Cândice Diniz Silva

**I finally found a place for
my questions.**

Monografia apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Língua Inglesa da PUC-Rio como requisito para obtenção do título de Especialista em Língua Inglesa.

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MONOGRAPH

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To my parents, Eustáquio and Gisa, my brother, Ézio, and my beloved boyfriend José Luiz, who have always believed in me.

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study is to try to understand my professional choices as a teacher based on a reflection on Exploratory Practice not simply as an investigative tool, but also as an attitude toward learning in a classroom environment of English as a second language in a Language Center in Rio de Janeiro. This paper uses the Exploratory Practice approach to collect data, observe learners, and promote learning.

Keywords: Learning, Language, Exploratory Practice.

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“... Se chorei ou se sorri, o importante é
que emoções eu vivi...”

Roberto Carlos e Erasmo Carlos

1. Warming up: who am I?

I am a bachelor in Psychology, an English and Portuguese instructor for the last twelve years, and the coordinator of a language school. Although I realized I have a career as a language teacher only a few years ago, the learning process of a foreign language has intrigued me since I started giving English classes as a foreign language.

In 1997, I arrived from the U. S. - having lived abroad for two years - I needed to find a way to make money and I also wanted to keep up the English language fluency I had acquired. I was a student of Psychology, and I thought that in the future, if I wanted to apply as a psychologist for a multi-national company, it would be crucial to have an advanced level of English. Therefore, I started to give English classes.

When I first decided to teach, I chose teaching adults instead of children and I did so because I thought that in adults the communicative process was already established. In other words, I thought adults already knew how to communicate in their native language, and for me, if communication was already set, the second language learning process would be a “simple” matter of a foreign language acquisition.

As I was inexperienced teacher, I thought that teaching adults could be easier than teaching children. I thought then, just like my students still think, that I could leave the class harmlessly by simply acquiring another language. In other words, I thought a class was a unitary, isolated, cell of a bigger project which each student demanded for, in terms of their learning, when starting their courses.

In my mind, when a student arrived in a course, s/he wanted to know her/ his level, what structures s/he would learn, and when s/he would finish this program coverage. The way I used to see this process seemed very simple: language acquisition

was a matter of covering the syllabus. And I was a teacher who would transmit knowledge to my students by using the book and a method. And they would learn. It seemed very reasonable to teach a foreign language this way.

However, some students were not learning as well as I thought they would. After about six months of classes, I started asking myself if my classes were good enough or if the students were not learning because I did not have any formal education in linguistics. I was trapped in this puzzle, and decided to solve it myself. At the end of every class I started asking my students how the class was, what we could do differently to improve their learning. Fortunately, they tried to answer my questions, and together we could build different classes, based on their demands, not only on their project for the English course, but also on their expectations of me as a teacher.

I believed then that I was doing nothing else than teaching a language, because while teaching and looking for answers on how to make the language learning process easier for the students, I could find nothing related to the language learning process itself. When I thought the work with these adults were not helping much with my search, I decided - as an intern psychologist - to look for an answer on language acquisition and communication with children. I started working at a nursery school, but I did not quit teaching English. I thought that by observing children in the language acquisition process of their mother tongue (Portuguese) I could understand better how they learned a language. I was already interested in the communication process, and could closely examine it from a psychological perspective during my internship program. At this nursery school, I took care of infants and toddlers and participated in their daily routine. This experience with children was soon affecting my teaching practice; I could notice my classes became more focused on general comprehension than on language items to be taught. I started using a lot of gestures and onomatopoeic

utterances to emphasize and help the students' language comprehension. However, I gave up working there because I could not find an answer to my questions. Then, I thought the answer for what language is could be with their parents, so I decided to take part in another internship program in a maternity hospital. There I was responsible for attending pregnant women and I was trying to understand, from a psychological perspective, the kind of expectations these mothers had on their babies and how their communication with their spouses changed in terms of urgencies and targets during pregnancy. After designing this puzzle, I started considering an answer for communication and language acquisition could be in the family. Finally, I gave up looking for an answer from a psychological perspective and decided to focus on my professional life in the undergraduate course in psychology while giving language classes. In fact, I graduated without knowing what I had tried. At this point, it is of great relevance to say that I tried, and I still try. It might not make sense, but now I know it is worth trying.

However, things did not get better: I had many questions related to communication and language learning, and the psychology course was not helping me answer them. I gave up the psychological point of view, where listening in order to investigate was a major tool, when I noticed I was taking it from the wrong perspective. I was in a dilemma also between giving classes and being a psychologist. However, as a psychologist I could not find a place for my questions, I did not even feel in the position to state my questions. Soon I realized that I was focusing on the fact that I couldn't find an answer. I wanted THE root in terms of learning how to communicate, assuming language was a tool. If I had tried not answering at first, the road could have been shorter and less anguishing.

Finally, In 2003, I decided to be only a language teacher and not a psychologist anymore. However, I still had all my questions with me. I thought those questions could have prevailed due to a belief I had: language teachers are expected to be assertive. I thought that when teachers teach, they have to decide on students' levels, design learning programs, and give grades. On the other hand, my own answer seemed not to please me. I was still determined to find answers to my questions. I kept asking: "What is language?", "How can I, as a teacher, teach a second language?", "Can students learn a second language?"

1.1. Meeting Exploratory Practice

In 2005, I thought that taking a course on teaching could be helpful, and would also make me feel a real teacher - a teacher with a degree in teaching. However, I did not want to take an undergraduate course again. I asked for help from some friends, I searched a lot on degree requirements, course syllabus, and in 2006 I finally decided to take a post-graduation course at PUC-Rio in "Língua Inglesa". Since the beginning of this pos-graduation course I felt I had found the environment I was looking for: a learning environment where my classmates had experience in language teaching and we were all eager for answers. I was happy to find a place where people like me were looking for answers. I felt so comfortable to ask questions. I was relieved to find a place where the ideas presented supported my ideas on language learning and acquisition. The course was divided in modules, and in a module named "Issues in Research Methodology" I was introduced to "Exploratory Practice" (EP). EP is summarized by its mentor, Dick Allwright, as follows [Exploratory Practice (EP)]:

“Exploratory practice is a name given to a sustainable way of carrying out classroom investigations which provide language teachers (and potentially learners also) with systematic framework within which to define areas of language teaching that they wish to explore, to refine their thinking about them, and to investigate them further using classroom activities, rather than academic research techniques, as the investigative tools”

(Allwright *apud* Slimani- Rolls, 2003:221)

Meeting EP was like finding a place where asking questions is reasonable, in fact it is crucial. Questions are the means to better understanding. I was tired of following the book and not finding anything. I thought EP could be a way to look for answers, focusing on questions first. According to Allwright (1991:36)

“conducting empirical research assumes that the main point of the research is to test theories by finding out if the theory correctly predicts what actually happens, and if the results do not match the prediction, then it is possible that the theory is wrong, or at least that it needs modification”.

Therefore, EP is an investigative tool, but not interested in gathering data for further analyses, not aiming at building or reaching a manual or guidelines on how to conduct our classes. Its aim is to allow room during the language classes, for discussion of relevant issues, chosen by and for teachers and students. These issues are related to their learning and teaching and are integrated in ordinary class activities.

In a typical Exploratory Practice process teachers, together with their students, build puzzles. Puzzles are questions, raised by either the teacher or the students, related to a specific language item to be taught or their learning experience carried out during the class, targeting at a better understanding of the process. Therefore, it facilitates teacher and student involvement in the search for understanding better their teaching/ learning environment.

The idea of having teachers and students together to reflect upon an issue, not any issue but one which intrigues them, was something new to me. I could see that it would promote the use of the target language, its practice in a relevant context, as well

as a discussion on the issues that teachers and learners are all involved in: our lives in the classroom

1.1.1. What is my objective?

As a teacher today, I am interested in discussing about the learning process from a different perspective. From a perspective of a teacher who wants, who needs to learn with her students in order to feel there is learning going on. When I look back now I know, I would not be able to look at language from a standardized perspective because my ~~educational~~professional-course background was not standardized; almost nothing I do is very standardized. The same way this monograph is not standardized, and that, writing this monograph is a moment for me to explain myself as the language professional I am.

In all this process, what I still believe in is that the students know more about their own learning ~~th~~aen we could think of or they sometimes believe. Students know what they want to do and what they should do in order to reach their goals. My aim in this paper is to show this by discussing “my students’ opinion about the role of homework” (See Appendix I) in their second language learning process, and to build a better understanding of the learning process through a class activity where all the participants are equally and cooperatively involved (see Appendix II). I still don’t have many answers, but I do have many stories to tell about the theoretical paths I have taken, the ones I have chosen, my beliefs, and the things I have read and done.

In order to reach this aim, firstly I consider important to discuss about the concept of language I deal with when I reflect about my classes. Otherwise, I believe, I can not understand what kind of learning I am promoting. Secondly, by means of discussing homework, I would like to give evidence ~~te~~ to the importance of understanding the practice of a language as a relevant moment for sharing experience and knowledge.

2. What language ~~A~~am I talking about?

The learning process I am talking about here is the acquisition of English as a second language. How can I consider that a person *acquired* a second language? For the meanssake of this discussion we will consider a language acquired when the people involved in the communication process are able to understand the doubt or the gap in information or concept requested by the other party, and being able to, somehow, through the means of an answer, make from their own perspective, a relevant use of it.

According to linguists (Berk 1999:1-4) language is primarily a social tool, its function is communication and a a systematic resource for expressing meaning in context (Halliday 1994:97), and interaction is a central ingredient in language acquisition (Lantolf 2002:247).

According to Hopper (apud Larsen-Freeman 2002:42) learning a language is not a question of acquiring grammatical structure but of expanding a repertoire of communicative contexts. Language is not about having, it is about doing. According to Halls and Walsh (2002) current understandings on classroom interaction and its links to language learning are based on the premise that much of our linguistic, social, and cognitive knowledge is intimately tied to our extended participation and active

apprenticeship in sociocultural events and activities considered significant to our everyday worlds.

When talking about language learning, I am referring to a ~~we are talking about~~ *second language experience*. For the time being it is important to bear in mind that if we are talking about a second language acquisition, ~~we~~I mean that somehow a first language was already established. Here ~~we~~I ~~are~~ am not interested in how this first language was established, but how we can promote understanding and experience in a second language class environment. We are not talking about any second language class either - we are talking about English classes with adult language students and teachers.

In order to learn a language, we should go through the process of language learning. However, here we are not concerned about the techniques involved in order to teach specific subjects or language items in the learning process. Here we will focus on an attitude present in the class in order to promote understanding of learning. Once I am an English teacher in an environment of English as a second language, this environment is my tangible evidence if there is an ongoing learning process or not. In other words, we are concerned with the pedagogy of English as a Second Language, considering pedagogy as the art of being a teacher, pedagogy as a style of instruction, as a practice.

Being in this position ~~we~~I pose the following questions:

What is language? What does language mean? By asking these questions in fact, I would like to reflect about the role of language in communication, once I have already posed the concepts of language I believe we can deal with during classes. Is language an instrument? Is language the means? Is it a construction? Or could it be a set of rules?

Why would it be important to ponder about these questions? Because depending on how we answer these questions, we will define our attitude toward language. And

depending on our attitude, we will learn differently. We can never forget that our attitude toward something implies the outcomes we want to bring up. Only after understanding about the concept of language we want to learn, will we be able to think over the learning process. In other words, firstly we must make a choice, and then take all the consequences of this choice.

According to Halliday language is a *system of meanings*. This view on language as a system is a way to face language. As it is often called by students “grammar”, or syntax, would be another way to see language as a system of meanings, as well as phonetics, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and so on. They are all different systems to study language. Can we use a language just by studying it?

Zellig Harris (1952) coined the term “discourse analysis”. He started a search for language rules which would explain how sentences were connected within a text by a kind of extended grammar. Later, Swales (1990) stated that the quality of language as being meaningful and unified (coherence) cannot be explained simply by concentrating on the internal grammar of sentences. Therefore, knowing what is possible to make a correct sentence and to identify where the sentence ends may be important, worthy, and helpful for teaching and learning purposes, but it is not enough. Being a communicator, having what Hymes calls *communicative competence*, involves much more.

However, sentence linguistics still confines language to what happens within sentences. The authors above invent their examples for analysis or take language people have used and remove the features they believe to be irrelevant to their purposes. Sentence linguistics argues that they take away what is incidental and variable in language and leave what is permanent and invariable. From my point of view, they

gather isolated sentences, grammatically well formed, without context, invented or idealized. Unfortunately, when we communicate, this is not how we use language.

I believe there is more to producing and understanding meaningful language than just knowing how to make or recognize correct sentences. In other words, grammar does not stop with a full stop but goes over it. Exactly like language behaves.

In order to listen to what the students want to tell us, we must look beyond the formal rules. Due to our knowledge (of the world, of the speaker, of social conventions, of what is going on around us as we read or listen) in order to make sense of the language we encounter I must look beyond formal rules. I believe language is part of a wider social and psychological context.

Therefore, we need a system that can also account for conversation and other types of spoken or written English "longer" than a sentence. Most of this language is acquired without conscious attention, but some situations require training because of the use of complex language production. Our education system accounts for some of this training, and as a teacher we must consider different *analyses*, or even practices, as a tool which can help students "grasp" meaning. For example : using the text as a process and through the *analysis* of lexical ties, we can lead the student into going backwards - the reader will then become the *interlocutor* (with the text) - and work on "meaning" as a process based on ties which are already constructed.

In other words, depending on **how** the teacher presents language to students, these students' characteristics of going for details, a static grammar, is "enforced". This is an atomistic view and it is used in favor of the concept of "right" or "wrong". However, if we face for example a text during the class using the *analysis* of lexical ties, we can show the students exactly the opposite. We can show that the text has meaning as a whole, and that identifying the "links" can lead us to a better

comprehension not only of the text, but also of how to effectively use language.

According to Halliday, the *analysis* of texts enables us to increase our *understanding* of the linguistic system and of how it permits speakers and writers to *process coherent meaning*.

Whenever, in my classes, we analyze a text or any other piece of information, meaning will be negotiated, and it can be done in the target language (English). Therefore, the new language system is practiced, is used, and is relevant. The choice of words, which is a speaker's choice, and word order of one sentence often depends on the sentence that follows. Besides that, the *analysis* of the material (e.g. text) is done together, teacher and student, discussing meaning, ideas, comprehension and understanding of a text, or a piece of information. Things may be done differently.

2.1. How differently?

For example, lexical cohesion refers to the cohesive effect of the use of lexical items where the choice of an item relates to the choices that have gone before. It works above the sentence level. The knowledge and use of cohesion can help us guide our students toward a greater understanding of the text, moving from a detailed *analysis* to the *understanding* of the text as a unit. In order to proceed with this kind of *analysis*, Halliday explores the use of lexical cohesion ties, such as: repetition, synonyms and antonyms, related words (near synonyms), hyponyms, and superordinates.

This kind of *analysis*, saving all the terminology, is a great tool to make students aware of what *is hidden*, and at the same time written in the text, or said in a

spoken piece of information. It can be a tool for the teacher, as well as for the student. Minimizing frustration and increasing comprehension.

However, the most important point here, is not what we use to mention in terms of text analysis. Here, the most important point from my perspective as a language teacher is that Halliday is in favor of a type of analysis which provides room for language exchange and discussion, as a consequence, making room for learning.

According to Cook (1989:)

“(...) there is more to using language, and communicating successfully with other people, than being able to produce correct sentences...Knowing what is supposed to make a sentence correct, and where that sentence ends, though it may be important and worth teaching and learning, is clearly not enough.”

As mentioned before, we are here dealing with a concept of language not designed to be simply studied, but used. We are talking about a language that has the quality of being meaningful and unified (Cook 1989), quality which is also named as coherence. Quality which, according to Cook, is necessary for communication and for language learning, but which cannot be explained by concentrating on the internal grammar of sentences. Halliday (1994:95) makes the point that the relationship between the forms of utterances and the types of meaning they can express is a complex one, which is based on the principle that what the speakers say makes sense in the context in which they are saying it . In order to make it clear, I would add that, for the means of this study, it is also the relationship established by people, and the types of meanings they can express to themselves which are very intriguing and complex. Besides, the language they use, will build, establish, and promote a relationship. This is probably the reason why language is so important and, at the same time, so difficult to define.

3. EP as an attitude?

Language has always intrigued me and I saw in Exploratory Practice more than an investigative tool. I found in EP an attitude toward learning which could absorb my ideas about language based on questioning language itself.

After a class on investigative tools, I started to think that it could be reasonable to have doubts. It was reasonable to question myself, and to ask questions. We can question to understand. And I keep asking to myself: Who can handle this attitude?

In order to try to answer this question, first allow me to present Dick Allwright's idea on who is the learner (see Appendix II). He said in his last presentation in a seminar at PUC-Rio (2006) that learners are "key developing practitioners". Therefore, it is relevant to say that when Dick Allwright says that learners are practitioners, I particularly do not like the term practitioners. Maybe it is just a matter of terminology, because "practitioner" reminds me of practice, drills, language as a static entity. Also, I believe this can lead to a mistaken use of the concept, so I prefer, here in this paper, to think of learners as "exchangers", exchangers of information, structures we choose to speak, attitudes, opinions, ideas, etc... And I would include teachers and students in this exchangers category, exactly like Dick Allwright does. Why should I do so? I should do so because, in a classroom, we (my students and I) are exchanging, although we may have different objectives. This exchange I am talking about is like entering a dark room with two or more people trying to exchange - exchanges which may turn on the lights of this room and make people see one another from a different perspective. We reflect, we try to understand, we get intrigued (or puzzled) by questions that we have never tried to ask, or we have never thought we could ask ourselves and the teachers, and vice versa. As a teacher I could never think, or even allowed myself to question things like: Do I always give the same class? Why don't my students do their homework? Is my class

only based on the course book? Am I mistaking it? This type of questions is more than simply a question. It brings a lot of responsibility to whomever asks them. As Dick said at a seminar at Puc-Rio (2006): I “want to really put learners centre-stage, alongside teachers.”

The distinction we need to make at this point is that a question, in order to practice a specific vocabulary item or a grammar structure, is not the question we are talking about. The question we are talking about involves reflection, and trying to answer this question already indicates understanding the responsibility of sharing information in order to exchange ideas and understandings about ourselves, our lives, our social group, our responsibilities, and our thoughts.

“The teachers are officially in charge of the practice of language teaching that goes on in the classroom, but they have to leave the practice of doing the actual language learning to the learners... teachers cannot do it for them.” (Ch 1p1, Dick Allwright – To be published).

In other words, the model: speaker -> message-> interlocutor, or the code/transmission model, is not dynamic enough for such exchange.

“We can no longer assume that our students are simply students, nor they are bundles of discrete variables. They are complex human beings who bring with them to the classroom their own individual personality as it is as at a given point in time, and this influences how they interact with what we do as teachers”
(Tudor *Apud* Allwright, 2001:14).

It is very important to mention that this attitude is also valid for teachers. If an interaction is unique – due to social factors, personal factors, background knowledge, etc... each meeting is a new opportunity for better understanding. It is like a game where the rule is: question yourself. If it is a more experienced teacher, there is a

tendency to work more on questions. Dick Allwright warns us that we may expect some sort of tension whenever we ask, and we must be careful. We are “between the expression of uniqueness and individuality, and the need to be aware, and careful, of one’s effect on others.” (Allwright’s words in a Seminar at PUC Rio 2006).

Questions, meaningful questions can be very productive. We as teachers, in order to live a “friendly” learning environment, must ask questions. I feel impelled to explain the inverted commas I used in the word friendly. When I say friendly, I mean it aims at promoting learning as a dynamic process; although, from the experience I have, I know these questions can be in fact very disturbing.

However, the teacher knows when exchangers succeeded because the student understands the game, and starts to ask questions too. Firstly, we usually talk about grammar – comparing structures; then, vocabulary usage; and then, questioning themselves. When students notice that questions are welcome, that answers can *depend on* something, we can also think that situations can promote language and its practice.

In fact, interaction is what establishes a situation, and it is the situation established ~~by~~ through interaction, in turns, that can promote language.

4. A Swiss cheese!?

Depending on how you relate to the person asking/ answering, you will have different situations. Therefore, a situation is established by the people, and the way they relate to each other. For this same reason, a traditional model of second language teaching can be established if one of the people involved in the situation does so.

However, I do not know how to put myself in the position of someone who has the knowledge to be transmitted to the students. Dick Allwright proposed, in his

seminar at PUC – Rio in 2006, that we try to think of learners as practioners of learning, and I believe we are not talking about a socio-interactional model. I see the socio-interactional model as a model to deal with language as a product. The teacher has an aim in terms of language to be produced by the students, and uses activities that can make the students produce this specific language item. After meeting Exploratory Practice, I do not believe this objective meets the EP's objective. Learners are not just targets.

I do not assist/help learners in a passive way. I try to ask them and let them come up with better ways of learning. No one better than ourselves to know how (well) we can learn. As Allwright says, the learners are key because they are the only people who can do their own learning, because whether or not language professionals recognize the fact, learners can develop, do develop, and will develop over time.

Here when I talk about development, it is not a linear one. It is not a development which can be measured by the index of a book, or by the syllabus of a course. It is related to the kind of complex ideas the student is able to convey, usually closely related to his opinions, and his way of life. This is the way I see learners in a class environment. Basically I try to develop a better understanding, even because, as a teacher, I am also developing my own understandings. We work together, but we build an attitude or a puzzle for our own lives. It is an individual process through cooperation, but never a selfish one.

This is the reason I believe textbooks and lesson plans can be a trap, even for the more experienced teachers who cannot see that the class happens beyond the material, for both teachers and students. If the teacher gets too involved with his tools, he will play this game alone, just like a single child. If teachers and students share tools they can play together, even if their planned outcome, their objective, differs. However, if the

teacher focuses on his tools, and the students on theirs, sooner or later they will notice they don't need one another.

There is a tendency to analyse the learning process stratifying it in teachers and learners, and then talking about interaction. This type of analyses will not help us further than the syllabus coverage. In other words, it can not lead to interaction. It can be very didactic, but not very close to the proposal I have for my students during a class. The class is what matters. And what do I mean by a class? It is a unique interaction that happens with people when they want to share concepts. *So let us try to think of learners as practitioners of learning – or exchangers - not just as targets of teaching.*

Maybe that is a reason for hearing a lot of complaints by teachers about materials, syllabus, etc... I myself used to complain, until I started to learn with my students. When I decided to listen to them, I seriously took their comments and started by inverting the order of presenting new language items to students, by letting them decide what we should talk, or discuss, or even study. The class changed and there was a different teacher/ student relationship - we became learners. Therefore, the classes are never the same or as Dick Allwright said at PUC-Rio (2006) “each lesson is indeed a different lesson for every learner”.

The book and the language *produced* became an excuse to share ideas whenever possible: about my work, about their jobs, their family, our general concepts, whenever possible. The book was transformed by the student into something relevant, not because of the new structures presented or the new vocabulary, but because language learning was an excuse to think over real issues for us, just because we were willing to do so.

This is what in EP is called a “mutually supportive environment”, an environment where learners are essentially social beings in the necessarily social setting of the language classroom—. If the setting is not social, the method is transmission.

Some people could say that the book (here it can be any supporting material used in the class by the teacher) + the syllabus + the teacher = learning. This equation can look reasonable, but it reminds me of a different language learning model. You can ask yourself: how could we then fit EP in this equation? If you ask me that, I would say you are asking the wrong question. Instead, we should ask: how can I have a different attitude toward this equation? If you ask yourself, I can give you my opinion. This equation is like a Swiss cheese. All the complaints, comments, jokes, doubts which happen within the “plus” (+) is what is meaningful in our learning. This is when learning takes place. It is like fooling people with cheese and later telling them or letting them find out, it is like Swiss cheese, one where learners can fill the holes in, while you, as a teacher, fill some of them too. People can get upset with this attitude or can enjoy it. Fostering this attitude should be the worry during the class. As Dick Allwright said: “what they can do there depends to some extent on others, here ~~lies~~ yies and is emphasized the importance of interaction”.

I believe teachers and students share responsibilities during their interaction. And the only one responsible for the students’ learning is the student. However, the teacher is also responsible for promoting a “friendly”¹ learning environment. An environment full of doubts, uncertainties that promote discussion, unfamiliarity with what is supposed to be obvious, and the negotiation of meaning that can be a process for their lives, for both, the teacher and the student. The only difference between the two here is that along the discussion, one empowers the other with a “new” language and English becomes an excuse for interaction.

How ~~much~~ committed can a learner be to his learning during the class? Once he enjoys discussing and sharing ideas with others, he will learn the language, because he

¹ “friendly” to promoting room to learning, which can in fact be very hostile to learners/ exchangers

wants to disagree, to expose his ideas, to negotiate meaning, and in order to do that, he needs language. A learner can learn when he feels he needs and when he makes his point through. As Cortis (1977: 66) wrote many years ago: *“no teacher teaches except by consent. Learners are therefore crucially important to their own learning, and that inescapable fact must surely be key to the whole notion of how they may or may not be helped by whatever language professionals can do.”*

You may be wondering, where this discussion is leading to. [If you ask, I can try to answer]. However, I need you to try to ask me first, and then I would try to answer. Would you try to ask? Would I try to promote a room for you to ask? Or would you try just by seeing me trying? What would it take you, my partner, to make me try? That’s the point here. I will always try. No matter what you say. As a teacher, I don’t want you to be sure of your answers, even because I can’t be sure of mine. In fact, the answers can be changed, but the process by which we try to reach them can be the same. My process never stops. I always learn a new way to experience the same issue; the process never stops. This is because I do not want to give the same class, I do not want to know the same things, I do not want to be the same all the time. I know I can’t be the same if I talk to different people. Therefore, if I talk to different people, I can never be in the same situation because I experience different relationships.

If I am the teacher, I can simply get the book (the one I have been working with for the last four years) and use the method I have been working with (for the last ten years). The room is very familiar and almost always identical. The course can be standardized in terms of facilities and procedures. I have the rules, I am the teacher, and the students? They require answers from me ~~answers~~. When we feel comfortable, and when they believe we can communicate in English, we at least notice we have different opinions. What makes me laugh may not make them laugh. The way I

believe I share ideas is not the way they share ideas. The meaning of talking and having a conversation can be different for us and even then, we can communicate, we can see we need language, even when we don't share opinions. And then, it is as if the lights in the classroom went off. I see nothing else. I hear voices, see faces, questions. We want to show our points. We want to have our opinions respected. And we share.

That's the reason why I decided to turn things around. I decided to ask questions too. Why can only the student have doubts? As a teacher I also have doubts about my students' second language learning process. Supported by Exploratory Practice, I made of it much more than a tool, I ~~adopted~~have it as an attitude in my classes.

5. Can you give me an example? ²

Over the last year, I was very intrigued by the fact that my students were not doing ~~their~~ir homework. Whenever I ask "Did you do your homework?" Frowning faces are usually the first reaction to this question. Students, when asked about their homework answer almost in "pain" and by doing so teachers can most of the time guess the response will be "No". I know they have very little extra time during the day once they are very busy with their jobs and family.

I have been questioning myself a lot about the role of homework in the process learning *for these* students. However, before moving into this topic, I consider ~~it~~it important to talk a little more about adult students.

² Complete investigation with tables in Appendix I

When questioned why they don't do their homework, the most common answer is "I didn't have time". In fact, as Agnieszka Strzalka says in her article "Seven Things Adult Learners Dislike" (1998)

"Adult learners are busy enough carrying out their professional work and fulfilling family duties; so, if on top of that they decide to take up a foreign language, this becomes quite a burden. Adult learners do want to learn but have very little or no time for it at home. They expect to learn as much as possible in the classroom."

Whatever are the teachers' assumptions for their students doing so - better saying not doing so - this issue was not discussed in this investigation. We talked about homework from the students' point of view. The aim of this investigation was to identify some of the students' opinions about homework and also some reasons for not doing it, due to the belief that understanding the students' behaviour can have an effect on teachers' way of giving classes.

In order to investigate the students' opinions about homework and some reasons for not doing it, I proposed an activity (a potentially exploitable pedagogic activity - PEPA). An Exploratory Practice followed by an open unstructured interview with a group of 8 upper- intermediate students, aging from 36 to 50 years old. All the students had studied in at least two other English courses. They were professionals working in different fields (sales, law firms, and financial consultancy). It's important to mention that the homework we assign is taken from the textbook used in class which is designed by the course's method department.

The activity (PEPA) consisted of writing on the board "HOMEWORK IS..." and having them complete the sentence. After completing the sentence, I asked some questions to clarify the understanding of their answers. For example: student 1 said: "Homework is necessary, it's like an obligation." and student 2 said "Homework is

necessary”. I asked student 2: an obligation...? What do you mean?” Student 2 answered: No, teacher, necessary to learn!”

A total of 8 students were involved in the activity and the issues investigated were: firstly, (A) a definition for “homework”; secondly, (B) if they do their homework and thirdly, (C) the reason why and finally (D) if homework should be a choice.

In response to question A (a definition for homework): three of them defined homework as a tiring activity, two students said it was important, the other two said it’s a way to consolidate material studied in class, and one said it was boring.

Four of the students said they never do their homework, three of them said they always do it, and one said he does it sometimes. Five of them said they don’t do their homework because they don’t have time to do it, whereas three students said they do it because it helps them consolidate material given in class. When asked if homework should be a choice, six of them said it should, and two students said it shouldn’t be a choice.

After having those answers turned into graphics (see Appendix I) I thought we could use the PEPA results to prepare a poster for an event at PUC-Rio. I proposed to them the idea of going public. They liked it. By E-mail they sent me some ideas on how this poster should look like, and the final suggestion is on Appendix III. It is very important to mention that during this whole process, I never gave them homework. And I did not ask for suggestions on the format of the poster. However they were so clearly involved with all this that a student sent a scanned handout by E-mail, which presented ideas for the poster (appendix III). I could notice how involved they were in this project, because even restricted by time and by the class length, they found a way to participate, talking to me during the break, asking about the poster, sending suggestions to my E-mail. We were interacting and practicing language, sharing ideas, learning.

5.1. Discussion on the homework issue

This group of students reinforce the fact that most of the students don't do their homework and that the most common reason is ~~due to a~~ lack of time, besides finding it tiring and/ or boring. During the classes students argue that they have a lot of responsibilities and tasks to meet due to their jobs, they usually arrive late at home, and they don't want to spend their free time doing homework because they would waste the time they have to spend doing more pleasant things, such as staying with their families. However, some do their homework and associate this activity as an important part of the learning process. All of them believe that if the homework relates very closely to their needs they will probably do it.

When asked if homework should be a choice, most of the students answered yes, but isn't it already a choice from the students' perspective? After all, some of them don't do their homework. Maybe they aren't aware of the fact that they are already choosing. On the other hand, some students do approach their teacher and ask for homework on a specific topic, and when given this type of assignment they say they do it because then it relates to their needs.

Throughout all this process we have had some light on these students' opinions about homework. This can enhance the discussion over homework assignment helping us, teachers, understand why they don't do it. On the other hand, I reckon this can be considered a very limited study due to the number of subjects involved, and also to the restriction in the homework assignment as to the one given on textbooks. In order to identify more subtle details on their expectancies of a homework assignment further

investigation on this matter could be conducted to understand what students mean when asking to have homework as a choice.

6. Finally ?

This activity brings ~~to~~evidence to the fact that when we communicate we position ourselves toward an issue and that our interlocutors grasp the message in what ~~it~~relates to our opinions and judgments on matters.

In other words, communication is not a simple matter of creating and saying sentences, but it also related to conveying and expressing our opinions and judgement, which depending on when and to whom we express them, they will change. Moreover, we, as teachers of English as a Second Language, are rarely aware of this relevant matter, and as a consequence we don't allow our students to be aware of this fact either. This lack of awareness is not due only to my attitude as a teacher in the class, but also to the materials used which, most of the time, don't break the ground by themselves for questions (puzzles). Usually the syllabus of a book or a course is given by a list of items: grammar, practice (which covers the grammar point of the chapter worked through practices covering all the four skills, not necessarily equally (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)).

The equation book + the syllabus + the teacher does not encourage learners to look for a different attitude. However, If learners are aware of a possible different attitude toward their own learning, different issues can be discussed. I am not talking about an equation. I am talking about a class designed to be a Swiss Cheese, which does not necessarily need to look as if it has holes.

Learners should have room during the class to compare material provided in this class. The learner can be almost always invited to share experience, to judge, and give his/her opinion on issues. The greater consequence of this attitude is that language is an excuse for learning. According to Jin and Cortazzi (In Byram 1998:99-119) from the framework of expectations and norms of interpretation through which cultures mediate learning and classroom communication we can see there is a tendency for adult learners to keep the transmission model. On the other hand, discussion over some aspects in order to unlock a text (for example) will help learners guide the class choosing the appropriate clues to be passed on in order to activate the learners own knowledge of language communication to unlock language. This search for unlocking language is a search that, according to Dick Allwright, always needs a purpose or purposes beyond itself. The most obvious purpose is of course to further our understanding of the world we live in. In this kind of research the situation is important, the situation is also interactional, the interaction, relationship among the people involved in the conversation defines, qualifies, the situation. Therefore, we can not forget that formulas can require, can ask for pre conditions, just like in chemistry lessons, equations and the NCTPs (Normal Condition of Temperature and Pressure).

I like questions more than answers because they are less deterministic; Questions, from this point of view, can be more productive. We teachers are there, in the class, to allow room for interaction. In reality, language is an excuse for interaction;

therefore vocabulary and grammar are consequences, not an objective. How we deal with this excuse (language) will, to a certain extent, determine our practice as teachers; and as a consequence, our students' learning experience.

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Appendix I

A WORD ON MY STUDENTS' OPINION ABOUT HOMEWORK

“Did you do your homework?” Frowning faces are usually the first reaction to this question. Students, when asked about their homework answer almost in “pain”, and by doing so, teachers can most of the time guess the response will be “No”. I work in a private language course, where we teach only adults, and this fact made me assume that they would be aware they are supposed to do their homework. On the other hand, I know they have very little extra time during the day, because they are very busy with their jobs and family. Those aspects make them differ from other learners (children and teenagers). According to Agnieszka Strzalka (1998) - *“Adult learners differ from other age groups in respect to their learning experience, memory type, motivation, and, most of all, in respect to their needs and expectations... Knowing about the don'ts of teaching adults seemed as important as knowing about the do's”* - Therefore, she made some observations related to what demotivates adult students. As a result, she discovered there are seven things adult learners of English dislike, and among the seven dislikes we will find Homework in the fifth position.

I have been questioning myself a lot about the role of homework in the learning process *for these* students. However, before moving into this topic, I consider important to talk a little more about adult students.

Once they frequently say they didn't do their homework, when asked why not, the most common answer is “I didn't have time”. In fact, as Agnieszka Strzalka says in her article “Seven things Adult Learners Dislike” (1998):

“Adult learners are busy enough carrying out their professional work and fulfilling family duties; so, if on top of that they decide to take up a foreign language, this

becomes quite a burden. Adult learners do want to learn but have very little or no time for it at home. They expect to learn as much as possible in the classroom.”

Besides the facts mentioned above, she also gives the teachers impressions on the reasons for their students not doing their assigned homework:

“Some teachers say that students seem to reject, ignore, or forget their homework. Others say that students are stressed, full of physical activities, and they end up too tired to cope with all their responsibilities, especially the ones that require quiet and concentration.”

As teachers, we concentrate on the importance of homework on the learning process, but we have been limited to assigning homework and most of the time we don't wonder about our students' beliefs when facing this matter. Therefore, I decided to make some room during the class so they could express their ideas on that.

Whatever are the teachers assumptions for their students doing so- better saying not doing so- this issue won't be discussed in this paper. We will talk about homework from the students' point of view. The aim of the present paper is to identify some of the students' opinions about homework and also some reasons for not doing it, due to the belief that understanding the students' behaviour can have an effect on teachers' way of giving classes.

Methods

In order to investigate the students' opinions about homework and some reasons for not doing it, I conducted an exploratory practice¹ followed by an open unstructured interview with a total of 8 upper- intermediate students, aging from 29 to 50 years old. All the students have studied in at least two other English courses. They are professionals working in different fields (salespeople, teachers, lawyers and financial consultants). It's important to mention that the homework we use is the homework from the textbook used in class which is designed by the course's method department.

The investigation was held through an exploratory practice at the beginning of the class – in the previous class they were consulted in order to get their agreement to participate in the activity which would happen in the following class aiming at gathering information for a paper I was writing. All the students agreed to participate. The activity consisted of writing on the board “HOMEWORK IS...” and having them complete the sentence. After completing the sentence, I asked some questions to clarify my understanding of their answers, for example: Student1 says : “homework is necessary, it's like an obligation” and Student 2 said “ homework is necessary...Teacher: an obligation...? Student 2: No teacher, necessary to learn!”

The questions that were asked during the interview are listed in the results section in order of occurrence during the class.

RESULTS

A total of 8 students were involved in the activity and the issues investigated were: firstly, (A) a definition for “homework”; Secondly, (B) if they do their

homework and (c) why; Finally, (D) if homework should be a choice. Three of them defined homework as a tiring activity, two students said it was important, other two said it's a way to consolidate material studied in class, and one said it was boring.

Four of the students said they never do their homework, three of them said they always do it, and one said he does it sometimes. Five of them said they don't do their homework because they don't have time to do it, whereas three students said they do it because it helps them consolidate material given in class. When asked if homework should be a choice, six of them said it should, and two students said it shouldn't be a choice.

The table and the charts below represent these results:

The numbers in parentheses indicate how many students shared the same opinion:

Questions	Students' answers			
A) Homework is...	Tiring (3)	Boring (1)	A way to consolidate class material (2)	Important (2)
B) Do you do your homework?	Yes (3)	No (4)	Sometimes (1)	
C) Why ?	It helps to assimilate new material (3)	Due to lack of time (5)		
D) Should homework be a choice?	Yes (6)	No (2)		

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This group of students reinforces the fact that most of the students don't do their homework and the most common reason is due to a lack of time, besides finding it tiring and/ or boring. Students argue that they have a lot of responsibilities and tasks to meet due to their jobs, they usually arrive late at home, and they don't want to spend their free time doing homework because they would waste the time they have to spend doing more pleasant things, such as staying with their families. However, some do their homework and associate this activity as an important part of the learning process. All of them believe that if the homework relate very closely to their needs they will probably do it.

When asked if homework should be a choice, most of the students answered yes, but isn't it already a choice from the students' perspective?. After all, some of them don't do their homeworks. Maybe they aren't aware of the fact that they can choose. On the other hand, some students do approach their teacher and ask for homework on a specific topic, and when given this type of assignment they said they do it, because then it relates to their needs.

We have some light on their opinions about homework. This can enhance the discussion over homework assignment helping us (teachers) understand why they don't do it; Although, this is a very limited study due to the number of subjects involved, and the restriction in the homework assignment as to the one given on textbooks. In order to identify more subtle details on their expectancies of a homework assignment, once the don't do the homework and would like it to be a choice, further investigation on this

matter should be conducted to understand what they mean when asking to have homework as a choice.

“The more you know about your learners' likes and dislikes, the more fulfilling and successful your classes will be”

STRZALKA, A (1998)

Notes

- 1- Exploratory practices (EP) – “ a name given to a sustainable way of carrying out classroom investigations which provide language teachers (and potentially learners also) with systematic framework within which to define areas of language teaching that they wish to explore, to refine their thinking about them, and to investigate them further using classroom activities, rather than academic research techniques, as the investigative tools”

(Allwright apud Slimani- Rolls, 2003)

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Appendix II

Excerpts

Five Propositions about learners by Dick Allwright

Our thinking, and the inspiration provided by learners like those just quoted, leads us to five propositions that we shall be using throughout this volume as a shorthand summary of how we would like to see learners treated by us language professionals. We will use them first as a framework for reviewing the field as it has developed and as it is now. And we will then use them for making proposals about what we see as the way forward for people who wish, like us, to develop general understanding in the field of classroom language learning, but who also wish, crucially, to do so in a way that helps learners themselves develop their understandings, and thus develop as practitioners of learning. We will be advocating practitioner research like that just exemplified from the work in Rio, where teachers and learners are co-practitioners, and where learners conduct their own investigations into their own puzzles about their own learning lives.

Proposition 1: Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways.

For us it follows from thinking of learners as ‘key practitioners’ that we need also to respect their unique individuality as people. We cannot therefore imagine learners will be best served by being expected to learn and develop as practitioners of learning in just the same way as everybody else in a learning group, by going through exactly the same classroom activities, and so on. Again we shall explore this issue further throughout Part I, but for now it may suffice to note that textbooks and lesson plans, and the way teachers are trained to use them still do

typically seem to assume that learners in a classroom can best be treated, to put it very crudely, as ‘an undifferentiated mass’. Clearly learners in a classroom group may have much in common with each other, but we now know enough about learning to know just how idiosyncratic it can be, and typically is. Each lesson is indeed ‘a different lesson for every learner’. We will develop this idea in Part 2 of this volume as it is important to our overall argument about learners and how they might work for their own development. For now we propose simply that it makes sense to at least try to treat learners in accordance with the idea that learners are not best seen as an ‘undifferentiated mass’.

Proposition 2: learners are social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment.

Secondly, we believe that we also need to acknowledge the essentially social nature of learning, and therefore think of learners as essentially social beings in the necessarily social setting of the language classroom. (Whether they are in disposition anti-social is an entirely separate matter, of course. Anti-social people utterly depend on having a social setting to be anti-social in, after all.) It follows that learners, even if we see them as key practitioners of learning, are not entirely free agents in the classroom. What they can do there depends to some extent on others, is indeed constrained by the presence of others. So we may expect some sort of tension in the classroom between the individual and the social, between the expression of uniqueness and individuality, and the need to be aware, and careful, of one’s effect on others. But these ‘others’ also represent

the major positive resource for mutual support. Learning strictly alone may be possible, and even attractive for some, but almost everyone seems to readily acknowledge that being in a learning group is likely to be far more enjoyable, and far more productive, because of the mutual support such a group can provide.

Proposition 3: Learners are capable of taking learning seriously.

If we are to think of learners as ‘key practitioners’ then clearly they are people to be taken seriously, as serious people. As we shall see throughout Part I, this is a key underlying issue for many aspects of the work of language professionals. In teacher training, for example, trainers often ask their trainees to do case studies of individual learners, as a way of helping trainees to better appreciate the crucial importance of trying to understand learners. At the same time, however, other aspects of teacher training, such as instruction in lesson planning, seem more likely to reinforce the perception that learners need almost everything done for them. And we do know that a good many experienced language professionals consider that the learners they know and work with are not really at all serious about their learning. Around the world what seems most to concern teachers, for example, is their learners’ apparent lack of motivation for language learning. There are distinguished exceptions, of course, as we have already seen from the Rio example, and as we shall amply illustrate in Part Three of this volume, but the general picture we find is largely negative. And if that is how teachers perceive their learners, then it is perhaps understandable if that is what guides the way

they treat them, as people who cannot be expected to be serious, as learners. But if experience tells us that people tend to conform to others' expectations of them, it also tells us that this can work positively as well as negatively.

We should also note that whether or not learners are serious about their learning is clearly a matter of great social importance in the classroom. So important that some learners feel they need to hide their seriousness of purpose to avoid the negative social consequences of being labelled too 'keen'. This clearly poses problems for the teacher, who is being given a false impression of the learners' attitude to learning. So it may help to hold on to the idea that learners are capable of taking learning seriously, even if they do not currently appear to be doing so.

Proposition 4: Learners are capable of independent decision-making.

Thinking of learners as 'key practitioners', and therefore as people capable of taking learning seriously, also leads us to think that serious people are not best served by always being told what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and who to do it with. Unfortunately, much of what happens in language classes around the world could be characterised in this way without much injustice. Language curricula, syllabi, textbooks, and again lesson plans, all tend to leave relatively little space for learners to learn how to take their own, necessarily idiosyncratic, decisions about what to learn, when to learn it, how to learn it, and so on. And of course there is the social dimension to consider. A teacher may be able to enforce

decisions by the mere exercise of authority, but learner decisions, given the expected idiosyncrasy, are not likely to be unanimous, and so any learner-based decision-making will need to be highly sensitive to the social situation. It is perhaps not surprising then, if so little space is typically available for learners to learn how to take relevant pedagogic decisions about their own learning. And so it is hardly surprising at all if teachers typically consider that their learners are not capable of taking independent decisions, and are not likely to respond well if given the opportunity to do so, especially given that they are not seen as serious as learners anyway. Again this is something we shall deal with at greater length in Part I.

Proposition 5: Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning.

We also know from experience that learners are not likely to be already fully developed as learners when they get together in language classes. We can therefore expect their ability and maturity as learners to have scope for development, perhaps towards being able to take their own learning seriously, and to take productive independent decisions about their learning. Given our first proposition we should also expect that learners will develop best in unique and idiosyncratic ways, and not develop best if treated as an undifferentiated mass. In addition, following our second proposition, we should expect that when we start thinking about what can be done in the classroom to foster the development of learners as ‘practitioners of learning’, then we will soon see that

development itself can benefit from being seen as a mutual social process, where we can all stand to gain most not by 'going it alone', but by sharing understandings, ideas, and experiences.

Appendix III

student's handout on the poster