

## Chapter IV

# Investigating Interaction in an EFL Online Environment<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

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

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2004, 2007) have investigated which roles the footings of participants play while they are interacting with their peers in online academic forums. According to them, “within online interaction, interpretive resources usually present in a given context are transferred to utterances produced by interlocutors in virtual interaction” (Paiva & Rodrigues-Junior, 2004, p. 175, our translation). We can take, as an example, the use of capital letters when virtual

interactants intend to emphasize specific feelings. Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior (2007, p. 156) offer an example of this transference, when one of the students of an online course writes “Subject: HELP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The capital letters and the exclamation marks point to the emphasis the student gave to her problem, as if she were crying for help in any difficult situation.

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

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

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