language and will avoid it... That's why instead of "stimulating", or "motivating" the student to learn the language, which I think it's neither possible nor the teacher's role, I try for a moment to turn classroom moments

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1 For the sake of preserving the research participants' identity, they are identified as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7 and P8.
The excerpts were originally written in Portuguese. All translations are the authors' responsibility.
The abbreviation [F] stands for forums, which means that the excerpts have been extracted from the online discussion forums. In the same way, [Q] stands for questionnaire.

into pleasant one (It seems that as a teacher I gave up teaching, but that is not the point). [F]

P1: I can feel some demotivation in your talk, when you say you have already tried to motivate students and couldn't do it. I know what you mean… But for me, it's possible to do so and it's really part of the teacher's role to motivate students. I think you contradict your belief when you say it's not possible to motivate students. If you strive to turn classroom moments into pleasant ones, as you mention, for me, unconsciously you are trying to motivate your students. [F]

P3: (P1), today I thought about how my testimonial was contradictory, when I said that I try to motivate my students but at the same time I thought that this is not our role as teachers. What I was trying to say is that we don't need to bear the burden of motivating students. The responsibility for students motivation is not only ours… [F]

P7: (P1), I believe one way to motivate students is to start from what students like. If it's music, video game, movies, literature, I don't know… The point is to start from things that students like to do and insert language learning into these contexts. This may or may not work, because there are several factors involved in student motivation, but it's worth a try. Do you agree? [F]

In the excerpts, it is possible to observe that participants take control over the interactions without waiting for the professor's acknowledgment. For example, when exposing her opinion about the role of language teachers, P1 throws out open questions to the whole group. The other students answer her question and they seem to wait for her approval, as we can infer from the question "P7: Do you agree?". In some occasions, it is possible to note that P1 takes the role of a mediator in the forums – she proposes discussion questions to the group, she questions her classmates about their views on teaching and learning, and when answering her questions, her colleagues seem to wait for her feedback. As Nault (2008) recognizes, online discussion forums democratizes participation by allowing individuals to contribute to discussions in progress. In online forums, there are more opportunities for interaction among students; consequently, this interaction is less teacher-centered. In web-based instruction, students can take control of the organization and content of interactions (Nunan, 1999).

Markel (2001) remarks that in virtual discussion forums, the teacher is a facilitator and is no longer the holder of knowledge. We noticed that a high number of forum discussions in this course is not guided directly by the professor; the students themselves initiate discussions and respond to each other's questions.

When analyzing the dynamics of the interactions in the forums, it is possible to identify different reflection styles from participants. Firstly, there are moments of *argumentative open reflection*, in which a student directs one question to the group and invites all the participants to the discussion, as we showed in the previous excerpts. Secondly, we can observe *individual reflection*, when a student enters the forum and completes the tasks proposed by the professor, without making an effort to interact with other people. In other moments, *directive reflection* can be observed, which happens when a participant posts his/her opinion and directs a question or a comment to a specific classmate: "Do you agree?" In the following example, we can see that reading one participant's comment might lead teachers (e.g. P5) to reflect about theory in contrast with their beliefs and teaching practices:

P1: I agree with the statement "the self-motivational system brings new possibilities to motivate students and teachers". I believe the main feature to consider in this perspective is the creation of an "ideal-self". For me, this makes learning more learner focused, and it also makes the learning process more relevant to students, since they will be trying to achieve their own goals or dreams. So, the motivational focus is more rooted on the students. They will be encouraged to achieve their goals by this "ideal-self"… The teacher has a new strategy to motivate students: help them to think what their "ideal-selves" are, and imagine what they should or shouldn't do to accomplish these "ideal-selves". The teacher can contribute to make students believe that these ideal-selves are possible to come true. [F]

P5: (P1), by reading your post, I kept thinking that teachers can also transfer to students the images they hold of what is "ideal". A couple of times our daily practice is guided by a model of an English language speaker that we know it is impossible to achieve, but that we aspire for our students. The point is to know students' expectations, try to discover what they believe to be "ideal" and work within this perspective. In this case, it's necessary to know the students well … help them to pursue these goals by working with them. Do you agree? [F]

As Ali et al. (2014) suggest, teacher education programs should support the development of student teachers' practical knowledge, accumulated wisdom, and the know-how teachers construct through experience and which is the basis for dealing with every-day teaching situations. Through reflection, that is, a process of self-examination and self-evaluation, teachers can interpret and improve their professional practices, contrasting their experiences with research-generated knowledge. This is crucial if we want teachers to overcome the mere description of practices and reach a real state of critical evaluation or re-framing of their understandings.

In order to encourage reflection, Jonassen et al. (1995) believe that educators must perform the following tasks in a virtual discussion forum: send a message that introduces the forum, direct the discussions, intervene when necessary, and close discussions. They should also give clear directions to students and establish deadline dates for the tasks. According to these authors, there are tasks that students and teachers need to carry on in the forums, so that these can work effectively as a teaching tool, and not merely as a kind of "chat room". Here is one of many examples of how the teacher can initiate discussions in the forum:

P8: Girls,
Stevick (1980) states that "the success depends less on subjects and teaching techniques in the classroom and more on what happens inside the student". To what extend do you agree with this statement? In favor of a good interaction, post one question or comment to at least one classmate until September 09th. Hugs, P8. [F]

For Jonassen et al. (1995), depending on the level of engagement with their students, teachers can occasionally become participants in the discussions. This breaks the hierarchy commonly observed in traditional classrooms – all participants become learners and have something to add to the ongoing debate. The online environment itself provides a more inviting atmosphere to the sharing of experiences in such a way that is more egalitarian to everyone's participation, resulting in more interaction between the teacher and students:

> P8: Girls,
> It was really nice to get to know your teaching education stories! Even though we may have completed our undergraduate courses and internships some time ago, there are always some facts that stand out, aren't there? I remember my friend and I observed classes and taught some English classes in a public school. We made a huge effort to come up with motivating activities to students, but they simply did not respect us. In one of our classes, in trying to control some disruptive students, we turned off all the classroom fans (Rio Preto is a very hot city, the temperature reaches 38°C!). It worked!! Hehehe … [F]

It is through interaction that the participants' view concerning the teacher role is revisited in the online forums. In many posts, it is clear that the language teachers understand the teacher's role as someone who is responsible for students' learning outcomes. In the forums, we can notice beliefs such as, "the teacher needs to get to know students", "the teacher should look for ways to make students learn" and "the teacher should be a language reference for the student". It seems that for these participants, the teacher is the central figure in the leaning process, and it is part of his/her role to change their students' beliefs:

> P4: I think that as teachers we can work on students' beliefs because it's from new learning experiences that students can see language from another perspective. [F]

> P2: I agree with (P1) in what concerns the possibility of belief change. In the teaching context, a good job carried out by the teacher can entail changes in beliefs that hinder students' learning. So, the teacher is supposed to make students internalize beliefs that he or she thinks are capable of helping them learn a foreign language. In the case of students, I believe that the major responsibility for the changes relies on the teacher… With an adequate methodology, he can truly promote changes in students' beliefs. [F]

This view of the teacher's role as the authority figure in the classroom is widely debated among the participants in the online forums. Contrary to the opinion of their colleagues, three teachers say, "the responsibility for the student's motivation is not only the teacher's". For them, students are also responsible for their self-motivation. Frequently, not even external factors, such as the teacher's approach to teach a language can cause an increase in students' motivation:

> P6: I agree with (P7) in that "we don't have all the responsibility for students' learning", because I suppose the teacher does not have the absolute role to teach, but to mediate knowledge. In this way, even with great efforts to reach students, in some cases the teacher will not convince students about the importance of learning. And I do think he/she shouldn't feel frustrated about it. [F]

When discussing the role of students in language learning in the forums, participants relate it to their role as language teachers and by reflecting on their practice, they realize they should be less authoritarian. Araújo (2006) makes the point that reflection allows teachers to continuously reformulate their beliefs about what it means to be a teacher. Previous learning experiences can influence teachers' beliefs, as well as their classroom decisions and practices (Conceição, 2004), as

P7 states during the face-to-face discussion session:

> P7: I think the place where you started learning the foreign language can influence how you teach this language. I took classes in a language school where we had to repeat and practice a lot, so I think this is important for learning a foreign language. This is how I have learned English, so I think this is how one should learn a language [D].

By following the approach her teachers used to teach the foreign language, P7 states how she emphasizes with her own students repetition and practice. For her:

> P7: Beliefs that are formed when we are students shape who we are today. Even unintentionally, I found myself acting like my teachers did in ways I do not approve today. [F]

According to Mateus (2002), reflective practice can encourage teachers to discard old teaching formulas. By reflecting on their beliefs and actions, teachers acquire critical and theoretical foundations to position themselves in relation to teaching methods and approaches. When reflection is evoked by interaction in the forums, it can make teachers more prone to new ways of acting and teaching:

> P5: I also found myself in this controlling condition, but I've been changing in the last years... I have been a teacher for a long time, and I know I have some beliefs that need to be changed. One of them is this view of the teacher as the center in teaching and learning. I would say that I've been through this process of belief deconstruction for some time, but sometimes I find myself having some attitudes that do not match my new way of thinking. I believe this is natural, at least in my case, because I did not have opportunities for much questioning during my teacher preparation stage. [F]

As previously mentioned, the online discussion forums were implemented in the course allied to the face-to-face interactions. In order to understand how the participants evaluated the adoption of virtual discussion forums in this course, a questionnaire was administered in the end of the term via Moodle. According to the participants' perceptions, the online forums were extremely useful to enrich classroom discussions and make them more favorable to students' active participation:

> P3: The arena to discuss questions about the texts and our personal experiences, as well as the reading guides posted by the teacher enriched classes and integrated all the students in a more or less homogenous level. [Q]

> P1: I thought it was interesting the interplay of "absences and presences" of the teacher. Sometimes, she posted the questions to guide our discussion in the forum without intervening, while in other situations, when she felt students were confused and some kind of interference was necessary, she participated in the discussions. I guess these steps created an inviting atmosphere for students' participation. I thought the discussions were cool and felt comfortable in participating. [Q]

The students described the forum as a "great tool" to "complement face-to-face classes" and they

said it created an "opportunity for reflection". As P5 recalls:

> P5:... the use of this tool was essential because we had to write our opinions and doubts and this was helpful to better prepare ourselves to the next stage – the regular classes. By posting questions or comments in the forums, we found an opportunity for reflection and collaboration with classmates. [Q]

Among the advantages of the use of the online forums, participants also mentioned the introduction of a room in which they could "have a deeper understanding of texts" that were discussed in the classroom. The collaborative feature of the forums is also cited by the participants, who felt that "everyone's contribution was responsible for the enrichment of the discussions". As Markel (2001) states in online discussion forums students construct knowledge through the shared experiences that each participant brings to the collaborative discussions:

> P5:... I believe that only the readings and classroom debates would not be enough to deeply comprehend the theories and concepts related to the study of beliefs. The fact that we had to reflect to accomplish the tasks, the participation in the forums, the collaboration with classmates, who gave explanations and opinions were very important. The contribution of everyone was responsible for the enrichment of discussions. [Q]

However, for some participants, the forums can also bring disadvantages; they point out that the engagement in the forums demands more preparation time to complete tasks. As P1 and P7 summed up:

> P1: I had to access the platform three to five times a week. When someone addressed me in a post, I felt the obligation to log in the platform to answer immediately. [Q]

> P7: Sometimes I felt that there were too many tasks. I spent one whole week completing tasks on Moodle. I think it would be interesting to ponder on the number of tasks required from students. [Q]

In general, the students' positive declarations sustain Markel's (2001) findings concerning the potential of online discussion forums to make students draw on their own teaching stories and relate them to the course content. In the forums, participants could read other students' responses and interpretations, comparing these with their own beliefs. In the course, learning is not restricted to the passive absorption of theories and concepts. It is thus a process of reflection and the construction and re-construction of domains of knowledge. It is a negotiated interpretation of knowledge with student ownership. In this perspective, learning is deeper and more long lasting and students refine their thinking and their voice. This is what Ur (1996) calls "enriched reflection" – the enrichment of practical knowledge to be sustained by theoretical background, so that the knowledge built through reflection about one's own practice and theory becomes particularly meaningful to the person.

Final thoughts

In this paper, we outlined the potential of online discussion forums as a tool for stimulating interaction and reflection of language teachers in a graduate course from a public Brazilian university.

By giving students opportunities to read and comment their classmates' opinions and by providing them with more time to reflect before posting, the use of online forums points out the possibility to create an arena in graduate courses so that participants can face time restrictions in their personal agendas, meet in a VLE and learn collaboratively.

Online discussion forums transpose the classroom walls and open up the doors to a virtual world. Hence, they offer wider opportunities to discuss ideas, facilitate reflection and encourage critical thinking. In our course, it was clear that the forums promoted greater interaction between graduate students and the professor, increasing both online and offline reflection, since students could reflect not just during the face-to-face classes but also by posting, revisiting posts and reading their classmates' messages before posting a new commentary. The online forums created a dynamic process of reflection on beliefs, an advance in terms of collective reflection. Therefore, they constitute an effective tool for the identification, the analysis and, in particular, for the reflection on beliefs.

It is worth to mention that students' participation in the online forums was one of the evaluation procedures in the graduate course; yet, it does not undermine the benefits it brought to participants' learning. The use of virtual discussion forums, if supported by clear educational purposes, can be a means of organizing the course discussions, engage students, provide them with opportunities to become more actively involved with the content and build a deeper and more meaningful learning.

As Mateus (2002) claims teachers are permanent learners, and as so they should demonstrate more than a passive behavior in the constant search for answers. When discussion takes place in the virtual environment, it is through the interaction between teachers and students and the sharing of experiences, values and learning goals that participants teach and learn at the same time; this constitutes a virtual community of learners.

In a virtual community of learners, participants can establish a network, acquire a sense of belonging, share ideas openly and benefit from a collective view (Heemann, 2011). Also, students experience that knowledge is not held only by teachers; students become more engaged in building their own knowledge than simply in receiving it. Finally, in these communities, learning and knowledge building depend on teachers' and students' responsibility and motivation, as well as on the information and resources available. They involve the search for different ideas, common interest, experiences, new strategies and practices that may help new community members to rethink their behaviors (Palloff, Pratt, 2002). We found that the introduction of online discussion forums in this course contributed, above all, to the constitution of a virtual community of learners.

Success in a VLE can be measured by the students' level of participation, motivation and the amount of discussion generated among the participants. Considering the high involvement of students in the online forums, the quantity and quality of posts, and the positive evaluation from students in the questionnaire, the forums seem to have fulfilled those goals. Moreover, data indicate that the online forums were essential to the achievement of one of the course's goals: the creation of a space for interaction and reflection on teaching practice and beliefs of language teachers.

However, we cannot forget that the online discussion forums were used in the graduate course in complement to the regular weekly classes. Thus, the contributions listed by the graduate students in the questionnaire need to take into account this hybrid configuration, which makes us question:

could the forums have had the same effect in a full online course? Would the lack of face-to-face contact with the teacher and other students be a negative aspect for some students, a common belief that has been highlighted in some research studies regarding online learning environments? (Perine, 2013)

Despite these questions, one belief we hold for sure as teacher educators: in the digital era, in which language teaching and learning is increasingly pervaded by digital technologies, we must figure out alternative ways to articulate online and offline spaces and actions that may elicit and guide language teachers to a continuously reflective practice. By doing so, we must always be attentive to the design and delivery of these actions and their impacts in various teacher education contexts.

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Sintesi

L'atteggiamento in classe e le decisioni dei docenti sono condizionati dalle loro credenze sul significato dell'apprendimento e dell'insegnamento, formatesi a livello esperienziale (Barcelos, 2001). E tuttavia le esperienze personali dei docenti non garantiscono da sole un corretto sviluppo professionale (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Le credenze dei docenti sono state ampiamente studiate, visto che esse possono influenzare il comportamento, le pratiche, le decisioni e i modi di insegnamento in classe (Lin et al., 2014).

La Riflessione è uno strumento importante per gli insegnanti – solo attraverso la ricerca individuale e la collaborazione con altri, gli insegnanti possono imparare dalle proprie esperienze. Nel campo della formazione docenti, la riflessione è intesa come processo di auto analisi e auto valutazione che i docenti devono svolgere regolarmente per migliorare la pratica professionale (Ali et al., 2014). Al fine di diventare agenti di riflessione, è consigliabile che i docenti analizzino le proprie credenze e pratiche didattiche, una riflessione che può comportare la costruzione o ricostruzione di significato e il cambiamento dei loro comportamenti in classe.

In questo articolo discutiamo le potenzialità dei forum online nei corsi post universitari per stimolare la riflessione dei docenti di lingua su credenze e pratiche in classe. Con il rapido sviluppo delle tecnologie di comunicazione, i forum sono spesso applicati nelle classi per promuovere il pensiero critico degli studenti, la costruzione di conoscenza e l'autonomia nell'apprendimento linguistico (Kaur, 2011).

I dati analizzati nel presente articolo sono stati raccolti da un gruppo di sette insegnanti di lingue e un professore del corso ""Beliefs in language learning/teaching: affective and contextual factors" della Federal University in Brasile. Il corso prevedeva un incontro settimanale in presenza e l'utilizzo della piattaforma Moodle per lo svolgimento delle attività a distanza. Con la guida online e offline del docente, gli studenti hanno potuto condividere le proprie esperienze e articolare le proprie conoscenze in sostegno di un determinato punto di vista, discutere le proprie credenze e confrontarle con quelle dei loro colleghi.

Il metodo di raccolta dei dati include questionari, forum di discussione online, e una discussione in presenza che è stata registrata. L'analisi dei dati si basa sul metodo della content analysis (Gillham, 2000) e su tecniche informatizzate con l'uso del software WordSmith Tools (WST). I risultati hanno evidenziato che la comprensione, l'interpretazione e il confronto sulle credenze possono favorire la trasformazione delle pratiche riflessive e operative degli insegnanti. Confrontando le proprie credenze con quelle di altre persone, gli insegnanti avviano un processo di auto analisi sul proprio ruolo come insegnanti di lingua. In questo senso, i risultati delle indagini svolte confermano che l'uso dei forum di discussione rappresenta un valido strumento a sostegno di tale dinamica riflessiva.