

Original Paper

YouTube Platform and the English Language Learning in the Brazilian Context

Márcia Aparecida Silva[†] & Izáio Dias de Carvalho Junior¹

¹Department of Modern Languages, State University of Goiás, Iporá Goiás, Brazil

* Márcia Aparecida Silva, E-mail: marciasilva@ueg.br

Received: December 21, 2020 Accepted: December 28, 2020 Online Published: January 29, 2021

doi:10.22158/fce.v1n2p51

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/fce.v1n2p51>

Abstract

This work aims at exploring the YouTube platform as a social network and useful space for English language learning in the Brazilian context. We believe that YouTube is a potential platform to enhance autonomy, but we are aware that there is a specific kind of student who could benefit from using this tool. For the theoretical basis of this research, we are based on Recuero (2009) to discuss the meaning of social network. We will explore some YouTubers who use the platform to teach the English language.

Keywords

YouTube, social media, foreign languages, YouTubers

1. Introduction

YouTube is an online platform that was originally launched in June 2005, by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim. The platform was sold, a year after its launch, to Google. The purchase was made for an amount of \$ 1.65 billion dollars (more or less R\$ 6 billion reais), according to Burgess; Green (2009). YouTube is currently one of the most influential and internationally disseminated platforms, having reached the mark of 1.58 billion users in 2018. Also, in 2011, its interface was already available in 34 languages (Barton, 2015). In addition to enabling the sharing of audiovisual content, YouTube allows its users, through registration, to evaluate the videos, giving them a “thumbs up” or a “thumbs down”, and adding them to a list of favorite videos. The content found on this platform varies a lot in its content and can be presented in the form of music videos, movie trailers, video clips, parts of TV programs, live streams (streaming) and, a great success today, vlogs and daily vlogs.

This platform presents itself as an online environment pursued by those who wish, or do not care, for a more “public” life. Prensky (2010, p. 2) states that “people mourning with the need to express and share their feelings and get comfort in people’s responses [...]”, for this reason, a large number of people

produce their content with the intention of generating some kind of feedback from those who watch their videos.

Over the years new terms have emerged within the platform, and these terms have been used to refer to specific niches within the site. One of the most important terms was “YouTuber”, a word used to refer to the person who produces audiovisual material and shares it on this website. We can infer that the terminologies created were the result of an attempt to monitor the diversity of audiovisual content hosted daily. As an example, we can mention “booktuber” and “vlogger”. These terms, respectively, refer to those that produce content related to books and more personal topics.

Although by the time YouTube started, the production equipment was basically a webcam. Nowadays, however, there is a major concern on the part of audiovisual producers. It is not difficult to find videos in which YouTubers present their filming and editing material, leading us to perceive an audiovisual production for YouTube as an area that is developing professionally.

As we can notice, YouTube hosts audiovisual content of different genres, social relevance and goals. The videos are made mainly with a target audience in mind, so it is not difficult to find videos about sport, culture (national or international), news, education, comedy, entertainment and so on, some are delimited for age groups. For these reasons, we find it relevant to discuss how Brazilian students can benefit from this platform, enhancing their knowledge in the English language learning. To conduct our exploratory research, we will explore three YouTubers who post regularly about learning.

After this introduction about what YouTube is and what its uses are, we will move on to the next topic, which is in the Applied Linguistics field of study. To do so, let's start by pointing this platform as a social network.

2. YouTube as a Social Network

Over the years, YouTube has changed its concept. This website is no longer just an environment for hosting videos, it started to attract the attention of people who were interested in sharing something with the world. In other words, the website has changed “from a personal storage resource for video content to a platform designed for personal expression” (Burgess, 2009, p. 21).

This idea of personal expression is closely linked to the topic we intend to address in this section, the social. According to Dornelles (2015), YouTube has gained the attention of people who want to tell their stories to the world, and they see this platform as an alternative channel through which they can spread their ideas, opinions and worldview.

It is precisely this possibility of interaction between users of digital media that characterizes social networks. Recuero (2009, p. 69) states that “a social network is always a set of actors and their relationships”, thus, what characterizes a social network as such is the relationship and the interaction established among its users. This interaction process is strongly perceived on YouTube. This relationship happens in several instances, it can be noticed between YouTuber and followers, followers and YouTuber, YouTuber and YouTuber or even among followers. The aim of this section is precisely to

show YouTube as a social network and, in order to do so, we will point out how the interaction can be developed in this environment.

It is not difficult to understand YouTube as a social network that bonds its users through communication and interaction. This platform allows us to follow and interact more directly with video creators who create the content of our interest. We can notice this aspect by analyzing the platform's functionalities that enable us to subscribe to the YouTubers' channels that we like, to rate the watched videos by giving them a "thumbs up" or a "thumbs down". We also have the possibility of sharing the videos that we like. YouTube has become a place in which "many users post ideas and opinions, looking for feedback, and many get large numbers of responses to their clips" (Prensky, 2010, p. 2).

Digital influencers, in many cases, encourage their followers to express their opinions through the comments section, where interaction mostly takes place. Opinions and arguments are presented; debates take place openly, giving the right of speech to everyone who wants to use it. This interaction is one of the most common in the language teaching channels, since questions always arise when the subject is a foreign language. However, we believe that over the years the tendency is that the channels, regardless of genre, reach a larger audience and grow in terms of the number of subscribers. With this expansion of followers in mind, it is not difficult to imagine that in the future it will be almost humanly impossible for YouTubers to answer all their followers.

In this kind of scenario, we can witness the development of another type of interaction, the sharing of knowledge among subscribers. It is noticeable that a channel with more than 1 million subscribers receives many comments, comments that will not, at least not all, be answered by the channel owner. Taking that into account, it is quite common to find comments such as the following one:

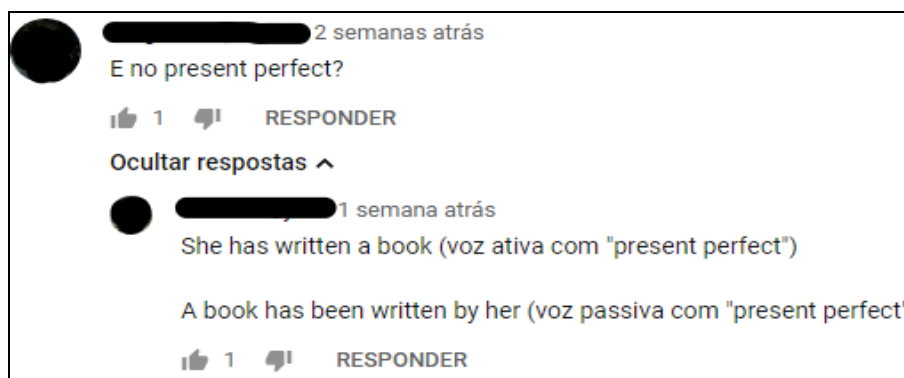


Figure 1. Subscribers Sharing Their Knowledge

In Figure 1, the first subscriber asks a question regarding the use of passive voice in the present perfect, and a second subscriber, for mastering the theme related to the question, does not hesitate to answer it. This sort of interaction is considered advantageous to all parties involved, since the first subscriber eventually finds a solution to their linguistic problem, the second subscriber puts into practice what they know and the YouTuber, who owns the channel, consequently, has one less comment to answer.

The construction of collective knowledge is frequently observed in the comments section in videos related to teaching English as a foreign language. Here we have another figure in which we can notice this sort of mutual collaboration:

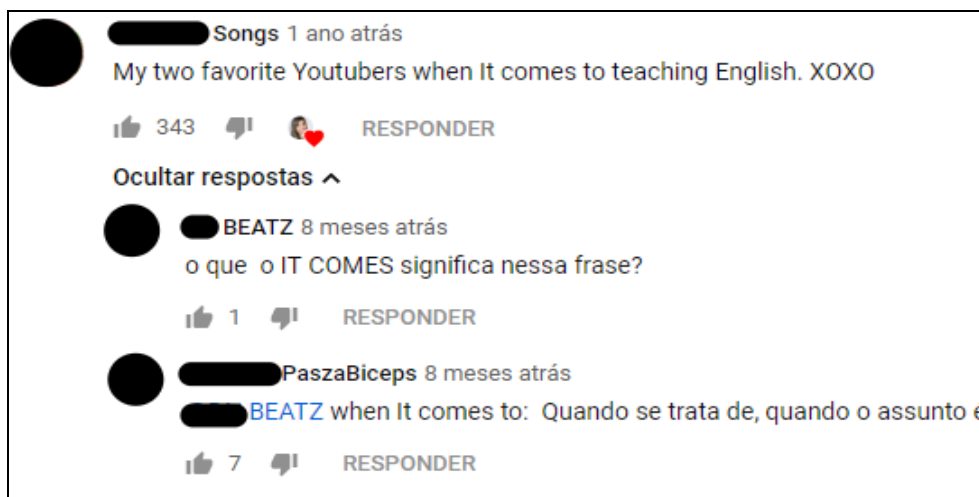


Figure 2. Construction of Collective Knowledge

Figure 2 presents a case in which three followers build mutual knowledge in the English language. The first one shares their appreciation of the YouTuber's online contributions by using the expression "when it comes to". The second subscriber had to ask for the meaning of the expression to understand the whole sentence, and, in the following moment, the third subscriber answers the question (Note 1).

Through these images, we can attest that YouTube is a social network, because it is its users, who use it for interaction, the ones responsible for keeping this social media ongoing. Recuero (2009, p. 103) confirms this by stating that

Although social networking sites act as a support for the interactions that will constitute social networks, they are not, in themselves, social networks. They can present them, help to perceive them, but it is important to emphasize that they are, in themselves, only systems. It is the social actors, who use these networks, that constitute these networks.

Bearing this in mind, we can argue that a social network website is enhanced when human communication is established at its core. Another form of interaction presented on YouTube is "collabs" (Note 2). "Collabs" are videos that YouTubers make by inviting other digital influencers to their channels and vice versa. To give an illustration, we can mention the following collabs.



Figure 3. Collabs between Carina Fragozo and Rodrigo Honorato

Figure 3 shows two collaborations between two Brazilian teachers, Carina Fragozo and Rodrigo Honorato. Collaborations are relevant on YouTube because, besides the gain of possible new subscribers, each YouTuber has the opportunity to present new content to their followers since the guest has a different background, opinion, humor and a unique view about the topic being discussed. In both videos, they are talking about the “African American Vernacular English” (AAVE) also known as “Black English”. In this collab, they present this English variation and its peculiarities, such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, story and so on.

In the following section, we rely on Arndt and Woore (2018) to discuss the concepts of intentional and incidental learning within YouTube. We also briefly present this platform as a means of sharing education.

3. YouTube for Academic Purposes

We would like to start this section with two researches, which were focused on the YouTube platform and in the English language learning and teaching. These studies are relevant to show the potential of this platform to education.

The first is the work of Silva (2018), which addresses the issue of YouTube’s pedagogical contributions to foreign language teaching and learning. The author introduced the possibilities and the challenges that this platform presents to the English language teaching/learning in basic education, in a Brazilian context, and the processes that permeate the skills that teachers and students need to present in this teaching model. For this purpose, the researcher used a qualitative methodology and theoretical foundation. To conduct the research, the author based herself mainly on the “English in Brazil”, channel by Carina Fragozo in order to understand the relationship of this social network with language teaching. The second research is from Dias (2013) who is also interested in pointing out the pedagogical contributions of YouTube. The author aimed to present this social network as a repository of audiovisual resources capable of contributing to the development of listening and oral skills in the teaching/learning

process of English in basic education.

The researchers presented are relevant to the current teaching scenario, as they aim to investigate the relation between digital platforms and language teaching. It is worth mentioning there are numerous academic researches, which analyze YouTube as a platform that contributes to teaching. These researches are present in the teaching of Mathematics, Physics, Biology, Sign Language and so on, but they will not be included here, since our focus is the teaching of the English language.

Taking into account the global reach of this platform and the ease we have to find videos in several languages, we argue that there is a relationship between this platform and the teaching/learning English. This is where our work is founded. We believe in the potential of YouTube as a facilitator in the development of the learners' autonomy, since this platform and its contents can motivate students to explore different materials for new information. To that extent, students look for information in videos that catch their attention, and this directly contributes to their learning process, as they act more actively, not just waiting for the teacher to tell them what to do.

Barton and Lee (2015, p. 77) argues that "many YouTube users also take advantage of the possibility of sharing video to 'teach the world' the languages they speak", that is to say, this platform acts as a great ally in the foreign language learning and teaching, as it allows language teachers, trained or not, to "break" geographical barriers and reach users around the globe.

We will explore the term "informal" linked to learning. To understand the proposed idea, we establish a relationship between "intentional" and "incidental" learning and informal teaching. Moreover, we will talk about how informal learning on YouTube can take place.

We rely on Arndt and Woore (2018) to explain the incidental and intentional terms. When we mention "intentional", we mean learning related to concentration, in which the student is actively learning. This occurs, for instance, when a language learner is in a traditional teaching context and he is receiving some type of instruction from the teacher. The moments of explanation in the classroom, for instance, can fit into intentional learning because it is when students focus their attention to learning, as Arndt and Woore (2018, p. 125) defend, "[...] it is believed that the intentional learning occurs when students' attention is focused on acquiring new language features [...]".

Although we have used the classroom, formal educational space, to refer to intentional learning, it can also occur in the YouTube context. When an apprentice watches a video about grammar, he strives to absorb the content, so he has his attention focused on that purpose.

Incidental learning occurs when the student learns something without being aware of it. Incidental learning can happen, for instance, when the learner is watching, for leisure, a video on a topic that interests him. At this point, the student is not concerned with the tenses or conjugations that the speakers of the language are using, because his intention is to understand what he is hearing. Throughout this moment of leisure, a lot is learned incidentally. In this type of learning, we unconsciously internalize grammatical structures, vocabulary, pronunciation, language rhythm, and so on.

There is an immense number of teachers, enthusiasts and language learners sharing their knowledge through videos. It is not difficult to find people, native or not, teachers or not, sharing tips, rules of a specific language which can leverage learning in any particular language.

We use, as an example, the testimony that teacher Carina Fragozo shared with members of YouTube at an event called “Creator Talks”, in a lecture at YouTube Space in New York. She was invited by the YouTube team to share her experience on the platform. Carina, in his lecture, addresses the issue of democratization of education through YouTube. She claims that “today education is available to more and more people” and, according to the speaker, this dissemination of free educational content through YouTube “is the most incredible thing that the internet has brought us” (Note 3).

The visibility experienced by teachers in the online environment is a point of recent debate when it comes to the democratization of education in an online context. This debate is based on the fact that videos hosted on YouTube vary widely in content and are subject to worldwide visibility, which, consequently, contributes to the lives of students who dedicate themselves to learn autonomously.

The YouTube Edu initiative is still relatively new, but it already has interesting ideas in the free dissemination of knowledge. Teachers linked to this platform have promoted since 2017 the so-called “aulão YouTube Edu ENEM”, in which they perform live classes talking about important topics for the National High School Exam. The democratization of education through YouTube is something that has shown positive results and seems that it will be more used in the future context.

In this section, we presented the concepts of intentional and incidental learning in an informal learning context, and discussed YouTube as a platform, which generates constant interaction among its users. Therefore, we intend to highlight the work of some YouTubers who produce quality content for everyone who wants to have greater and deeper contact with the English language.

4. YouTubers and the English Learning

In this section, we present three English teachers on YouTube. In order to understand these teachers and the work they have been developing on the platform, we introduce them, and show how they can contribute to the autonomy of the Brazilian English learners who follow them.

The first channel is called “English in Brazil” and it is run by Carina Fragozo.



Figure 4. English in Brazil by Carina Fragozo

Carina Fragozo holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of São Paulo. As a researcher, her main academic interests are phonetics, phonology and second language acquisition.

Her videos cover a variety of different topics, such as grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, curiosities about the English language and the culture of countries where this language is spoken. The content hosted on her channel is explained in a simple way. Carina, due to her academic background, generally relies on scientific facts and academic research to support her explanations.

The second channel is called “SmallAdvantages” and it is run by Gavin Roy, a native English speaker from North America.

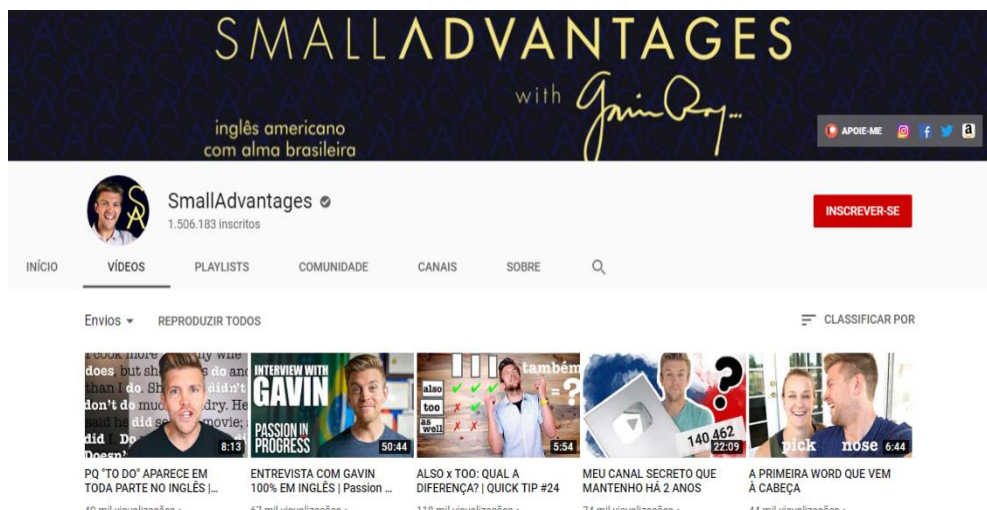


Figure 5. Small Advantages with Gavin Roy

Gavin Roy, better known as Gavin, is one of the classic cases of autonomous language learners, since he speaks English as his mother tongue and has taught himself Spanish and Portuguese. He is also currently learning the Czech language. His channel started in mid-2014 with the aim of giving English tips to Brazilian Portuguese speakers.

Although “SmallAdvantages” has good recognition among YouTube channels focused on teaching English, Gavin does not hold a certification in the educational field. He holds a Ph.D. in meteorology, but he has decided to focus on his career as an English teacher on YouTube. He started, back in 2014, only with tips on the English language, but his channel currently hosts a great number of videos covering many different topics in English, from pronunciation to grammar.

The content available on this channel is presented in a simple and dynamic way. One of the highlights of the YouTuber didactics is the relationship he establishes between the language learning processes he has been exposed to through his autonomous learning. This comparison facilitates the understanding of students who have never learned a foreign language or for those who have experienced many difficulties in their language learning journey.

Last but not least, we have Mairo Vergara’s channel.



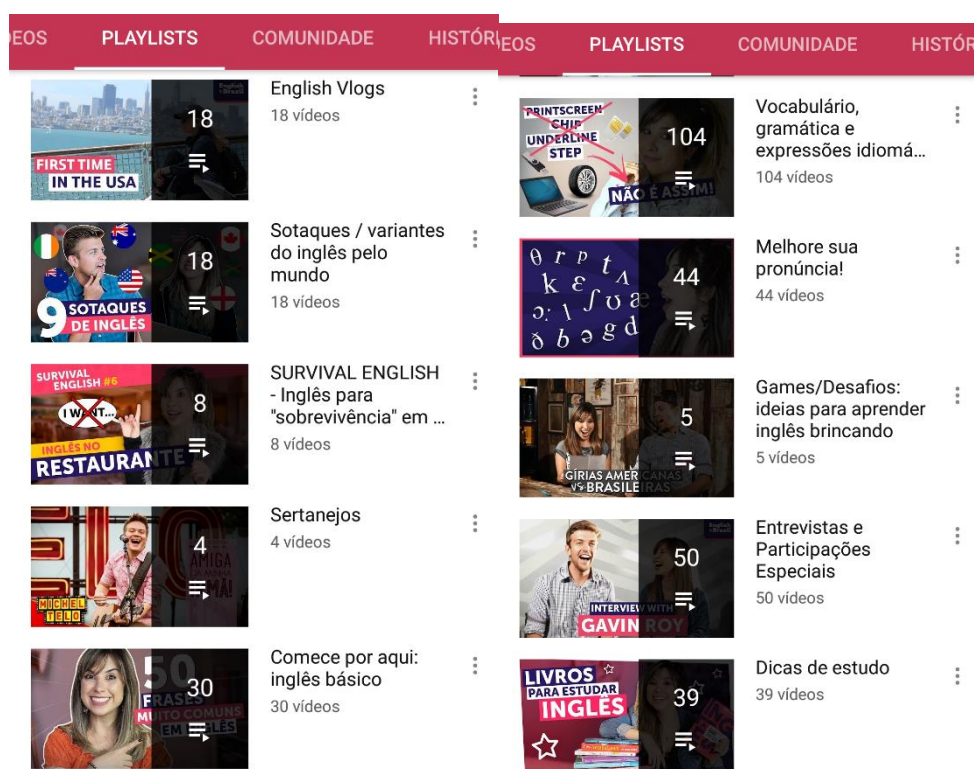
Figure 6. Mairo Vergara’s Channel

Mairo Vergara is a Brazilian English teacher and has worked in this field since 2009. He has accumulated over 2 million subscribers in his YouTube channel and he is well known for having a “think outside the box” mindset when it comes to teaching and learning English. Mairo is also an entrepreneur and sells his English courses online. His channel is interesting and accessible for everyone since most of his videos are recorded in Portuguese and using daily language. His channel hosts many videos related to grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, but there are also many videos talking about methods and techniques to learn English in a more effective way. He also posts videos explaining how to use apps, such as Anki

(Note 4) that can benefit our learning journey.

Before concluding this section, it is worth mentioning that most YouTubers create Playlists on their channels to divide their videos into topics. This division is another factor that contributes to English language learners, as they will have access to videos already separated. In other words, they will not “waste time” searching for videos of their interest on specific channels, they only need to go to the playlists and watch videos related to their current language needs.

To give an illustration of what we mean, the two following images illustrate how Carina Fragozo separates her videos into lists that meet the diverse needs of her followers. She also created a specific playlist, entitled “Start here: basic English”, for new followers who still do not know her channel and want to start from the beginning.



Figures 7 and 8. Playlists by Carina Fragozo

These are three channels that can contribute to autonomous English language learners in Brazil, because students have in these channels a source of information relevant to the search for proficiency in the target language. In addition to having contact with qualified professionals, apprentices have the opportunity to enjoy the content of the channels regardless of the level of proficiency, since the three channels mentioned here have specific videos for the most basic levels, but they also have videos for those English learners who are in a more advanced level in the language.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to explore YouTube as a social network and how this platform establishes possibilities to promote learning in English language learners in the Brazilian context. We can see that the process that unfolds on YouTube has brought many possibilities to learners. We can perceive this by acknowledging that YouTube provides free access to a vast collection of videos that contribute to autonomous learning and the enhancing of linguistic abilities.

In view of the arguments presented, it is concluded that the possibilities of using YouTube combined with the learning of students who have an autonomous profile are relatively large. The phenomenon of language teaching/learning on this platform has taken on great proportions, we can deduce that this fact is closely related to the narrowing that has occurred in the relationship between teaching/learning and the digital technologies of communication and information over the years.

Burgess and Green (2009, p. 13) state that

Although not the only video-sharing site on the Internet, YouTube's rapid rise, its wide variety of content and its public projection in the West among English speakers make it useful for understanding the still evolving relationships between the new media technologies, creative industries and popular culture policies.

Therefore, we conclude that the popularity of YouTube is something that contributes greatly to its status quo when it comes to the dissemination of content. YouTube popularity and contributions are going to last for a long time, but it is worth mentioning that "it is not social networks that improve language teaching, but how we use them" (Leffa, 2016, p. 138).

References

- Arndt, H. L., & Woore, R. (2018). Vocabulary learning from watching YouTube videos and reading blog posts. *Language Learning & Technology*, 22(1), 124-142.
- Barton, D., & Lee, C. (2015). *Linguagem online: Textos e práticas digitais* (1st ed.). São Paulo: Parábola Editorial.
- Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube e a revolução digital: Como o maior fenômeno da cultura participativa transformou a mídia e a sociedade*. São Paulo: Aleph.
- Leffa, V. J. (2003). Quando menos é mais: A autonomia na aprendizagem de línguas. In C. Nicolaidis, I. Mozzillo, L. Pachalski, M. Machado, & V. Fernandes (Eds.), *O desenvolvimento da autonomia no ambiente de aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras* (pp. 33-49). Pelotas: UFPEL.
- Prensky, M. (2010). *Why YouTube Matters*. On the horizon.
- Recuero, R. (2009). *Redes Sociais na Internet*. Porto Alegre: Sulina.
- Silva, M. T. (2018). *Contribuições Pedagógicas da Rede Social YouTube para o Ensino e a Aprendizagem de Língua Estrangeira*. 2018. 169 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Linguística Aplicada)-Faculdade Federal de Minas Gerais-UFGM, Belo Horizonte, 2018.

Notes

Note 1. Figures 1 and 2 were taken from interactions on Teacher Carina Fragozo's channel. The images show moments of interaction between the YouTube teacher and her followers, and these moments show the exchange of information that takes place on this platform.

Note 2. Term used to designate collaborations between YouTubers.

Note 3. Retirado de: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70-I-99W77g&t=273s>

Note 4. Anki is an app and website that helps people to remember things by using flash cards.