

# THE USE OF ENGLISH EDUCATIONAL PORTALS IN ESP TEACHING AND LEARNING

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- **ABSTRACT:** Besides reading and writing, the learning and development of listening and speaking skills have affected and worried a great number of learners, especially in the ESP context. Some studies have focused their attention on finding these difficulties and proposing solutions that can perhaps minimize these problems. Aiming to contribute to the debate, this study investigates listening and speaking activities displayed in five English educational portals with the objective of identifying what kind of pedagogical tasks and exercises are suggested and their textual configuration in the digital context. The results revealed that the majority of activities can be considered as additional instructional materials which can be used in the classroom because of the relevant issues presented. However, to be used directly in the digital context these activities need to be reformulated and adapted to allow teachers and learners to use all the technological resources in an effective and functional way.
- **KEYWORDS:** Educational portals. Activities. Listening. Speaking.

## Introduction

Studies in Applied Linguistics (FIGLIOLINI, 2004; RICHARDS, 2008; BAGHERI; KARAMI, 2014; MELENDEZ; ZAVALA; MENDEZ, 2014) reveal that learning and development of the oral skills – reception (listening) and production (speaking) - can be considered one of the issues that effectively worry students and teachers in the educational context.

The difficulties shown by learners have motivated numerous research studies. In the last three decades, researchers have focused their attention on finding out these difficulties. Many studies have aimed at the analysis and evaluation of learning and teaching strategies, and additional studies have been carried out on instructional materials, which can help to minimize the problems and can aid to the effective development of oral skills (OXFORD, 2003; CHAMOT, 2004; CHEN, 2005; HINKEL, 2006; CHANG, 2009; KLUGE; REIS, 2011; XAVIER; BALTHAZAR, 2011; etc.).

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The same happens to Brazilian students in the context of language learning, more specifically, in higher education. The printed instruction material used in the English for Specific Purposes context have not proposed any pedagogical activities which emphasize or point out the use of different learning and teaching strategies in the listening and speaking tasks proposed.

Considering this question, in this study, I will present and discuss the textual configuration (SWALES, 1990) of twenty-two (22) listening and nine (09) speaking pedagogical activities provided by five English educational portals. The main objective is the investigation of alternative ways of teaching and learning that can reduce, or maybe solve the majority of difficulties presented by learners in the following teaching context: ESP classes for Tourism, Hotel and Hospitality Management and International Relations in a higher education institution.

I hope that this paper can contribute to pre-service teachers' education, providing them with a more effective discussion and orientation in terms of theoretical and methodological issues, which constitute the language teaching and learning process, more specifically the development of communicative skills and competences.

## Literature review

In the early 1990s Underwood (1989) affirmed that learners whose culture and education included oral communication and narratives presented a better performance in listening skills than those whose education and cultural background came from reading.

This finding can be observed in Brazilian context where the abilities of reading and writing seem to be those which most represent the communicative events performed in daily life, and in the educational scope (for example, reading maps and bank statements, searches on the Internet, access to social networks, thesis and report writing, article publications).

Two of the official documents which regulate Brazilian education - *Parâmetros Nacionais Curriculares de Ensino Fundamental e Médio* (BRASIL, 1998, 2000) and *Orientações Educacionais Complementares aos Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais para o Ensino Médio* (BRASIL, 2002) – give special attention to this question. In terms of foreign language teaching, these documents emphasize that “[...] learning should focus on the communicative function, giving priority to reading, the comprehension of oral and written texts, taking into account the communication in different daily life situations.” (BRASIL, 2002, p.94)<sup>1</sup>

These documents suggest that the text should be used as a teaching unit in reading as well as in production (BRASIL, 2002). This indicates an attempt to ensure the teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Original: “[...] O foco do aprendizado deve centrar-se na função comunicativa por excelência, visando prioritariamente à leitura e à compreensão de textos verbais orais e escritos – portanto, à comunicação em diferentes situações da vida cotidiana.” (BRASIL, 2002, p.94).

and learning of communicative abilities which evince the social and discursive practices that really happen in our context, as explained in the following excerpt:

With the exception of any specific situation of some touristic regions or multilingual communities, the use of a foreign language should be, in general, related to the technical literature or leisure reading. It is also noticed that the only formal tests in a foreign language (for instance, entrance examination or post-graduation admissions) require the knowledge in reading. Therefore, on the one hand reading skill brings benefits to formal education and, on the other hand it constitutes the ability in which a student can use in his/her social context. (BRASIL, 1998, p.20).<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, even considering the relevance of teaching reading and writing, the ideas presented by the document *Orientações Educacionais Complementares* (BRASIL, 2002) stress the importance of oral abilities, including suggestions of pedagogical activities which contribute to the learning and development of students. According to the authors:

[...] during the classes, students should have the opportunity of, individually, in pairs or in groups, participate in interactions which implicate in different levels of formality. In this sense, it can be proposed from informal chats about a literary work to the judgment of a character's attitude in a literary work, using the genre debate which requires of its interlocutors a bigger level of formality and the awakening about the argumentative text that they are producing in speaking. (BRASIL, 2002, p.76).<sup>3</sup>

The same idea is proposed by the newest document *Base Nacional Comum Curricular*. The authors state that foreign language teaching and learning “[...] implicates an expansion of listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks, providing pedagogical experiences with oral and written texts which allow learners' performance in multilingual spaces.” (BRASIL, 2016, p.123).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Original: “Com exceção da situação específica de algumas regiões turísticas ou de algumas comunidades plurilíngües, o uso de uma língua estrangeira parece estar, em geral, mais vinculado à leitura de literatura técnica ou de lazer. Note-se também que os únicos exames formais em Língua Estrangeira (vestibular e admissão a cursos de pós-graduação) requerem o domínio da habilidade de leitura. Portanto, a leitura atende, por um lado, às necessidades da educação formal, e, por outro, é a habilidade que o aluno pode usar em seu contexto social imediato.” (BRASIL, 2002, p.76).

<sup>3</sup> Original: “[...] no transcurso das aulas, os alunos devem ter oportunidade de – individualmente, em duplas ou em grupos – participar de situações dialogadas que implicam graus de formalidade variáveis. Nessa linha de trabalho, pode-se propor desde bate-papos mais informais a propósito de uma obra literária até o julgamento da atitude de uma personagem do texto literário num debate regrado, gênero oral que exige de seus interlocutores um grau maior de formalidade e de consciência do texto argumentativo que estão produzindo na fala.” (BRASIL, 2002, p.76).

<sup>4</sup> Original: “O ensino-aprendizagem de línguas implica uma expansão do trabalho com escuta, oralidade, leitura e escrita de modo a propiciar vivências com textos discursivos, orais e escritos, relevantes para a atuação do/a estudante em

In this sense, BNCC proposes the work with Orality, which involves listening and speaking skills, articulated by negotiation in the construction of meanings among interlocutors. This conception is related to Vygotsky's studies, which considerate teaching and learning as a process which aims at the meaning of construction through the interaction between teachers and learners (VYGOTSKY, 2003).

As mentioned in the new document (BRASIL, 2016, p.200):

[...] the orality also provides the development of a number of behavior and attitudes, such as take risks and make yourself comprehensible, give voice to the other, understand and accept the other's point of view, avoid misunderstandings and deal with insecurity. Through interactions in the classroom, students will have opportunities of experiences and reflection about language uses, not exactly a "pure" language, accurate, but a language "in use" and "for use".<sup>5</sup>

This theoretical and methodological framework increasingly makes part of the teaching and learning process and the development of communicative abilities. With regard to listening and speaking, the exchange of information and experiences and the negotiation among peers are essential for the development and improvement of linguistics, discursive, social and cultural aspects which involve language learning.

In his studies, Vygotsky (2003) suggests the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) conception, in which learners with low language proficiency or lexical level can improve their abilities and receive numerous benefits when interacting with learners of a higher level. The cooperative/interactive work among more experienced students and/or peers results in a more effective knowledge production.

In the case of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching and learning, it is fundamental to the development of communicative abilities in different academic fields, such as Medicine, Tourism, Hotel and Hospitality Management, International Relations, Journalism, Business, Engineering, etc. In these areas, besides specific knowledge provided by reading and writing skills, these professionals need to deal with the discursive and communicative events which make part of their professional performance through listening and speaking.

In Medicine, for instance, doctors need to develop listening strategies when participating in international conferences, Tourism professionals need to improve speaking abilities when interacting with tourists for giving information or suggestions. In the same way, journalists who work as international correspondents need to develop listening as well as speaking skills.

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espaços plurilíngues." (BRASIL, 2016, p.123).

<sup>5</sup> Original: "[...] a oralidade também proporciona o desenvolvimento de uma série de comportamentos e atitudes, como arriscar-se e se fazer compreender, dar voz e vez ao outro, entender e acolher a perspectiva do outro, superar mal-entendidos e lidar com a insegurança. É na interação discursiva em sala de aula que os alunos terão oportunidades de vivência e reflexão sobre os usos da língua inglesa, não propriamente uma língua *pura*, precisa, mas uma língua "em uso" e "para o uso". (BRASIL, 2016, p.200).

However, it can be observed that the majority of English learners cannot develop, efficiently, these two abilities in the classroom and, in many cases, they enroll in private or online courses. The investigation of instructional materials and courses online (XAVIER; BALTHAZAR, 2011; LIMA; ARAÚJO, 2016) pointed out a need for listening and speaking pedagogical activities.

With the increased use of the Internet in language teaching, educational portals can be seen as a significant alternative to teachers and learners. English educational portals can be defined as repositories of several pedagogical activities - listening, speaking, reading, grammar, vocabulary, games, culture – and multimedia - audio and video - (ARAÚJO, 2009; OLIVEIRA, 2009) which can be accessed and used by teachers as permanent or extra class materials.

Nevertheless, teacher's tasks include the choice of theoretical and methodological concepts and the selection of pedagogical activities which contribute to the effective learning of these abilities in his/her teaching context. In her studies about instructional materials displayed in educational portals, Araújo (2009, p.445) states:

[...] before be used or recommended by teachers, instructional materials should be examined with previous established criteria, observing the learning theory adopted by teachers. Furthermore, there is also the challenge of the teacher in knowing implement activities specifically for web or selecting appropriate educational materials. In order to do these tasks, educational professionals should have wide knowledge in terms of language learning theories and abilities developed by use web.<sup>6</sup>

Hinkel (2006) affirms that the oral pedagogy has the objective of enabling non-native speakers to communicate effectively and to negotiate cross-cultural interactional norms successfully. In relation to listening, the author suggests that the intensive use of metacognitive strategies<sup>7</sup> by second language learners can be more effective for the development and improvement of this skill (HINKEL, 2006).

As I found in my previous research (OLIVEIRA, 2009), Araújo (2009, p.458) confirms that the pedagogical activities suggested by educational portals:

[...] not only help learners to develop their linguistic abilities, e.g., literacy in second language through the study of authentic texts, as also they help them to explore the target language culture through the

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<sup>6</sup> Original: “[...] antes de serem usados ou recomendados pelo professor, estes devem ser examinados com critérios estabelecidos previamente e tomando por base a teoria de aprendizagem adotada pelos professores. Em acréscimo, há também o desafio do professor de saber implementar atividades especificamente para a *web* ou de selecionar materiais educacionais adequados. Para realizar tais tarefas, o profissional da educação deve ter conhecimento mais amplo das teorias de aprendizagem de línguas e habilidades desenvolvidas pelo uso do ambiente Web”. (ARAÚJO, 2009, p.445).

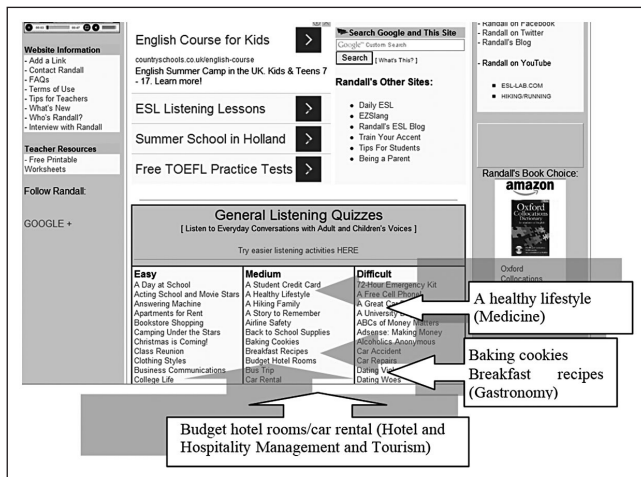
<sup>7</sup> Metacognitive strategies examples are identifying one's own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy (OXFORD, 2003).

interaction with a great diversity of people and places available on the Internet or through the dialogue with native speakers by email, chats or blogs.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, I consider that pedagogical activities, specifically listening and speaking, displayed in English educational portals can be considered additional tasks in ESP teaching and learning. The use of authentic multimedia (video and audio) and the discussions proposed about sociocultural and professional aspects, as can be seen in Figure 1, configure pedagogical tools which can contribute to listening learning and development since they emphasize relevant aspects in different areas.

Tarnopolsky (2013) declares that, in the case of ESP, tasks linked to professional contents can motivate learners once they are always interested in their future career.

**Figure 1** – List of listening activities in ESL-LAB portal

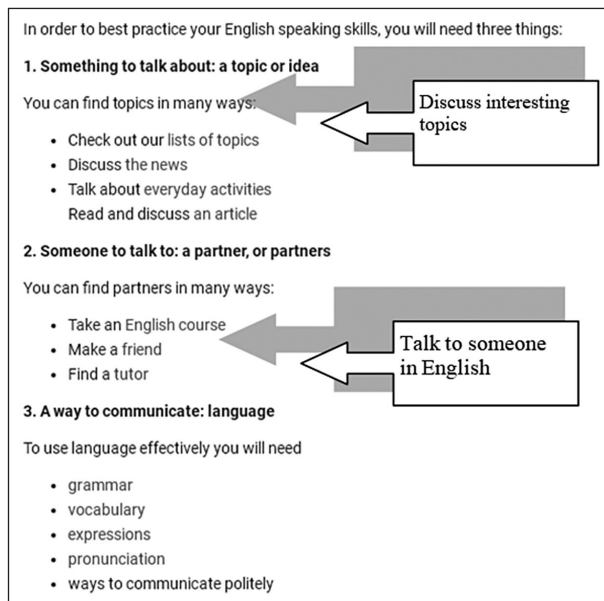


Source: Portal ESL-LAB (www.esl-lab.com).

In the same way, the investigated portals offer speaking activities (Figure 2) which allow the interaction among learners through information and communication technologies and provide the opportunities for them to discuss issues of their interest, increasing and strengthening the development of linguistic and discursive competences.

<sup>8</sup> Original: “[...] portais educacionais não somente ajudam os aprendizes a desenvolverem suas habilidades linguísticas, isto é, letramento na segunda língua, por meio do estudo de textos autênticos, como também a explorar as culturas da língua-alvo via interação com uma diversidade de pessoas e lugares disponíveis na internet ou via interação com falantes nativos através de e-mail, chats, blogs”. (ARAÚJO, 2009, p.458).

**Figure 2** – List of speaking activities in ELLO portal



**Source:** Portal ESL-LAB ([www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com)).

Based on Genre Analysis theoretical framework, my study aims at carrying out a detailed investigation into these activities with the objective of 1) describing their textual configuration and 2) verifying the main teaching and learning theories embedded in the construction of these activities.

## Methodology

The main purpose of this work is the analysis of textual configuration in listening and speaking activities selected from five English educational portals. The investigation constitutes a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory study. Chart 1 illustrates the portals investigated.

**Chart 1** – Names and website addresses of the selected portals

Portal 1 – [www.ello.org](http://www.ello.org)  
Portal 2 – [www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com)  
Portal 3 – [www.eslgold.com](http://www.eslgold.com)  
Portal 4 – [www.dailyesl.com](http://www.dailyesl.com)  
Portal 5 – [www.eslflow.com](http://www.eslflow.com)

**Source:** Author's elaboration.

The portals were selected using the following keywords on the google website: esl, listening, speaking, activities. The selection took into account free access to listening and speaking activities – starter and intermediate levels – and the themes related to the fields investigated in this study: Tourism, Hotel and Hospitality Management and International Relations.

All of them are foreign portals, managed by professionals with more than twenty years of experience in language teaching. The activities are proposed by these professionals and, in the case of the ESLGOLD portal, they are also proposed by collaborators.

Two of them were created at the end of the 1990s (ESL-LAB/ESLFLOW), the other three were created in the beginning of 2000s (ELLO/ESLGOLD/DAILYESL). According to their webmasters, the portals display listening, speaking, reading and writing activities that can be used by English teachers and learners in general.

The *corpus* is composed of thirty-one (31) activities, twenty-two (22) with focus on listening exercises and nine (09) with focus on speaking tasks. It was considered the same themes offered by printed instruction materials adopted by Brazilian teachers who work in Tourism and Hotel and Hospitality Management areas. In the case of International Relations, the theme selection was based on the syllabus of different higher education institutions<sup>9</sup>.

As mentioned before, this study has a descriptive and exploratory nature. In this sense, my objective is to make a list of the activities suggested (for example, multiple choice, fill in the blanks, question-answer, problem-solution, role play, true or false, etc.) and identify the pedagogical objectives embedded in these activities.

The identification of these aspects collaborates with teachers' education in pre-service. The awareness and reflection about the activities can help them to identify learners' needs more effectively, trying to solve their difficulties in terms of listening and speaking skills.

The understanding about these pedagogical materials available on the Internet is essential for teachers to make choices that permit them to propose, reformulate, and reflect about their pedagogical objectives. Moreover, this knowledge allows them to rethink and make use of new tools and resources in language teaching and learning.

## Results and discussion

In order to explain the results of this study, I have divided this section into two parts. In the first one, I present the listening activities investigation. In the second, I focus my attention on the speaking activities.

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<sup>9</sup> In Brazil, there isn't any specific printed instructional material for English teaching and learning in the area of International Relations. It is possible to find books with specific activities in many other areas, such as Social Service, Engineering, English for travel, Medicine, etc.



## Listening activities

The listening activities investigation showed little variation in terms of textual configuration. Out of 22 activities, 16 were multiple choices exercises titled Quiz, Portal 1; Listening exercises, Portal 2; Comprehension questions, Portal 3. In all of them, the learners have the opportunity of checking his/her answers after the answers submission, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3** – Example of Quiz, portal Ello and answers submission, portal ESL-LAB

**Quiz**

1) Women usually do events that are \_\_\_ dangerous.

a) not  
 b) very  
 c) slightly

2) Women would usually work with a \_\_\_\_.

a) calf  
 b) goat  
 c) bull

3) She was \_\_\_ when the man told her to get up!

a) happy  
 b) angry  
 c) sad

Final Score    Reset

Score = \_\_\_\_\_

Correct answers:

\_\_\_\_\_

Source: Portal Ello ([www.ello.org](http://www.ello.org)) e Portal ESL-LAB ([www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com)).

Besides multiple choices tasks, Portal 1 also presents two types of drill exercises, both emphasizing lexical items, as can be seen in Figure 4.

**Figure 4** – Examples of drills exercises Portal ELLO

**Vocabulary Challenge**

Complete the sentences with the words below:

undergrad • equipped • one-on-one  
sheltered • self-driven

1. He is rich, so he is \_\_\_\_\_ from the real world.

2. He will succeed because he is \_\_\_\_\_.

3. We are not \_\_\_\_\_ to handle this situation.

4. Teachers try to give each student some \_\_\_\_\_ attention.

5. He is an \_\_\_\_\_ at the local college.

Check Answers    Reset

**Mixer #95 Do you worry about your appearance?**  
Several people discuss how much thought they put into their appearance.

**Gap-Fill:** Fill in the blanks with the most appropriate word.

**George, United States**  
I worry about my appearance? Yeah, I \_\_\_\_\_. In high school I didn't worry about it at \_\_\_\_\_ but I don't know, coming to college, I really became self-conscious about my image \_\_\_\_\_. I tried to reinvent myself in a way, \_\_\_\_\_ yeah.

**Aiste, Lithuania**  
I don't think I really worry about \_\_\_\_\_ appearance because I don't have much time \_\_\_\_\_ worry about my appearance, \_\_\_\_\_ I don't consider it that important, \_\_\_\_\_ maybe sometimes I'd like to spend some time on it.

**Enam, Bangladesh**  
Actually, I don't worry about my appearance \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes when it goes beyond the limit then I had to because everyone is a social being \_\_\_\_\_ it's different when it looks good \_\_\_\_\_ it's different when it looks bad. I think I lose my confidence when I look \_\_\_\_\_.

Source: Portal Ello ([www.ello.org](http://www.ello.org)).

These findings are very similar to those revealed in a research conducted by Lima & Araújo (2016) about activities proposed in an online course. The authors' conclusion points out that the activities focus on the interaction student/computer, referring to Warschauer's conception (1996) computer as tutor established in the mid of the 1990s. In other words, webmasters or teachers still have difficulties in providing activities which promote the interaction student/student or student/teacher through multimedia resources.

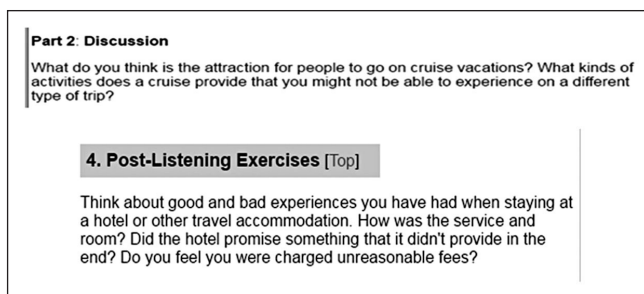
It can be noticed that even with access to numerous attractive and powerful Internet and computer tools (podcasts, videos, blogs, twitter, Facebook, smartphones, etc.) teachers, mainly in pre-service education, still need to deal with the challenges and difficulties presented by teaching and learning in real life. Many of them do not know or simply do not make use of the different technological tools offered by the digital media.

Warschauer (1996, p.4) states that it is hard “[...] not so much to have students discover the right answer, but rather to stimulate students’ discussion, writing, or critical thinking.”<sup>10</sup> Information and Communication Technology training courses, as well as Language teaching and learning studies, are fundamental for teachers to think about, share experiences and propose activities which corroborate to evidence the social practices in which learners participate in their daily life and educational scope.

As suggested by the document *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BRASIL, 2016, p.199), English teaching and learning should ensure the development of competences, such as “[...] the use of new technologies, with new languages and possibilities of interaction in order to research, select, share, express opinion and construct meaning in practices of literacy, with ethics, criticism and responsibility.”<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, two portals – 4 and 2 – suggest activities with the purpose of discussing deeply the topic proposed. The tasks are titled Discussion and Post-listening exercise, respectively. Figure 5 shows two examples.

**Figure 5** – Examples of activities in Portals DAILYESL and ELS-LAB



Source: Portal ESL-LAB ([www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com)) e Portal Dailyesl ([www.dailyesl.com](http://www.dailyesl.com))

The majority of activities in these two portals stimulate a discussion about the themes, making learners think about, argue and express their point of view through interaction. The teaching and learning process is seen as being student-centered. In

<sup>10</sup> Original: “[...] ainda é difícil fazer com que os aprendizes não apenas descubram a resposta correta, mas também estimulá-los ao debate e ao desenvolvimento da escrita e do pensamento crítico.” (WARSCHAUER, 1996, p.4).

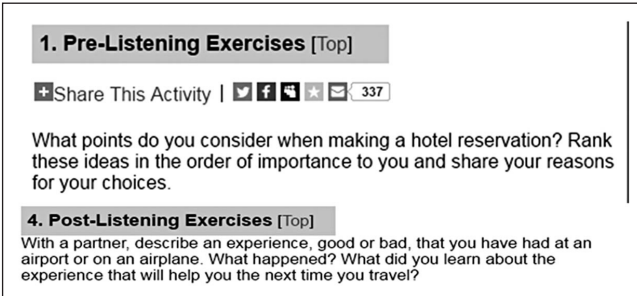
<sup>11</sup> Original: “[...] a utilização de novas tecnologias, com novas linguagens e modos de interação, para pesquisar, selecionar, compartilhar, posicionar-se e produzir sentidos em práticas de letramento na língua inglesa, de forma ética, crítica e responsável.” (BRASIL, 2016, p.199).

Kumaravadivelu's words (2006, p.65), "[...] learning is based on activities which emphasize negotiation, interpretation, and meaning, with less attention on form."<sup>12</sup>

Nunan (1999, p.8) synthesizes that "[...] exchange information tasks force students to negotiate with each other, and this is healthy for language development because it 'pushes' the learners to reformulate and extend their language."<sup>13</sup>

Besides the interaction among learners, Portal 2 also presents a textual configuration which seems to be embedded in the communicative approach in which great part of the activities follow the pattern pre-listening, listening and post-listening. Figure 6 demonstrates two of these activities.

**Figure 6** – Examples of pre-listening and post-listening activities Portal ELS-LAB



The image shows a screenshot of a webpage with two exercise sections. The first section is titled "1. Pre-Listening Exercises [Top]" and includes a social sharing bar with icons for Twitter, Facebook, and others, along with a count of 337. The text of the exercise asks the user to rank points for a hotel reservation. The second section is titled "4. Post-Listening Exercises [Top]" and asks the user to describe an experience at an airport or on an airplane.


Source: Portal ESL-LAB ([www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com))

Pre-listening activities analysis shows that webmasters/teachers have the purpose of introducing the topic to learners, pointing out the main ideas which will be worked during the listening tasks. As previous literature (NUNAN, 1999; AJIDEH, 2003; PAIVA, 2005; HINKEL, 2006) has evinced, the objective of pre-listening activities is to motivate students and enable them to do the exercises by observing the keywords, grammatical aspects, textual organization and, mainly help them to understand the topic which will be discussed. One example can be seen in Figure 7.



<sup>12</sup> Original: “[...] o foco do aprendizado está nas atividades de negociação, interpretação e expressão de significado, sem o foco explícito na forma.” (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2006, p.65).

<sup>13</sup> Original: “[...] tarefas que promovem a troca de informações forçam os alunos a negociarem entre si e isso é fundamental para o desenvolvimento da linguagem uma vez que ‘obriga’ os aprendizes a reformularem e expandirem seus conhecimentos sobre sua língua.” (NUNAN, 1999, p.8).

**Figure 7 – Pre-listening activity Portal ESL-LAB**



**1. Pre-Listening Exercises [Top]**

Share This Activity |     337

What points do you consider when making a hotel reservation? Rank these ideas in the order of importance to you and share your reasons for your choices.

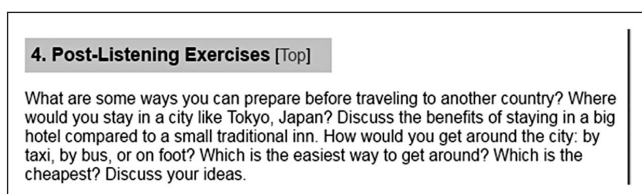
**Source:** Portal ESL-LAB ([www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com)).

In the example above, the purpose of the activity is to activate learners' previous knowledge about the topic. Richards (2008, p.9) classifies this kind of activity as top-down and he explains:

[...] learners make a list of things they know about the topic and things they would like to know, then they listen to and make comparisons. Besides learners describe the ideas which they expect to listen to about the topic and after the listening, they confirm if they are present or not.<sup>14</sup>

Post-listening activities aim at reviewing the new information presented by the text, they punctuate the most relevant topics and discuss different ideas proposed by the author's (AEBERSOLD; FIELD, 1997) as illustrated in Figure 8.

**Figure 8 – Post-listening activity Portal ESL-LAB**



**4. Post-Listening Exercises [Top]**

What are some ways you can prepare before traveling to another country? Where would you stay in a city like Tokyo, Japan? Discuss the benefits of staying in a big hotel compared to a small traditional inn. How would you get around the city: by taxi, by bus, or on foot? Which is the easiest way to get around? Which is the cheapest? Discuss your ideas.

**Source:** Portal ESL-LAB ([www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com)).

As mentioned before, portals 4 and 2 are managed by the same webmaster/teacher, and seem to follow the theoretical and methodological concepts related to the communicative approach. In this sense, considering Almeida Filho's (2002, p.36) ideas "[...] the activities proposed take into account the learners' needs and interests in order to enable them to use the target-language and interact with native speakers of

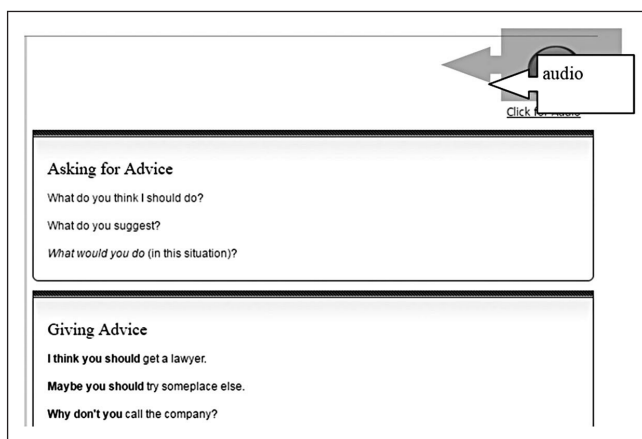
<sup>14</sup> Original: "[...] os aprendizes listam coisas que eles já sabem sobre o tópico e coisas que eles gostariam de saber, então ouvem e comparam. Além disso, os aprendizes descrevem ideias que esperam ouvir sobre o tópico e, após ouvir, confirmam se estas estão presentes ou não". (RICHARDS, 2008, p.9).

this language.”<sup>15</sup> There is learners’ empowerment in terms of language comprehension and its real uses (WARSCHAUER, 1996).

## Speaking activities

The speaking activities investigation revealed a little textual configuration variation in the nine activities analyzed. Portal 3 presented questions and answers tasks about a specific topic. The portal displays an audio, situated at the top of the page, on the right. Figure 9 exemplifies this kind of activity.

**Figure 9** – Example of speaking activity Portal ESL-GOLD



Source: Portal ESL-LAB ([www.esl-lab.com](http://www.esl-lab.com)).

This type of activity emphasizes specific linguistic structures following the repetition pattern. This outcome is similar to that found by Xavier e Balthazar (2011) in their investigation about speaking activities in Italian instructional materials. The tasks in Portal 3 present linguistic patterns with the objective of demonstrating to learners the appropriate use of specific linguistic structures. However, in this study, the patterns are linked to specific topics, such as ask for/give advice, ask for/express opinion, require details, etc.

Again, the findings suggest the webmaster/teacher’s intention of following the concepts of notions/functions presented by the communicative approach. There is an effort in proposing speaking activities which reinforce the communicative events closer to learners’ real life, mainly in the case of beginners. Figure 10 presents a list of these communicative events.

<sup>15</sup> Original: “[...] há uma tentativa em propor atividades de real interesse e/ou necessidade dos aprendizes a fim de que eles se capacitem a usar a língua-alvo e interajam com outros falantes-usuários dessa língua.” (ALMEIDA FILHO, 2002, p.36).

**Figure 10** – List of topics for beginners Portal ESLGOLD

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greetings</li><li>• Introducing yourself</li><li>• Introducing people</li><li>• Identifying people, things</li><li>• Classroom questions</li><li>• Asking for information</li><li>• Giving information</li><li>• Simple sentences</li><li>• Simple questions</li><li>• Numbers and counting</li><li>• Talking about family</li><li>• Talking about favorite things</li><li>• Talking about here and now</li><li>• Describing People</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Telling Time</li><li>• Talking about past actions</li><li>• Talking about the future</li><li>• Talking about feelings/health</li><li>• Talking about life events</li><li>• Expressing likes and dislikes</li><li>• Simple shopping</li><li>• Contractions</li><li>• Short questions and answers</li><li>• Closing a conversation</li><li>• Expressing thanks</li><li>• Situation: At the Store</li><li>• Describing a Picture</li><li>• Talking about Occupations</li></ul> |
|---|---|

Source: Portal ESLGOLD ([www.eslgold.com](http://www.eslgold.com)).

Portal 1 follows the configuration of question/answer activities, as can be noticed in Figure 11.

**Figure 11** – Example of speaking activity Portal ELLO

**Speaking Challenge**

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**Answer these related questions.** Then, discuss with a partner.

Q1) Have you ever been bullied?

Q2) Would you like to reinvent yourself?

Q3) Do you have a complex about your appearance?

Q4) If you could look like anyone, who would you look like?

Q5) How do you feel about men getting their nails done?

Source: Portal Ello ([www.ello.org](http://www.ello.org)).

The activities in this portal can be considered the most effective for the development of speaking skill. The tasks in pairs titled - discuss with a partner – are linked to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory whose central point is the verbal interaction as one the main ways of language acquisition and development.

As exemplified in Figure 11, the activities are learner-centered, with less teachers’ control, giving more opportunities for students practice, interact and develop aspects, such as pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. Nevertheless, it can be observed that there is not any kind of feedback to learners through the computer. Hence it is possible to conclude that the activities should be used in the classroom since there is not any link or multimedia resource which allow learners’ interact with other learners/people while they working on that activity.

Chapelle (1998) emphasizes that when we make use of multimedia resources, it is necessary to take into account the input provided to learners, the output which can be produced and the interactions which they are capable of promoting among learners.

Portal 5 is the only one which promotes the student’s interaction with another people using a system of registration displayed in the following screen (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12 – Registration system Portal ESLGOLD**

**You Can Talk to Someone in English Now!**

Speak-English-Today.com is an online meeting place for English students and teachers from around the world. Here you can meet personal tutors, teachers and people who want to speak in English. Our website includes thousands of members, so you can begin practicing English right away! It's free to sign up and speak with other students and conversation partners. We also provide qualified tutors you can employ to help you learn English more easily.

---

**1. REGISTER** Here for a Speak-English-Today Account

It's free to sign up! Register now.

---

**2. FIND** Speaking Partners

Locate other students or qualified teachers from around the world.  
See who is online now.

---

**3. PRACTICE** Your English Skills

Source: Portal Ello ([www.ello.org](http://www.ello.org)).

Finally, in Portal 5 the webmasters/teachers make use of different examples of drill, pictures, question/answer and writing tasks. One example can be seen in Figure 13.

**Figure 13 – Example of speaking activity Portal ESLFLOW**

Talking about travel and culture  
speaking exercise eslflow.com

1 I find \_\_\_\_\_ inspiring.

2 I don't like it when people \_\_\_\_\_ at me.

3 I like to learn about other \_\_\_\_\_.

4 You should get \_\_\_\_\_ before you travel to a country for the first time.

5 In most countries this is a positive \_\_\_\_\_.

6 I would be too \_\_\_\_\_ to travel alone.

**1 Complete the sentences with the words below:**  
scared, point, kiss, natural scenery, language, affectionate, cultures, stare, gesture, poor, advice

**2 Discuss in groups whether you agree/disagree with each sentence.**

Source: Portal ESLFLOW ([www.eslflow.com](http://www.eslflow.com)).

The activities in Portal 5 can be classified as controlled and non-controlled. As in Portal 1, they are learner-centered. The controlled activities are represented by drill tasks with focus on grammatical and lexical aspects.

Lima e Araújo (2016, p.65) stress that this kind of activity presents limited learning because during the interaction it is predictable the absence of “possible variations during the activity on-line”. The positive aspect is the last task which promotes a discussion in groups, stimulating the social interaction in a contextualized situation.

The non-controlled activities permit information, ideas and opinion exchange among pairs or groups. Brown (1994, p.48) affirms that interactive learning suggests “[...] activities in groups that enable learners to deal with real uses of language outside the educational scope, the production of significant and genuine language and the oral practice through spontaneous conversations close to student’s real life.”<sup>16</sup>

The examples above show that speaking activities still present challenges and difficulties to be solved by their webmasters/teachers. It is necessary to reformulate and adapt them in order to become really innovative, motivating and effective in the context of computer-assisted language and learning.

## Final considerations

The investigation of listening and speaking activities provided in English educational portals reveal that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has had many advances since the middle of the 1990s when the Internet became popular in the educational context. However, reformulations and adaptations are necessary to help teachers and students use effectively and functionally all the technological resources offered by the digital context.

The increasing contact and use of these tools by learners in daily life or in the classroom demand new methodologies especially in language teaching and learning. As the outcomes of this study showed, the availability of audio, video, podcasts, and social net become possible to learners the access to authentic materials. These possibilities allows them to learn the language observing contextualized examples of real situations

The findings point out that the majority of listening and speaking activities constitute instructional materials which can be used in the classroom, mainly in the ESP context, considering the relevant themes suggested and observing that teachers can make necessary modifications according to his/her educational context. However, to be used directly in the digital context, these activities need adaptations, about everything if we think about teachers in pre-service education who are still processing their theoretical and methodological capacities and developing a pedagogical criticism.

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<sup>16</sup> Original: “[...] a realização de atividades em grupos que preparem os aprendizes para usos reais da linguagem fora do contexto educacional, a produção de linguagem genuína e significativa e a prática oral por meio de conversações espontâneas e próximas da realidade do aluno.” (BROWN, 1994, p.48).



OLIVEIRA, F. O uso de portais educacionais no ensino-aprendizagem de inglês para fins específicos. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.61, n.3, p.733-751, 2017.

- *RESUMO: Dentre as quatro habilidades que constituem a competência comunicativa em língua inglesa a aprendizagem e o desenvolvimento da recepção (listening) e da produção oral (speaking) são as que mais preocupam os aprendizes, principalmente, no contexto de Inglês para Fins Específicos. Diversas pesquisas têm centrado sua atenção em detectar as principais dificuldades e na proposição de soluções que possam minimizar e, talvez, sanar esses problemas. Visando contribuir com essas investigações, este estudo investigou atividades de listening e speaking disponibilizadas em cinco (5) portais educacionais de língua inglesa com o intuito de identificar que tipo de atividades são propostas e como estas se configuram textualmente no meio digital. Os resultados revelam que boa parte das atividades se constitui como recursos didáticos adicionais que poderiam ser utilizados em sala de aula em razão da temática bastante pertinente. Entretanto, para serem utilizadas diretamente no meio digital, ainda são necessárias reformulações e adaptações que permitam aos professores e aprendizes utilizar de maneira mais efetiva e funcional todos os recursos tecnológicos disponibilizados.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Portais educacionais. Atividades. Recepção. Produção.*

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