# FROM COLLABORATIVE WRITING TO READING COMPREHENSION
## (A pilot study on form focus as a means to enhance reading comprehension in ESP classes)

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RESUMO: Estudo piloto realizado como parte integrante da dissertação de Mestrado da autora, cujo objetivo é verificar de que maneira a interação negociada com foco reflexivo na forma através do diálogo colaborativo favorece a compreensão de textos acadêmicos em inglês. Com esse fim, o conceito de diálogo colaborativo é utilizado segundo Swain (2000). À luz da teoria sócio-cultural do desenvolvimento da mente humana, a aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira resulta de interações dialógicas do indivíduo não só com os outros, mas também consigo mesmo. O estudo fornece subsídios para uma melhor compreensão do processo de leitura em língua estrangeira.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: interação; leitura; diálogo colaborativo; instrução-focada-na-forma; negociação.

ABSTRACT: This paper reports the data from a qualitative pilot study involving four ESP students from a private English course in Vitória, ES. With the purpose of investigating how collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000) which includes peer-feedback during a writing task enhances reading comprehension in English, this study constitutes the first stage of my Master's Degree dissertation research. Besides my personal interest that originates from my experience as an ESP teacher, I believe this investigation can provide us, language teachers, with some insights not only into the process of reading comprehension in English specifically, but also into the ESP teaching/learning context in general.

KEYWORDS: interaction; reading; collaborative dialogue; form-focused instruction; negotiation.

## 0. Introduction

In the last thirty years, much has been discussed and written about the role of grammar (i.e. some type of focus on form) in language teaching. The heavy emphasis on fluency and on the use of meaning-focused tasks advocated by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has led second-language acquisition (SLA) researchers to make great efforts to find answers to the many questions posed about the role of grammar in what is sometimes referred to as the post-CLT.

From the various studies, many interesting and relevant findings have emerged. However, although different and confusing terminology has been applied to describe ways to teach the formal features of the language, there is a consensus in the literature that grammar is certainly an important element in language teaching and learning.

Thus, several SLA researchers have been investigating the effectiveness of form-focused instruction[1] in communicative classrooms from different perspectives.

Perhaps some of the most interesting studies on form-focused instruction are those informed by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning (Swain, 1985-2005; Donato, 2000; Ohta, 2000; van Lier, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; 1998).These researchers claim that as a result of problem solving tasks through meaningful peer-collaborative work and corrective feedback, learners achieve a higher level of language competence.

It may thus be argued that some kind of form-focused instruction is not only beneficial, but especially necessary for second language acquisition (SLA) in English as second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts. In addition, it could be claimed that language learning occurs through interaction. Nevertheless, there is in the literature a recognized need for further studies on the quality and nature of learners' interaction as they attempt to complete form-focused language production tasks.

Furthermore, there seems to be little, if any research investigating the effectiveness of negotiated interaction in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. Based on the works of Swain and her associates (1985-2005), it was thus the purpose of the qualitative pilot study reported in this paper to investigate how four Brazilian ESP

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[1] The term is used in this paper following Spada's (1997, p.73) definition: it refers to "pedagogical events which occur within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction but in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways".

students managed to understand an English text through collaborative dialogue[2] (in their native language) as they performed writing tasks in pairs.

Besides my personal interest that originates from my experience as an ESP (reading) teacher, I believe that this study could provide insights not only into the process of reading comprehension in a foreign language specifically, but also into the ESP teaching and learning context in general.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

Extensive empirical research conducted in Canadian French immersion programs by Swain and her associates (1985-2005) have demonstrated that although comprehensible input[3] is necessary for language learning, it is not the only thing the students need, as Krashen (1985) has claimed. Swain (1985) found that French immersion learners exposed to comprehensible input for a long time still had problems with certain linguistic aspects of the target language. She argued that the importance of language output – "students' meaningful production of language" (Swain, 2000:99) should also be recognized.

However, according to Swain (1985), output will aid acquisition only when the learner is "pushed" to produce oral and written discourse which is grammatically accurate and sociolinguistically appropriate. It is claimed that output has three main functions in facilitating language learning: noticing, hypothesis testing and metatalk. Output creates awareness of language knowledge holes and/or gaps, that is, producing language may cause learners "to notice what they do not know or know only partially" (Swain, 1995:126).

When learners notice the gap/hole in their knowledge, they turn to others or to their own linguistic resources, and work out a solution - they formulate and test hypothesis, i.e., alternative ways of saying/writing what they want to say/write. Producing language output also requires learners to pay conscious attention to the form of the messages. According to Swain, such reflection (consciousness raising or

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[2] The concept of *collaborative dialogue* is used in this paper according to Swain (2000), and will be explained in the "Theoretical Framework" section.

[3] According to Krashen's (1985) *comprehensible input hypothesis,* learners acquire language by hearing and understanding messages which contain language features just beyond their current level of competence in the target language (i+1)

metatalk) might lead to acquisition because it makes noticing and hypothesis testing more explicit to the learner. In short, metatalk is "language used consciously to reflect on language use" (Swain, 1998:70).

It is important to mention that for Swain, output and its functions can be seen as existing within dialogue (with others and/or with the self). As she points out, dialogue "is where language use and language learning can co-occur" (Swain, 2000:97). Therefore, in her view, dialogue is where learning takes place. In the light of the sociocultural theory, which considers dialogic interaction as central to human development, Swain (2000) coined the term *collaborative* dialogue to refer to spontaneous learners' talk about language in their attempt to solve a linguistic problem as they work collaboratively in small groups.

Through this collaborative dialogue, students engage in knowledge building. Swain (in press) claims that this construct of *collaborative dialogue* allows us to move beyond the "conduit metaphor" suggested by the terms *input* and *output.* It construes language not only as communication, but as a cognitive tool. Verbalization was another term used by the author, but she argues that this word has "been subject to misinterpretation (...) – people often assume that 'verbalizing' refers only to speaking, rather than to both speaking and writing" (Swain, in press:147). Then, the term *languaging* emerged. For Swain, *languaging* occurs

> precisely when language is used to mediate problem solutions, whether the problem is about which word to use, or how best to structure a sentence so it means what you want it to mean, or how to explain the results of an experiment, or how to make sense of the action of another (Swain, in press: 148-149).

Because "languaging about language [with others and/or with the self] is one of the ways we learn a second language to an advanced level" (Swain, in press: 149), teachers have been encouraged to involve students in tasks which engage them in collaborative dialogue. In her words,

> if one accepts a Vygotskian perspective that much learning is an activity that occurs in and through dialogues, that development occurs first on the inter-psychological plane through socially constructing knowledge and processes, then it must be that a close examination of dialogue as learners engage in problem-solving activity is directly revealing of mental processes. The unit

of analysis of language learning and its associated processes may therefore more profitably be the dialogue, not input or output" (Swain, 1995:142).

Therefore, according to her view, and to the sociocultural theory, by studying how students *language* (Swain, in press) about form and meaning with others and/or with the self, we are observing the process of language learning.

## 2. The Study

This qualitative pilot study constitutes the first stage of my Master's Degree dissertation research. It aimed to investigate how collaborative dialogue which includes peer-feedback during a collaborative writing activity enhances reading comprehension of a text in English.

The following research questions were considered:

- When asked to write an English passage collaboratively, do the students *language* (Swain, in press) about L2 form and meaning[4]?
- If so, how does it help them understand a written English text?

## 2.1 Context and participants

The study was conducted in an ESP reading classroom in a private English course in Vitória, ES, Brazil. The group involved consisted of four voluntary students (two women and two men), ranging from 20 to 25 years of age, all belonging to the same ESP classroom. Their level of general English proficiency may be considered intermediate. All participants have learned English in high school, and attended General English classes in private English language institutes for at least two years. None has lived abroad. These students' immediate need was to be able to read and fully understand texts written in English in order to pass the entrance examination of a private college.

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[4] In this study, "form" referred to any grammatical features: verbs, prepositions, collocations, word order, spelling, pronunciation, linkers, referents, etc. "Meaning" referred to synonyms, word choice, unknown words/expressions, new meaning of familiar words/expressions.

## 2.2 Data collection

A basic cycle of data collection covered a period of three-day classes (2h each), consisting of two collaborative writing tasks (text production and reformulation (Swain & Lapkin, 2003), and an individual reading comprehension exercise. Finally, the students were invited to write an evaluation report based on their experiences of working collaboratively and of comprehending an English text.

The task was based on Widdowson's (1980:76-77) *gradual approximation* exercise, a strategy which

> begins by providing exercises within the scope of the learner's (limited) linguistic competence in English and then gradually realizes its communicative potential by making appeal to the other kinds of knowledge that the learner has. Thus, the starting point is the sentence and the end point is discourse (...).

Day 1 - After a brainstorming session in which a diagram related to the topic was presented, and the students were required to comment on it, thus activating their prior knowledge, the first collaborative writing task was introduced.

Collaborative writing task 1: the four students, in self-selected pairs, were instructed to arrange some scrambled sentences in the appropriate order and combine them where necessary to make a paragraph. Then, they were required to arrange the three paragraphs in the most appropriate order to form a complete passage. This passage was related to the diagram presented beforehand. The students were audio-taped as they talked in their native language to solve their language problems during this activity. Dictionary use was allowed, but there was no teacher/researcher intervention.

Day 2 - Collaborative writing task 2: Reading, noticing and rewriting: The students, in the same self-selected pairs, were instructed to read the text they had produced attentively, and to compare it to the original version, noticing the differences between both texts. The next step was to rewrite their compositions, making the necessary corrections, following their peers' feedback. There was no researcher/teacher intervention in this activity either. This type of "reformulation" technique allowed the students to notice and reflect on language use, and therefore, to come to a deeper understanding of the English language

(Swain & Lapkin, 2003). Again students' collaborative dialogue performed in their native language was audio-taped for further analysis.

<u>Day 3</u> – Reading comprehension exercise: In order to verify whether the negotiated interaction during a collaborative writing task enhanced reading comprehension, the students were asked to read the original passage again, this time with the aim of answering comprehension questions.

## 2.3 Data analysis

To find answers to the first question posed, (i.e. when asked to write an English passage collaboratively, do students *language* about form and/or meaning?) transcripts of the peer/peer talk during the writing session were analyzed and compared for language-related episodes (LREs). These aspects which generated the negotiations are defined by Swain & Lapkin (1995:378) as episodes

> in which a learner either spoke about a language problem [that may refer to form or meaning] he/she encountered while writing and solved it either correctly(..) or incorrectly (...); or simply solved it (again, either correctly or incorrectly) without having explicitly identified it as a problem.

Responses to the second research question (i.e. if students *language* about form and/or meaning, how does it help them understand a written text in English?) were found through the reading comprehension exercises, and the students' evaluation reports.

<u>Examples of Language - Related Episodes:</u>

The following examples from the transcripts illustrate some of the LREs identified in the research:

Episodes from Day 1: (collaborative text production)

1. Meaning

a) Word meaning

> Mark: *Ficou assim: A pele é fabricada com duas camadas. A epiderme e a derme são as camadas da pele.*
> Gloria: *você pulou "main". "main" é... maior?*
> Mark: *acho que não. Vou ver aqui. Ah! É principal.... então: a pele é fabricada com duas camadas.*
> Gloria: *Fabricada? Estranho...*
> Mark: *é... "made" é fabricado. "made in China" – fabricado, feito na*
> *China.*
> Gloria: *Certo. Cada camada promove um diferente papel na função da pele.*
> Mark : *promove um papel? Representa é melhor..*
> Gloria: *é mesmo, representa.*

In the above exchange, when trying to join the sentences, Mark activates his prior knowledge of the expression "made in China", but erroneously translates made up as *fabricada*, without noticing that in this case, it's a phrasal verb. Gloria recognizes that the word is not appropriate, but, after Mark´s reply giving the example ("made in China"), she immediately agrees. Then, when adding the next sentence, it is Gloria who makes the wrong translation. This time Mark corrects, and she agrees – then, they find the right word. (They correctly solved the problem).

Gloria is unsure about the meaning of the word *main*, and requests for confirmation. Mark replies that he does not know, but finds a way of solving the problem without the teacher's help – by checking the meaning in the dictionary. (Problem correctly solved).

b) Word Meaning:

> Mark: *Você sabe o que é "shield"?*
> Gloria: *Não. Vamos ver no dicionário.* (looking up the word in the dictionary). *Olha aqui! É "escudo".*
> Mark: *"Escudo"?*
> Gloria: *Hum Hum...*
> Mark: *ok. Escudo protetor*

Again, they use the dictionary to solve their problem, and, this time, Mark is the one who gives the right translation.

c) Word choice:

> Gloria:   *The epidermis is a tough protective layer what contains melanin. Ficou bom assim? É "what" mesmo, não é? "Que" – acho que é.*
> Mark: *Mas, "what" é "o que" – "what are you doing?"*
> Gloria: *então, como é "que"?*
> Mark: *acho que é "that".*
> Gloria: *"That"? ah! É mesmo!!! Tonta! "Here is the book that I bought for you" – lembra  dessa frase da lição?*
> Mark: *também pode ser "who", mas só se for para "gente."*
> Gloria*: tá certo. Somos 'fera' mesmo!!!!*

In this example, Gloria joins the sentences by using *what*. As she feels unsure, she translates the word, and considers her choice right. Again, by activating his prior knowledge, Mark questions the use of the word *what*, and suggests *that* instead. Gloria has an insight and also refers to a sentence she had previously learned from a textbook. Mark reminds her of the use of *who*. She agrees, and feels happy for being able to solve the problem.

2. Form:

a) (linking sentences)

> Mark:   *Nessas frases tem muito "the skin". Não podemos escrever assim. Parece parágrafo de criança. Vamos juntar.*
> Gloria: *Coloca vírgula.*
> Mark*:. Mas não podemos encher de vírgulas…. vamos colocar "and" também   .*
> Gloria:   *tá. Vê se ficou bom assim.* (reading aloud)
> Mark:   *Acho que está certo. Agora vem a 5 e depois a 6. Pronto. Terminamos o     primeiro parágrafo.*

In this episode, Mark and Gloria talk about the best way to link the sentences. They recognize that they must write in a more elaborate form, but the suggestion is to use commas and the word *and.* Both agree on that.

b)  (spelling)

> Gloria: *Como se escreve "hypodermis" – com "i" ou com "y" ?*
> Mark:   *com "y" depois do "h". No final, é com "i".*

In this episode, Mark is dictating the sentences to Gloria. As she doesn't know the spelling of a word, she asks for help. Mark correctly provides the answer.

Episodes from Day 2: "Reformulation" stage.
1. Form:

A)

> 1. Gloria: *Olha, a gente podia ter escrito assim! Ia ficar bem melhor…. Ao invés de colocar ponto, a gente podia ter usado o verbo igual a português: cobrindo…*
> Mark: *Vamos consertar então o nosso texto. Copia aí…*

> 2. Mark: *Olha agora. Estranho.. por que aqui tem "ing"? não é "servindo".. "In addition to" não quer dizer "além de"? Não se diz "além de servindo"….*
> Gloria: *pode ter sido erro de digitação. Sei lá… Acho melhor deixar o nosso como está. Depois a gente pergunta pra professora. Acho que do jeito que fizemos também está bom. Não precisa mexer.*

> 3. Mark: *olha só! "ing" de novo. Aqui o sentido é igual ao primeiro: "each providing" – aqui, está certo: cada um fornecendo…*
> Gloria: *viu? Podemos usar o "ing" pra juntar as frases. Fica até mais bonito. Vou consertar o nosso.*

The above episodes (1-3) show that both Mark and Gloria noticed the verb form as they compared their text to the original one. Again, they translate the verb form, and both agree to change their text, although it is not wrong.

In the second example, both Mark and Gloria notice the use of the *ing* form, but they cannot explain its usage. They translate the sentence, but recognize that it does not make sense in Portuguese. They agree to keep their sentence, and later on to ask the teacher. They recognize there is a problem, but cannot solve it.

> Gloria: *Outra coisa que nós nem pensamos. Nós só usamos vírgula e ponto. Aqui no texto também tem ponto e vírgula.*
> Mark: *então vamos colocar também. E parênteses…..*
> Gloria: *pois é…. é outra forma. Fica bom. Ih!!! Olha aqui! "Which" – nem lembramos!!!!*

Mark: *isso mesmo! "which" pode ser usado no lugar de "that".*

Gloria and Mark notice the use of the semicolon and parentheses and agree to use both in their text as they reformulate it. Gloria notices the use of which, and Mark then mentions that which and that can be used interchangeably.

## 3. Discussion

The data show that in carrying out the tasks collaboratively, the students spontaneously engaged in dialogue which mediated their language learning. Through their output in the form of collaborative dialogue, they became aware of their linguistic difficulties and points of uncertainty, as predicted by the output hypothesis (Swain, 2000), and tried to find ways of solving them collaboratively. By verbalizing their problems through social interaction, the students had opportunities to reflect on, analyze and better understand them.

An aspect which I consider very important to comment is that the participants were involved in a very friendly atmosphere. They actively participated in the activities, trying to solve their problems by themselves. There were no fixed expert/novice relationships. Both contributed to the discussion, providing useful feedback to one another. The students trusted each other's responses – collaboration was successful. Scaffolding during peer interaction promoted learner development.

The findings indicate that the students attempted to solve their language problems by translating the sentences into their native language (L1) and by using the tools at their disposal, i.e. the dictionary, besides activating their prior knowledge of the English language. It also became clear that when comparing their written text to the original, students had rich insights into the process of language production. These strategies certainly contributed to a better understanding of the English text.

The reading comprehension activity showed that the students were finally successful in the task. By completing the table in Portuguese, they proved they had fully understood the passage. Their evaluation report also showed that they enjoyed working collaboratively, and were very proud of their success without the teachers' interference.

## 4. Conclusion

With the purpose of investigating how collaborative dialogue performed in L1 during collaborative writing tasks helps foreign-language students better understand an academic text in English, the qualitative pilot study had very positive results. It became evident, for example, that the students' collaborative dialogue allowed them to move from production to comprehension (Swain & Lapkin, in press).

When asked to perform a writing task collaboratively, the students did *language* about form and meaning. By noticing the gaps and holes in their knowledge, and trying to find solutions to their linguistic problems, the students not only learned or confirmed new vocabulary meanings, but especially became more

> aware by experience of how English sentences can be put to relevant communicative use, actually to involve [them] in the discovery of how discourse is realized through the particular medium of the English language. This awareness, this discovery, is as crucial to comprehension as to composition: both of these activities are aspects of the communicative competence, of the basic process of interpretation which underlies all language use (Widdowson, 1980:84).

The tasks certainly allowed ESP students to better understand a reading passage, but, above all, they helped them believe in their potentialities to learn a foreign language. They could finally realize the real value of being an independent learner.

It is important to note, however, that this paper reports the data from a pilot study which only sets the basis for a more complex research study (the author's Master's Degree dissertation research).

APPENDIX

COLLABORATIVE WRITING TASK
A) PRE-WRITING (BRAINSTORMING SESSION)
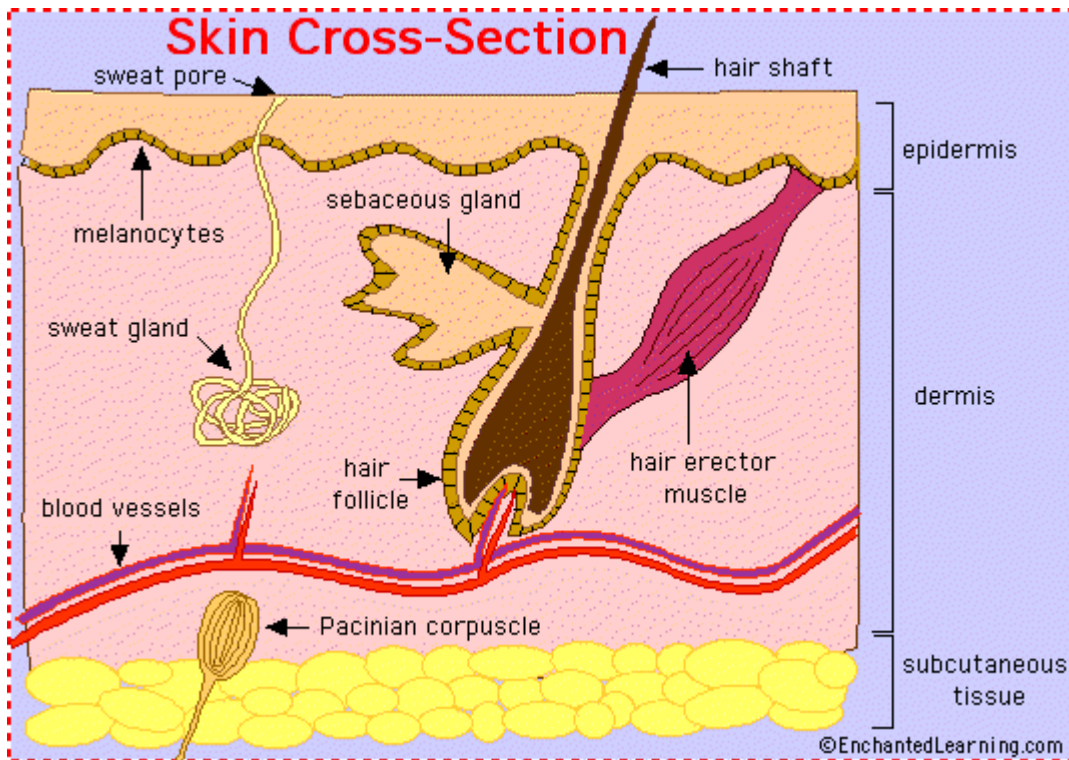


(retrieved from **www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/anatomy/skin/** on Jan.10th, 2007)

B) THE WRITING TASK

Exercise: (Adapted from Widdowson, 1980:82-83)

Put the statements in the following sets in the appropriate order and combine them where necessary to make a paragraph. Then arrange the three paragraphs (A,B,C) in the most appropriate order to form a complete passage.

A.  1. Human skin is only about 0.07 inches (2mm) thick
    2. The skin weighs about 6 pounds (2.7kg)
    3. On average, an adult has from 18-20 square feet (about 2 square meters of skin)

B.
1. The skin covers the entire outside of the body
2. The skin can sense painful and pleasant stimulation
3. The skin also regulates body temperature
4. The skin is the human largest organ.
5. The skin stores water, fat and vitamin D
6. The skin serves as a protective shield against heat, injury and infection

C.
1. The dermis contains sweat glands
2. The second layer is located under the epidermis
3. Each layer provides a distinct role in the overall function of the skin
4. The outer layer is called the epidermis
5. The dermis contains oil glands
6. The epidermis contains melanin
7. The hypodermis stores adipose tissue
8. Melanin gives the skin its color
9. The second layer is called the dermis
10. The epidermis and the dermis are the skin's main layers
11. The dermis contains nerve endings
12. The skin is made up of two main layers
13. The epidermis is a tough protective layer
14. The dermis contains hair follicles.
15. The dermis is attached to an underlying hypodermis
16. The hypodermis is also called subcutaneous connective tissue
17. Melanin protects the body against the rays of the sun
18. The hypodermis is recognized as the superficial fascia of gross anatomy

READING COMPREHENSION EXERCISE

Read the following passage very carefully.

### SKIN ANATOMY - (AN INTRODUCTION)[5]

The skin is the largest human organ, covering the entire outside of the body. In addition to serving as a protective shield against heat, light, injury, and infection, the skin also regulates body temperature, stores water, fat, and vitamin D, and can sense painful and pleasant stimulation.

The skin is made up of two main layers - the epidermis, and the dermis, each providing a distinct role in the overall function of the skin. The outer layer is called the epidermis; it is a tough protective layer that contains melanin (which protects against the rays of the sun and gives the skin its color). The second layer (located under the epidermis) is called the dermis; it contains nerve endings, sweat glands, oil glands, and hair follicles.  The dermis is attached to an underlying hypodermis, also called subcutaneous connective tissue, which stores adipose tissue and is recognized as the superficial fascia of gross anatomy.

On average, an adult has from 18-20 square feet (about 2 square meters) of skin, which weighs about 6 pounds (2.7 kg). Human skin is only about 0.07 inches (2 mm) thick.

*        *        *

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[5] (Adapted from "Introduction to the skin" by Jason R. Swanson, Loyola University Chicago, retrieved from
http://www.meddean.luc.edu/lumen/MedED/Medicine/dermatology/skinlsn/skini.htm
and from **www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/anatomy/skin/**  Jan. 10th, 2007)

Complete the chart below (in Portuguese) according to the information contained in the passage.

Órgão:

Peso:

Espessura:

Extensão:

Funções:

1.
2.
3.
4.

Camadas:

1.
2.
3.

Camada 1:

Nome:
Características:


Camada 2:

Nome:
Características:

Camada 3:

Nome:
Características:

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