PREZI AS A TOOL TO ASSIST IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTIC ABILITIES IN ENGLISH

João Felipe Manhães de Lima Velloso
Fluminense Federal Institute
joaofelipe384@gmail.com

Prof. Dr. Hélvia Pereira Pinto Bastos
Fluminense Federal Institute
helviabastos@yahoo.com.br

Prof. Dr. Suzana da Hora Macedo
Fluminense Federal Institute
shmacedo@iff.edu.br

Abstract

This article presents a pedagogical experiment with learners of English supported by Prezi, a software that allows non-linear presentations. The activity was based on the Communicative Approach – a group of methods that intend, among others, to enable the language learner to use the target language authentically and meaningfully. The experience involved in the production of didactic sequences helped the students to develop the four main linguistic abilities: reading, writing, speaking and oral comprehension. Participants answered a questionnaire in which they evaluated (a) Prezi software as a pedagogical tool, and (b) the interaction and collaboration during the didactic activity. The experiment showed the potential and usefulness of Prezi as an auxiliary tool in the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

Keywords: Linguistic Skills. Communicative Approach. Computer Assisted Language Learning. Prezi.

INTRODUCTION

It is possible to find software to assist different areas of study and, increasingly, new programs can be found on the market. Their audiovisual resources (images, music, diagrams, narration, etc.) can bring changes to the way teachers work in the classroom. However, attention with the method must be constant, because the idea is not transforming these computer programs into mere support in education, but to provide learner-centered and collaborative activities that engage and empower students.

Technologies to teach and learn languages are numerous (from simple objects, like pencils and paper to digital devices); however, they are of little value if students are not trained to use them to achieve their objectives in a functional and meaningful way.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) plays an important role in   the experiment described here, as it used Prezi as a facilitator and stimulator of self-learning and collaborative learning of English by associating digital technologies with the communicative approach. An example of an activity mediated by computer that gives the opportunity to teach   and learn in the Communicative Approach is the preparation of oral presentations with editing programs like Prezi.

Prezi can be used online for free, allowing the user to associate ideas with any subject and make dynamic and nonlinear presentations in the form of images, text, sounds and videos. This can enhance student' s ability to

summarize texts and present them orally - a learning activity that takes into account the learner's creativity in the production of a *prezi*. This was the intention of the experiment described in this paper.

Next section provides the theoretical framework for the study: Linguistic Skills, Communicative Approach, Computer-Assisted Language Learning, and Prezi. The methodological procedures and the qualitative analysis of the results are in the third section.

METHOD

This research, of qualitative nature, carried out in May and July 2015, aimed at verifying: a) how six English students of the basic and intermediate levels enrolled in the Language Centre (CELIFF) at IF Fluminense, Campos-Centro, ages 21-32, developed their language skills using Prezi; b) how this tool can be used to achieve these skills; c) the validity of the approach and methodology used by the teacher to direct these students in the resourcefulness of the activities, and d) the prior knowledge of the students regarding their experiences with the English language and slides presentation program(s).

Foreign language teaching and learning at CELIFF follows the Communicative Approach. Meyer (2013: 41) says that: "These approaches underline the significance of the social aspects of language, for instance learners' interaction with others in the target language and the use of authentic learning materials for learning." Although oral communication was the main purpose of the experiment, other skills (reading, writing and oral comprehension) were practiced. The following sections describe how these skills were developed with Prezi.

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS WITH PREZI

The adequacy of the experiment is due to the fact that Prezi is a relatively new tool in education and has many features, such as pictures, video, music, etc., allowing students to make

more dynamic and creative presentations. The pedagogical orientation in "CELIFF" is to work as little as possible with translations (English - Portuguese / Portuguese - English); thus, multimedia resources are used to facilitate and stimulate the students' approach to learn foreign languages.

Most of the activities proposed in the experiment could be done individually, except for the first one aimed at oral production in which the students discussed these ideas in pairs: "What do you know about Prezi?", "How do you usually study texts in English?". One of the *prezis* was prepared by a trio, and this was a facilitating factor, as one of the students, who presented more difficulties, could interact with her classmates and the teacher in order to have support to do the task. Only one student worked individually, because her level of English (classified as intermediate in "CELIFF") allowed her to analyze more advanced texts.

It is known that, in only three meetings totaling nine hours, the students cannot develop all the skills thoroughly and, much less, to strengthen them so that they become effectively internalized. However, it is expected that they realize that repetition (reinforcement) helps them retain information more consistently and can be stimulating to build *prezis* that develop association and organization of ideas. Nation (2014: 7) explains the importance of repetitions to learn a foreign language:

The two most important conditions supporting learning are spaced repetition and the quality of attention given to items. Quality is increased by recalling what you have met, making varied recalls, analyzing and elaborating on language items, and giving deliberate attention.

During the meetings, the students had the opportunity to choose their favorite texts among those suggested by the teacher. After having improved their *prezis*, they did oral presentations in which they had the opportunity to discuss the issues presented in the texts.

Five participants had a basic level in English (they had been studying in "CELIFF" for at least six months). When they were "audience", they practiced oral comprehension (by listening to a Prezi tutorial and interacting with

their classmates). Thus, they analyzed the vocabulary used in both situations and other presentations. Following this, they wrote an email to the teacher detailing the strong and weak aspects of their own texts in English, the *prezis* they prepared, and of their oral performance.

To carry out the experiment, the following online texts were used: "What is a dirty thunderstorm?", "What drives people to murder-suicide?", "A computing revolution in schools", "President Obama Creates new cyber sanctions programme", and "After Snowden: How vulnerable is the internet?". These were chosen by the teacher, who took into account themes that could be of the students` interest, as well as current and controversial issues related to their educational background.
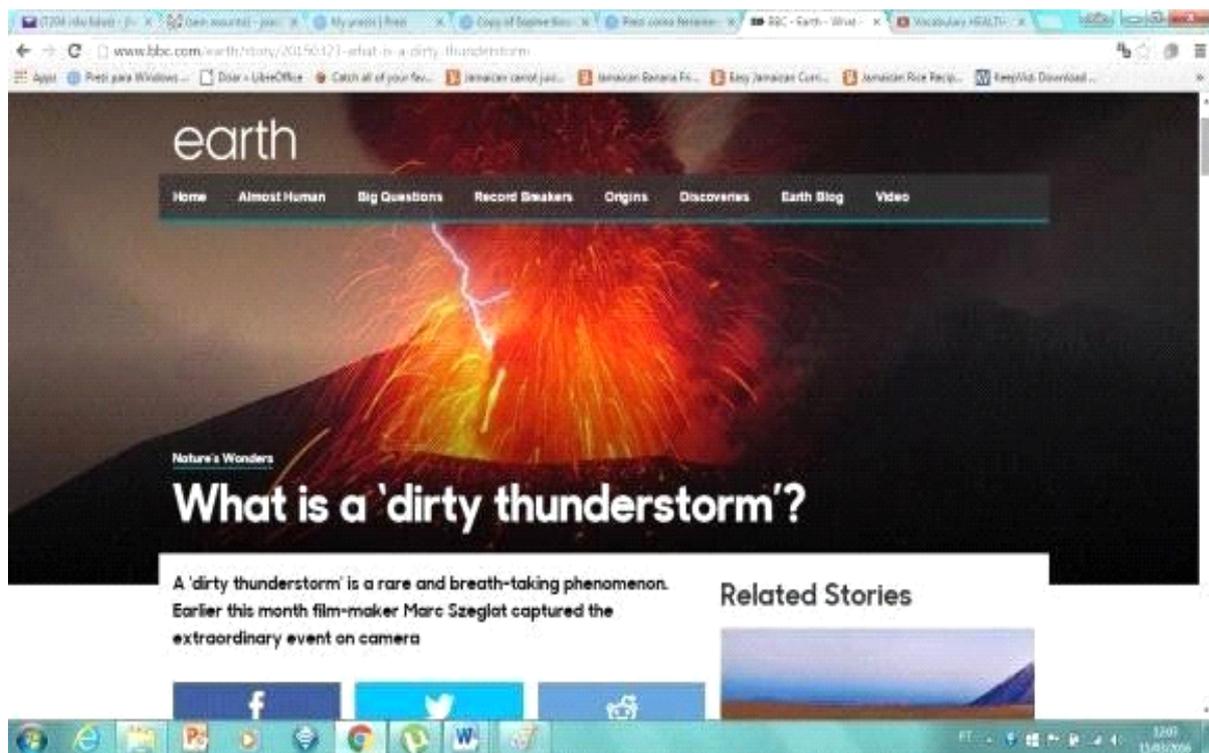

Figure 1: Text suggested to students (BBC website)

Regarding the discussion of topics presented in the students' *prezis*, the following characteristics of the Communicative Approach were observed (Finocchiaro & Brumfit , 1983 cited by Richards and Rogers, 1999: 67):

- "Dialogs, if used, center around communicative functions and are not normally memorized." In some moments, some students spontaneously expressed ideas on the presentation made by a classmate. Thus, oral communication was established without prior memorization of these interactions.

- "Any device which helps the learners is accepted - varying according to their age, interest, etc." The proposed resources were: online and offline texts, Prezi software, images and / or videos found in Google (or from computer files that could be adapted to the settings of this software), and YouTube. Such resources were used during presentations that lasted about 12 minutes (4 minutes for each student). While a group / student gave a presentation, another group / student took notes, mainly in English, of positive and negative aspects of classmates` presentations referring primarily to Prezi and the English language.

- "Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning". Most students were at the basic level, and only one student offered resistance to make oral presentations. After having realized this difficulty, the teacher, along with the

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classmates, intervened in order to encourage the student in her presentation, which occurred shortly after the intervention.

Oral comprehension was the second skill developed in the experiment. Prezi offers a tutorial called "Simple steps to a great *prezi*." It explains how we can develop a *prezi* using several of the features given by the software, including videos, suggestions, images and narration to create *prezis,* and suggestions of how to use the software in a fun way for the user. While the teacher showed the slides, students took notes of words or sentences they could understand in order to apprehend, at least, the central idea of the tutorial. Next, they saw an example of the *prezi* created to illustrate the sequence of steps they had to follow.
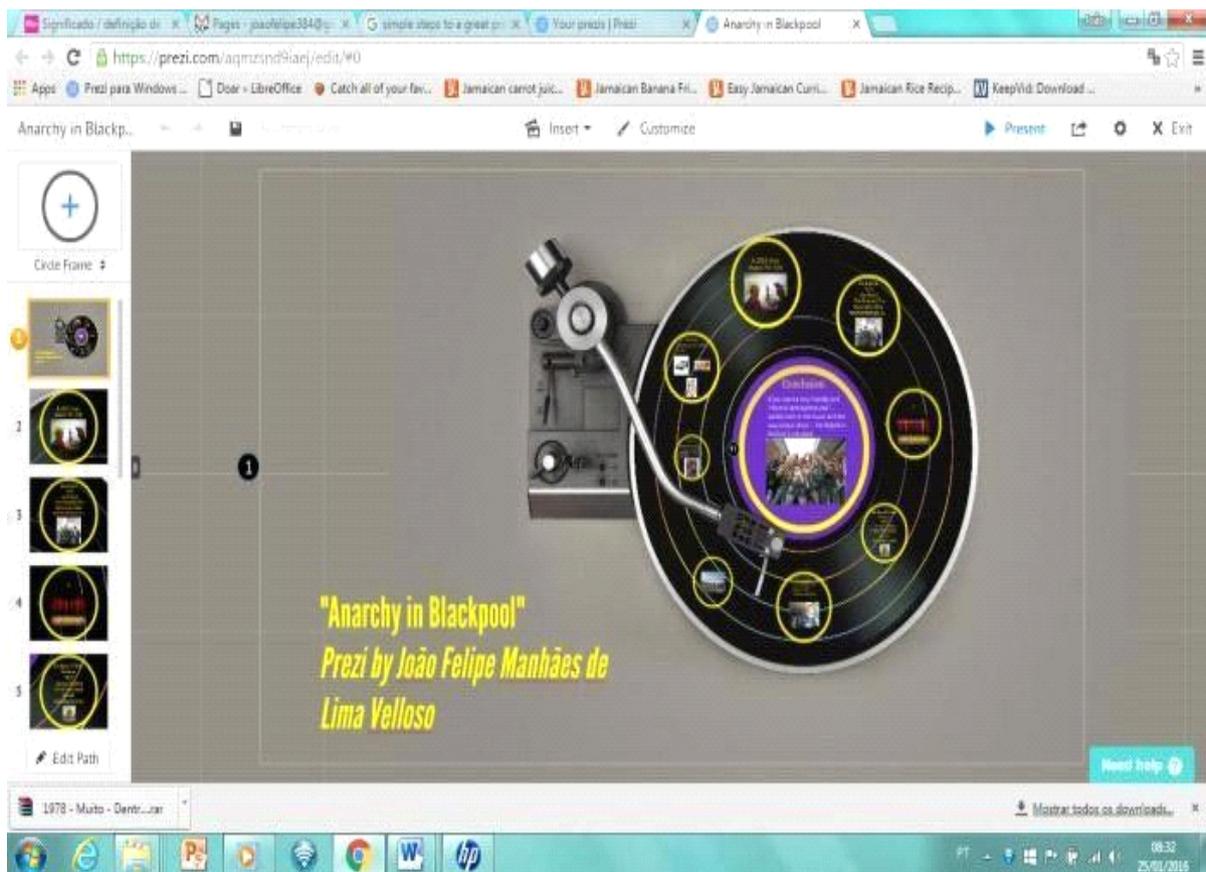

Figure 2: First *prezi* slide created as an example.

After the oral comprehension activity, participants took turns reading "Anarchy in Blackpool" aloud, (SpeakUp Magazine). While they were reading, the teacher underlined mispronounced words and correct them after they finished reading. The teacher also talked about the central idea details of the text. Following this, they used two reading strategies: the first one to understand the main idea, and the second one to understand the meanings of unknown words they regarded as important in the context. These strategies are known as "skimming" and "scanning", in which the first one is defined by Nardi (2011:24):

[...] flipping through some books to be able to predict something about their contents and decide what to choose. Read the titles, the flaps and some initial pages. [...] And, depending on the time people have to look at the text and previous knowledge (on the subject, author, genre), this can only make the reader formulate hypotheses about what people can find in texts or understand the gender, field of study, subject, author, style, central plot).

Therefore, all titles, cognate words, images and videos were facilitators of the interpretation of the texts.
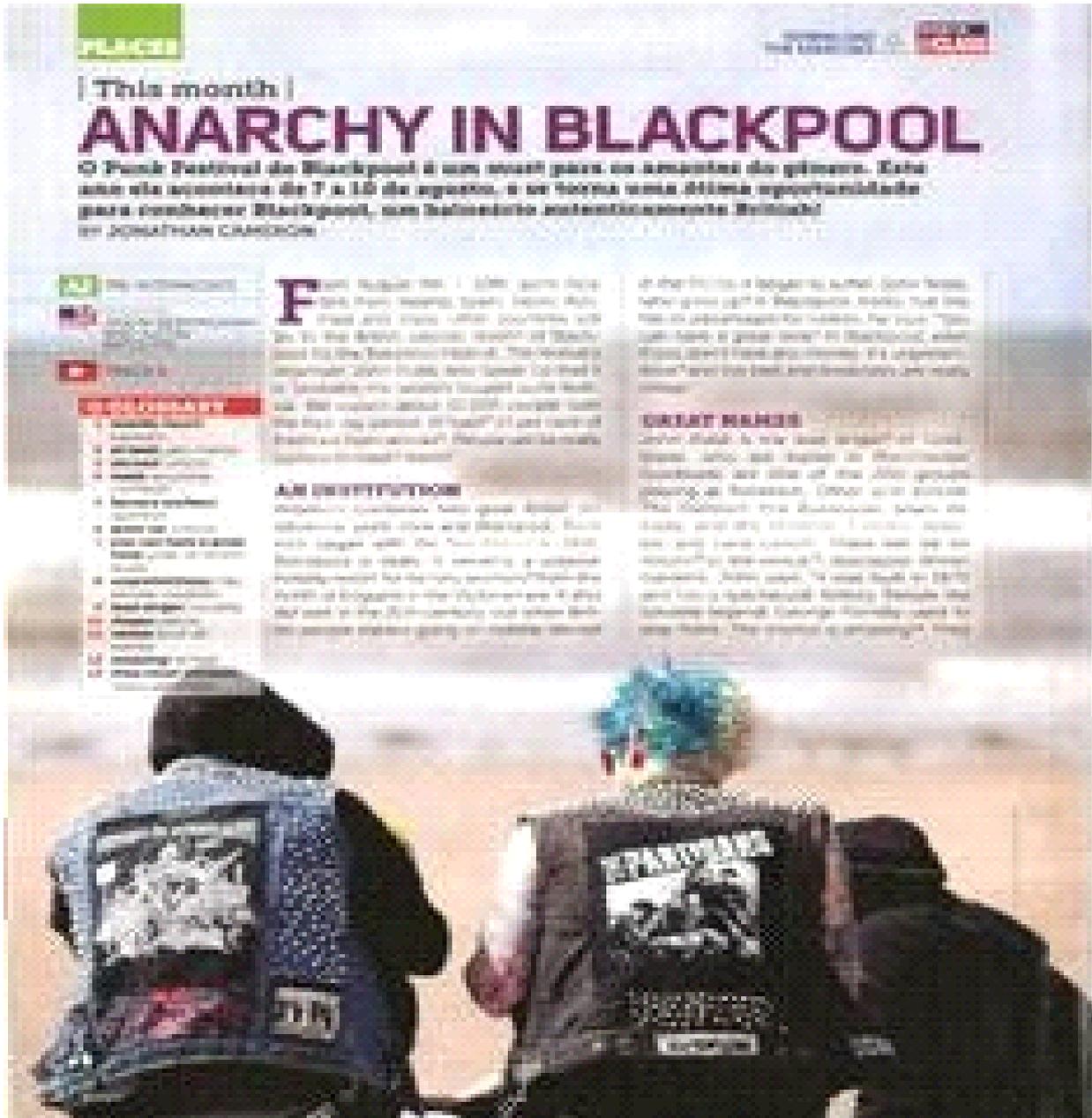
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Figure 3: First page of "Anarchy in Blackpool."

The same author (ditto, p. 24) defines the second strategy (scanning) as follows: "[...] search for a specific item in a known location, predetermined by the known structure of the text." To help with the implementation of these reading steps, online Cambridge Dictionary and The Free Dictionary were suggested.
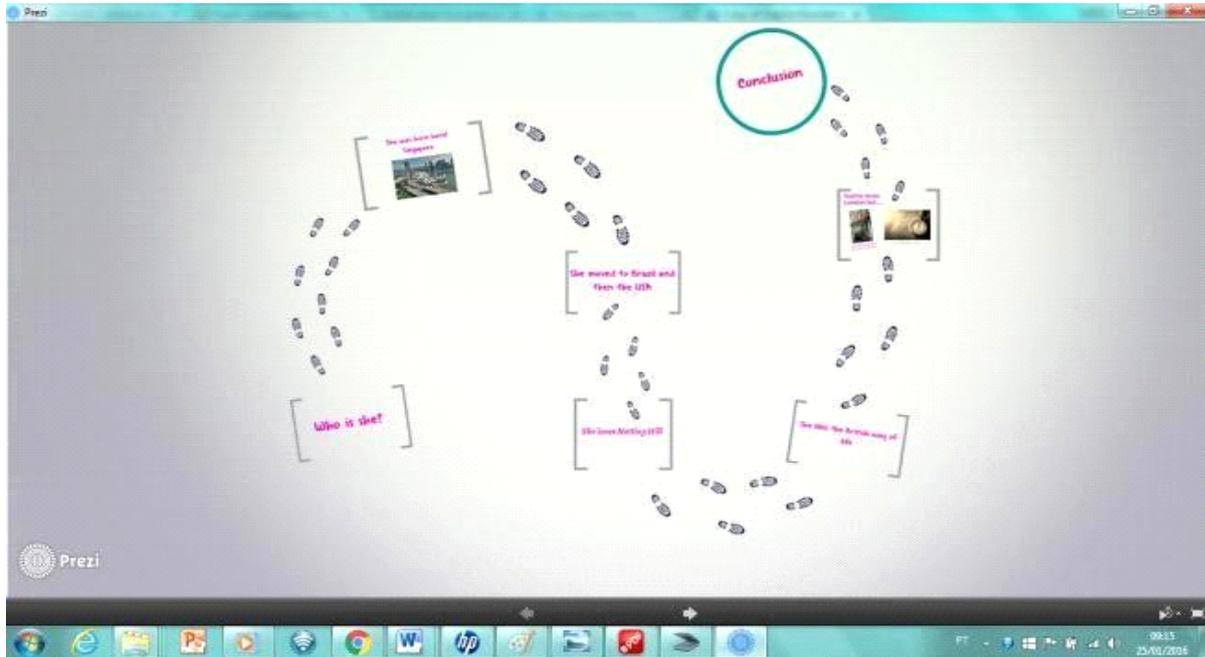The following figure shows a *prezi* prepared by students.

Figure 4: One of the *prezis* prepared by students summing up the text in Figure 5.

During the experiment, the following steps were followed to help students create their *prezis*:

- The choice of a *prezi* among those available to the user for free use. Students choseit by taking into consideration the subject they would study or they selected a blank *prezi*; in this case, they would be more responsible for including images or not, if this were of their interest.
- Image insertion. In this stage and in the others that followed, the teacher advised students to keep the same line of reasoning, i.e. to keep in mind the issues they would analyze.
- Insertion and removal of background music in a slide and in the entire presentation.
- Insertion and removal of narration by using Vocaroo voice recorder.
- Insertion and removal of the fade-in effect (this hides the picture to show itat another time).
- Emphasis on the image (how to zoom into animage).
- Insertion of arrows andsymbols.
- Decrease and increase ofimages.
- Insertion and removal of the background color of atext.
- Slides Order (how to change it).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the answers to the questionnaire showed that: a) regarding the use of Prezi as a support tool in education, it provides resources for developing *prezis* without major difficulties. All students agreed that this tool helps in academic and / or professional activities; b) considering the methodology and approach used in the experiment: these met the participants` expectations, some exceptions were made with respect to the progressive development of knowledge, their pedagogical relevance and the interaction with classmates in the tasks: all students considered the physical presence of the teacher as important in the development of the pedagogical activity; c) about the activity carried out in the experiment: it generally fulfilled the students` aims, but the adequacy of the activity related to the English level of the participants was the biggest object of criticism (five students agreed that the complexity of the activity was stimulating and / or a positive challenge; one student partially agreed on this); d) about their experience with English and slides presentation programs: answers varied widely according to the participants` habits with translators and slide presentations.

Other aspects observed in the experiment were: a) the support of cognates to interpret a text (half of the students use cognates to interpret a text; b) a third of the participants agreed partially and a student disagreed on this support); c) the use of slides presentation program(s) to summarize and/or interpret texts in English; d) the practice of oral comprehension and production of exercises, often, in English.

Participants also commented on their difficulty (or lack of difficulty) in performing the task. Although a third of the participants found difficulties related to oral production and comprehension, results after completion of the task was considered satisfactory, since participants were not only able to develop their ability to make oral summaries of the text but also be more responsible for their process of leaning and developing their language skills.

CONCLUSION

The article presented a didactic experiment with students enrolled in a language center mediated by Prezi software. The goal was to determine how this program can support the development of the four language skills in English.

Texts used in the activities were based on their language level. However, it was observed that the English language per se offered more difficulties than the handling of the software.

Based on the students' response, the activities were considered to be more positive than negative. The activity enabled participants to help one another throughout the experiment and understand the importance of finding their own way in a responsible manner to obtain satisfactory results. Results also show that students found Prezi a stimulating tool to facilitate the development of language skills in English, whether in a group or in an individual learning activity.

New computing resources are being developed, new methodologies as well; but they are of no use without the mediation of a teacher who knows the outcomes s/he wants to achieve with the students.

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