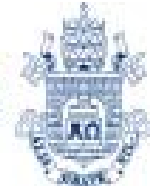


PONTIFÍCIA UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA
DO RIO DE JANEIRO



Ruan Nunes Silva

**If this group were a family, who would be who?:
affect, beliefs and roles in the EFL classroom**

DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS
Curso de Especialização em Língua Inglesa

Rio de Janeiro
Agosto de 2013

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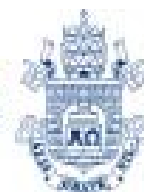
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Monografia apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da PUC-Rio como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Especialista em Língua Inglesa.

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“Learning is, I believe, an essentially idiosyncratic process which can be fostered or frustrated, but which cannot ultimately be controlled in the way that teaching techniques require for their success.”

Dick Allwright

Acknowledgements

It was harder than I would have expected it, but it has finally come to an end. All the effort, sleepless nights, books read, pages deleted... it all paid off eventually.

First of all, it seems only natural that I must thank *Bebel* for her support even when I was lost and not sure whether I was treading the right path. It has been an amazing journey through the dark yet lovely woods. I'm deeply indebted to you.

All my professors at PUC-Rio who made it possible for me to (re)think my own teaching practice and develop my skills – both as a practitioner and a learner. You have shown me there is always room for improvement.

Mydiã: Remember we made that vow and promised we would finish this course no matter what happened? So, here we are, both of us have accomplished that. Thanks for the sweet words, the great ideas, the papers we had to hand in, the text messages that kept me going even when I did not feel like I should. Thanks for believing in me 😊

I must thank my classmates for their kind ideas and mum-like support. We have made it!

My family and friends also played an important role. I don't think it would have been possible without your support. Thank you for having my back and being there.

Last but not least, it goes without saying that Thiago supported me in a way no-one else did. Thank you for holding the line and offering a soft place to land. Thanks for the great joy bestowed on me.

ABSTRACT

SILVA, RUAN NUNES, Maria Isabel A. (Advisor). **If this group were a family, who would be who? Affect, beliefs and roles in the EFL classroom.** Rio de Janeiro, 2007, 40 p. Monograph – Departamento de Letras, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

Much has been said about teaching adolescents and how challenging it might be: several are the questions it poses and many are the difficulties to be overcome. This study deals with my experience as a teacher at a language institute in Rio de Janeiro and my challenge: teaching an advanced group of learners. What should have started as a great experience proved to be otherwise: students were not interested and frequently had issues not only with their peers, but also with lessons as a whole. Intrigued by such scenario, I decided to investigate and go deeper to unveil what was happening, therefore this study will focus on the importance of beliefs (Barcelos, 2006) and affect (Arnold, 2009) while teaching a second language and how both play a central role in our classroom. This research will also make use of Exploratory Practice as part of its theoretical framework in order to make it clear why it was decided to carry out the investigation in the classroom and not outside.

Keywords: Exploratory Practice; Affect; Beliefs;

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 8 |
| 2. 21st CENTURY: THE CASE OF LANGUAGE INSTITUTES | 10 |
| 2.1 A bird's eye view of language schools | 10 |
| 2.2 Guiding 21 st Century Student | 12 |
| 2.3 Hi, teacher! Reality bites | 13 |
| 3. THE CASE OF AFFECT LANGUAGE AND LEARNING | 15 |
| 3.1 A look on pedagogic and environmental forces | 17 |
| 4. AS FAR AS BELIEFS ARE CONCERNED | 20 |
| 4.1 Teacher beliefs: history and expectations | 22 |
| 4.1.1 My history and my stories: my own beliefs | 22 |
| 4.1.2 Their history and their stories: learner beliefs | 24 |
| 4.2 Comparing beliefs and data: a bird's-eye view | 25 |
| 5. KICK-STARTING A PROCESS: HOW IT ALL BEGAN | 27 |
| 5.1 Exploratory Practice: whys and because | 27 |
| 5.2 The 20/20 experience: developing my PEPA and working on my puzzle | 29 |
| 6. WE ARE A FAMILY.... OR NOT? | 31 |
| 6.1 Analysing roles: who would these students be? | 33 |
| 6.2 Analysing roles: who would the teacher be | 34 |
| 6.3 Data and beliefs: giving it a second thought | 35 |
| 6.4 How does affect show itself? Four family scenes and one intermission | 36 |
| 6.4.1 Family #1 | 36 |
| 6.4.2 Family #2 | 38 |
| 6.4.3 Family #3 | 39 |
| 6.4.4 Intermission | 40 |
| 6.4.5 Family #4 | 41 |
| 7. CONCLUSION: THIS IS NOT GOODBYE | 44 |
| 8. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES | 47 |

1. INTRODUCTION

(Please, bear in mind there is a reason why I have decided not to use an academic and scholarly tone in favour of a personal one. I have always liked teachers who were able to tell good stories and storytellers always manage to catch people's attention, so I hope I am a good one and that my story is interesting enough.)

Once upon a time there was a happy teacher who had just started working for a new language institute. During his in-service course, he was told how amazing this place was: interactive whiteboards which worked miracles, teacher-designed web material, educators who were allowed to express their creativity as freely as they wished to. Although they had a syllabus to stick to, paths, routes and ways were to be chosen by teachers. This hard-to-believe-in scenario would easily seduce any educator and it is no wonder that novice teachers could easily believe that these tools would provide interesting and memorable learning experiences. However, what triggered this study was the opposite outcome: my fairy tale never had the chance to be read aloud and, as the old saying goes, there is more than meets the eye.

What you are about to read is a very personal account of my experience while teaching an advanced group in 2012. By no means I intend to be judgmental, but, given that my study comes from a very personal place, the text evokes a plethora of personal ideas and opinions. I have decided to use first person pronouns to explore my own vision and to be able to retell my tale, therefore pages and lines will be suffused with words such as *I, my, our, ours* and *mine*.

Initially, this study was triggered by my clear dissatisfaction while teaching an advanced group in 2012. I believed I was doing my best, but it did not seem enough, therefore going deeper and further seemed the only way to unravel the mystery behind my students' seemingly increasing disinterest. After some time, the original question, *Why don't my advanced students find it enjoyable to study English?*, slowly changed and embraced other enquiries which I brought up to help me develop my studies. From these enquiries, beliefs and affect are easily singled out for their importance and the central role each played in this research.

The ideas discussed in this study are divided into 5 chapters. The first one will deal with some challenges the 21st century has placed before teachers and educators: the connection between learners and technology. I hold the opinion that technology has not only helped us become better professionals, but it has also changed the way we learn. However, I argue that to some extent we are not yet prepared for that, especially when it comes to teaching teenagers, which was my case. I also take the chance to delve into some details about the group this study is about, upper middle-class teenage learners.

While dealing with these students, I realised I needed to unearth some beliefs and thoughts so as to understand what was happening in my classroom (and why not with students and myself as well?). The second and third chapters will elaborate on two aforementioned important issues that helped me develop my study: affect and beliefs. While the first was essential to establish good rapport and make students more aware that they could easily relate to their peers' preferences, the second played a central role in terms of my (re)thinking what I expected from pupils had to do with my own learning experience.

After exploring affect and beliefs, it seemed natural to explain why I decided to analyse data collected in the light of Exploratory Practice. Dick Allwright has stated that research *can* and *should* take place in the classroom as part of the lesson and not as extra burden for teachers and educators, thus teachers should be aware that any taught lesson and any taken step may be used as part of a research. Taking into account that research was no longer a scholarly activity, but one which I could carry out on my own, the fourth chapter looks into the activity I developed with my students and lays out some Exploratory Practice precepts as well. Finally, the last chapter, *the climax of this story*, focuses on the activity data so as to draw some conclusions and ideas. I decided to analyse the roles student and I played in the classroom by means of an activity in which students would have to choose and describe their group as a family. Analysis will establish a significant correlation between data and theory and, as Exploratory Practice states, it will focus on understanding rather than changing something. Their understandings surely brought eye-opening conclusions and definitely took us on a different path than expected.

We shall now let the story unfold.

2. 21st CENTURY: THE CASE OF LANGUAGE INSTITUTES

Guiding questions:

- 1) Who are my advanced students and what do they as 21st century learners want?
- 2) What does enjoyable mean and how can I make my classroom a better learning environment?
- 3) What are my students' view regarding learning English?

2.1. A bird's-eye view of language schools

Teaching adolescents has never been an easy task. It might as well be argued that teaching itself is a difficult task and, although we are already in the 21st century, teaching and learning still seem to have a long way to go. The same goes for teaching teenagers.

Times have changed yet education seems to worship what may be termed as *old school*: textbooks which do not share students' reality, rote learning, meaningless memorisation techniques and many others. When it comes to language learning, it is striking that many schools prefer these old school ways to more sophisticated and elaborate materials which are available. There are several reasons which may justify such a decision, but this is not the focus of our study.

Interactive whiteboards have replaced blackboards, computers have become part of everyone's life, students' exposure to L2 has increased, mobiles and the internet have made life easier and there are still teachers and educators who prefer to overlook all benefits these tools may bring. We are not advocating teachers are the ones to blame for lack of interest or students' low levels of motivation, but it cannot be denied how much technology has helped change and better classrooms around the world.

Still, some students will not learn. Still, some students do not *feel* they *need* to learn.

As an educator, I have already found myself questioning my own practice and wondering what could be done to make students more interested. Prensky mentions that "the place where the biggest educational changes have come is not our schools; it is everywhere else *but* our schools." (2010, p. 17) One might

wonder then that the revolution which is happening now is not happening in the classroom and the answer is *Not really*.

Despite the fact that many schools have not yet adopted technology, language schools definitely seem to be taking the other way. Many of them are in tune with what is happening around the world and adopt state-of-the-art technology so as to try to make learning as close to students' reality as possible.

Still, some students will not learn. Still, some students do not *feel* they *need* to learn.

Teachers and educators often find themselves wondering what happens that, in spite of all these technological devices and gadgets, pupils are reluctant to learn. One possible answer is given by Prensky when he says that

all teachers today know that digital technology is becoming an important part of students' education. But just how to use it in school is not yet completely clear, and most educators are at some stage of figuring out (or worrying about) how to use technology meaningfully for teaching. And these teachers are right to be concerned, since depending on how it is used, technology can either help or hinder the educational process. (2010, p. 20)

Teachers, as Prensky states, have been trained to tell¹ and there is nothing wrong with telling. However, when telling becomes the only tool educators use, it is very likely that students are not really *there*. Again, this is not to say that there is a best way to teach as educators are free to use more or less traditional ways according to their school policies.

Engaging students in a meaningful way using technology is a hard step most educators have not yet taken and it may also be highlighted that some who have started might have done so due to schools' policies and not their own desire. However, to what extent does technology play a central role in our classroom? Have we teachers become so addicted to it that simple activities may have become obsolete?

¹ Prensky explains that teachers are trained to tell, that is, lecture, present and explain – in other words, they would talk. Students then would only “listen, take notes, read the text, and memorize. This is often known as *direct instruction*.” (2010, p. 31) Prensky criticizes this increasingly ineffectiveness of telling and privileges the conception of *talk* as a real means of communication and not *talk* as a teacher-centred teaching.

The point is, there is a lot of technology available and schools are becoming more and more resourceful, but why is it that we still face challenges every day?

2.2 Guiding 21st Century Students

As previously mentioned, we are not to teach students the same way we learnt – such issue has to do with our beliefs. Times have changed and so have students. This so-called Generation Y has different principles and ideas and teaching these learners demands a new perspective from teachers – or at least one that differs from the traditional one many of us were brought up in. In other words, our students are what has been called *Digital Natives* whereas teachers and educators who were born before this technological boom have been called *Digital Immigrants*. The latter will teach the former, but not the way they have learnt because digital natives speak a whole new language.

Teaching teenagers nowadays does not mean using technology, although several gadgets have been playing a central role in classrooms throughout the world as they sparkle a significant interest in this age group. Prensky (2010) mentions six things educators need to do to ensure his partnering philosophy takes place in the classroom: 1) finding and following their passion; 2) using whatever technology is available; 3) researching and finding information; 4) answering questions and sharing their thoughts and opinions 5) practicing, when properly motivated (e.g., through games) and 6) creating presentations in text and multimedia.

As interesting (or old-fashioned) as they may seem, at least five of them have always been part of teaching. Encouraging learners and teachers to find something they are passionate about not only makes classes more interesting, but may also create a bond between students and teachers. However, what happens when schools adopt technology as a regular part of their lessons and students are still not interested? The tale which is about to be told will rely mostly on a very simple activity which was carried out without any technological device offered by the language institute where I worked at the time.

2.3. Hi, teacher! Reality bites

I taught an 18-student advanced group in 2012. The youngest was 14 years old and the oldest was 18. Their interests were very different and so were their personalities. Some of them were more reserved students who openly told me during our lessons that they would not like to participate and some of them were outspoken ones who would always enjoy being in the spotlight. It is important to mention that all of them studied at private schools and were high school pupils.

English classes at the institute would take place in the afternoon and all students went to school in the morning. As most of them lived in a wealthy area of the neighbourhood (Tijuca), some of them had already been abroad and it is worth noting that two of them had already gone backpacking for one month in Europe. Definitely this group's case was an interesting one as I expected them to be more motivated as they had more opportunities than most language learners. Unfortunately, nothing was as good as it seemed to be.

As a novice teacher at the institution, I did not know much about the group when I started. However, two weeks after the beginning of the semester, several teachers approached me to tell details about the group. Among these details there were ideas concerning their lack of interest, their disruptive and upfront behavior, their use of L1 even though they were advanced learners and many other negative comments. For obvious reasons these learners had already been labeled by other teachers as a bad group to teach.

Not only were all the negative comments true, but students were also extremely disrespectful and disruptive. They would not even talk among themselves, what made pair work and group work difficult and unearthy tasks to be carried out. When they actually did talk, they would insult and use Portuguese. In addition, they would every now and then complain about how bored they were.

As any other educator would imagine, this challenge proved to be demanding. I felt lost and at first I did not know what to do. Films and books romanticise some stories involving learners and teacher and I thought how motivated these teachers become as they overcome their problems and fears. However, having just started at a new institution, I was afraid of losing face before my students. Several enquiries clouded my thinking: Would I be able to

handle all these issues? How did students see themselves? Did they see me as a friend or a foe? What could be done to improve our learning environment?

To be able to cope with all these difficulties, I decided to work first on their sense of community² (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) because there was nothing I could do without their help. Affect was a key issue I needed to work on to achieve my goals. Then, when I realized some rapport had already been established, I could develop an activity which would help me think more about my first enquiries.

² McMillan & Chavis developed their definition of sense of community as having four elements which needed to be catered so as to be established: “The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences.” (1986, p. 4)

3. THE CASE OF AFFECT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Guiding questions

- 1) What is the connection between affect and language learning?
- 2) How can affect enrich the classroom? **or** How did affect enrich my classroom?

Learning a second language can be not only challenging, but demanding as well. Howard Gardner has suggested that there are several different intelligences and also singled out some learners may bear more features of one over others. To illustrate this point, it can be argued that a linguistic learner (according to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences) may find it easier to learn by reading and may enjoy languages whereas a logical-spatial one may not be as fond of language learning. However, every time each semester starts, questions and doubts seem to mushroom in the classroom. Teachers wonder what they *have* and *can* do to *teach* all these different learners and, most importantly, how not to feel overwhelmed by institutional pressure. Although there are several drawbacks and issues which will not be discussed here, one key factor I would like to call attention to is the connection between learning and affect. This connection has been widely discussed in several studies and articles and it will shed some light on the present study.

As far as language learning is concerned, it is known that affect plays a central role as it can help make learning a meaningful and memorable experience. According to Gerchezon (2012) and Jane Arnold (1999), students' reaction to another language or culture can be detrimental to the learning process and should be accounted for, therefore learners have to understand which strategies will help them become more aware of their qualities and flaws. Then, understanding and mastering rules may not be enough to make one proficient. A student may know all rules and lexis required, however when he/she needs to interact, this learner may find it frustrating not to get his/her message across, leading to feeling frustrated. Teachers often enquire what to do when learners are afraid of losing face in front of peers, especially when they do not want to feel in the spotlight.

Regarding affect, Kuschnir (2003) says that

Several authors have analysed classroom affective components, relating them to the design of a more meaningful and truthful learning experience. Once participants from a lesson are recognized as social beings that bring their own pedagogical experiences and specific affectivities to the classroom, educators and any pedagogically involved person help to make the context of the classroom as a more real and concrete one. (2003, p. 50, my translation)³

Kuschnir (2003) states that students should be seen as active participants in the classroom so that they can feel heard and seen. Once they become active participants, they are able to bring to the school their own experiences, thus enabling the classroom to become more concrete and real. When this experience-sharing process takes place, teachers open the doors to affect. Arnold (1999) goes on to say that “The term *affect* has to do with aspects of our emotional being (...). It should be noted that the affective side of learning is not in opposition to the cognitive side.” (1999, p. 01)

Arnold (1999) also demands that a learner-centred curriculum should privilege affect in many ways. Participants should be active in the decision-making process because it “opens up greater possibilities for learners to develop their whole potential.” (1999, p. 6-7). Once room is given to learners, they may show educators that what is being done is leading them nowhere and that there is room for improvement. The way my advanced learners signalled to me that we needed to change something could have been interpreted as misbehavior or lack of interest, but it also showed that we needed to take risks. Risk then meant trying to make the group work together and build up rapport by means of some learner-centred activities in which we would have the chance to hear from one another what we wanted to say and share.

To make room for these learner-centred activities, I decided to give students the opportunity to bring their own ideas to the classroom at the end of every class for one month. They would suggest videos, songs and topics and what I suggested is that we would talk about their choices otherwise it would be a meaningless process. I would raise questions as to why they wanted these, what

³ “Diversos autores têm analisado os componentes afetivos da sala de aula, relacionando-os com a criação de uma aprendizagem mais significativa e verdadeira. Ao reconhecer os participantes do evento aula como agentes sociais que carregam para o ambiente pedagógico experiências da vida e afetividades particulares, educadores e demais envolvidos na prática pedagógica acabam por ajudar a tornar o contexto da sala de aula mais concreto e real.” (2003, p. 50)

could be extracted from these sharing moments etc. My main goal at this moment was to stimulate emotional factors so as to “facilitate the language learning process” (Arnold, 1999:02). Positive emotional factors such as self-esteem, sympathy and motivation can make the difference in the classroom and, to create the aforementioned sense of community, I needed students to start seeing each other in a different way.

Therefore, by focusing on building up rapport with students, not only was affect cared for, but also some principles proposed by Prensky as students were trying find or follow their passions and share their ideas and opinions. Finally, when the time came for the PEPA (Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activity, to be discussed ahead) to be used, students were already used to speaking more than before and the way had already been somewhat paved.

3.1 Affect: A look on pedagogic and environmental forces.

It is easy to assume students are going to learn the same way, so language schools disregard students’ individuality and idiosyncrasy in favour of the aforementioned (tests, books, methodology) standardisation, which is still deemed the best way to assure results and equality. Students are then seen as part of a process in which they have no choice most of the time. The activity which I proposed in class to not only shed some light on my initial enquiries (How do students see/understand themselves and me?), but it also unearthed two aspects of affect which I needed to focus on: *environmental* and *pedagogic*. More questions started to pop up: Were there activities in which students would voice their ideas? Were their ideas heard? How comfortable did pupils feel in class?

In addition to the individual’s personal dispositions, there are at least two external forces that appear to shape the learner’s language-learning attitude: environmental and pedagogic. The environmental factor includes social, cultural, political and economic imperatives that shape the L2 educational milieu, (...) The pedagogic factor shapes how teachers, learners and the learning situation interact with each other to trigger positive or negative attitudes in the learner (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 39)

It is interesting to notice that Kumaravadivelu reflects on how students and teachers interact with each other and how this interaction may trigger positive and negative attitudes. It could be that either my students were tired of many things and needed a respite or they wanted something else which they had not yet been introduced to.

Although I knew I was trying to change and improve our classroom atmosphere, this advanced group I was teaching had to sit tests, hand in written tasks and take part in several projects as most language institutes require. I started to wonder whether they were willing to take part in any of these. I wondered to which extent they wanted to do something different or that they just did not feel like doing anything. Among projects which should be carried out throughout the year were Halloween presentations, Easter posters, birthday parties and some others, but these pupils preferred lessons in which there were no projects and their ideas were the only sources for speaking activities. Interestingly enough, Outeiral & Cerezer criticize that society demands that schools be normative and teach culture. (2003, p. 12), which leads us to the conflict between environmental and pedagogical issues when one is learning a second language. More questions popped up: To what extent should learners be involved in these projects? How realistic and objective are these? Did students share the same objectives as those of the institution?

These two “forces” – environmental and pedagogic – played a central role in my classroom as it was clear to me that my students’ objectives were not the same as the institution’s and, to a certain extent, very different from mine as well. Having different classroom objectives may have been the first topic I realised I had to work on more often so as to show learners that we could negotiate how we were going to work from that moment on. However, the thought of triggering negative attitudes mentioned by Kumaravadivelu was still alive and it required more time to investigate, thus I decided to focus on a speaking activity to understand better how these students saw not only their roles, but my role as well.. As analysis will show ahead, it can be argued that when one of my students agreed that he was “the dog”, even as a joke, he was aware former teachers and his peers had already labelled him as lazy and uninterested when, actually, he was struggling to improve. Such concept is an example of how negative attitudes may be triggered and it worried me.

Another interesting fact from the PEPA is that, in the middle of the activity, one student drew a face which resembled mine for the glasses and the fringe. I asked them if that was me and a different student immediately refused. He justified that that face could not be mine as it was not funny. Then, did this student understand that being funny was an important feature teachers had to have? Did this student think being funny was a quality or a flaw? While I have always been fascinated by teachers who were both strict and funny, I could not be sure if this students shared the same view(s).

While Kumaravadivelu (2008) does not quote any study to exemplify or even justify his claim that teachers' attitudes may influence learners' attitudes to language learning, it is interesting to notice that this belief seems to be part of every institution's list. Most institutions share the belief that teachers are role models and have great influence on learners, therefore motivation is also a key issue in the language classroom.

If teachers are role models and may instill positive and negative attitudes, I wondered if my students misbehaved because they wanted to or maybe they wanted to mirror something. I also questioned whether my beliefs helped me or thwarted my own plans.

4. AS FAR AS BELIEFS ARE CONCERNED

Guiding questions:

- 1) What are beliefs and what purpose do they serve?
- 2) What is the connection between my beliefs and my teaching practice?
- 3) Can I compare my students' beliefs to mine?

Defining what beliefs are is a difficult task. Barcelos (2012, p. 112) states it is hard to decide on one concept due to the existence of several articles and studies which have used several terms in different ways. However, some basic principles seem to permeate these: a) they are likely to change during one's lifetime (dynamic), b) they are not innate, rather they are socially acquired (social), c) they have to do with our experience (subjective and individual) and d) they may be contradictory (paradoxical).

When beliefs became the subject of study in the 1990's, they used to be thought of not only as stable mental structures which were unlikely to change, but also related to some binarism, whether they were right or wrong. However, this approach to studying beliefs has fortunately changed and we are now aware of the dynamism involved in this process. Beliefs change over the course of one's lifetime, therefore they are described as dynamic: what a teacher used to believe in 15 years ago may not be the same as what he or she believes in now. What's more, this teacher's experience may have influenced his/her own beliefs to the point where this practitioner has questioned his/her own practice and, for this reason, it is said that beliefs are subjective and individual.

It is also worth noting how beliefs are part of our social lives. An educator who has only been exposed to the same teaching techniques and that believes these are effective enough might not change his/her beliefs *that these techniques are useful and that others might not be*. An advanced learner who does not think speaking is an essential feature in a lesson is prone to find oral communicative activities pointless and dull. Obviously such examples are too simple and need to be developed, but they illustrate that beliefs are playing an important role in our classroom. We all have come across learners who state they do not feel their

English is improving or educators who feel they do not need to enhance and hone their teaching skills.

In short, beliefs have to do with the way we think and understand the world, our conclusions and perceptions. Ana Maria Barcelos (2006) says that she understands

beliefs, in a way close to Dewey's own interpretation (1993), as a means of thinking, as reality constructions, as ways to see and perceive the world and its phenomena, co-constructed in our experiences and resulting from an interactive process of interpretation and (re)signification. As it is, beliefs are social (yet individual), dynamic, contextualized and paradoxical. (Barcelos, 2006, p. 18, my translation)⁴

When Barcelos states that beliefs are both socially and individually constructed, she singles out how these are part of our lives since our childhood, therefore making it hard for anyone to change them whenever they feel the need. Basso (2006) shares the same view and supports this statement referring to how beliefs may be understood through a series of facts, namely one's upbringing.

We can say beliefs are moulded and circumscribed both culturally and historically. Although they have a very subjective character and, therefore, individual, beliefs are built socially, having in the social, in the group, its origin and due existence. Often are they formed in our formative years and for this reason they tend to be *change-proof*. (Basso, 2006, p. 71, my translation)⁵

Although beliefs have been studied since the 70's, only recently did teachers, researchers and practitioners decide to focus on its several aspects and influences. It is no wonder that some teachers overlook the importance of beliefs in the classroom and, according to Ana Maria Barcelos, some of these educators

⁴ Entendo crenças, de maneira semelhante à Dewey (1993), como uma forma de pensamento, como construções de realidade, maneiras de ver e perceber o mundo e seus fenômenos, co-construídas em nossas experiências e resultantes de um processo interativo de interpretação e (re)significação. Como tal, crenças são sociais (mas também individuais), dinâmicas, contextuais e paradoxais. (Barcelos, 2006, p. 18)

⁵ Podemos dizer que as crenças são moldadas e circunstanciadas tanto culturalmente quanto historicamente. Embora tenham um caráter subjetivo e, portanto, individual, as crenças são construídas socialmente, tendo no social, no grupo, sua origem e manutenção. Normalmente são formadas desde muito cedo em nossas vidas e por esta razão tendem a ser resistentes às mudanças. (Basso, 2006, p. 71)

even underestimate its values. It may be argued that this right-wrong binarism is deeply rooted in teachers for several reasons, among these we may find teacher training courses, school policies and language institutes requirements. As previously stated, beliefs used to be understood as having to do with something right or wrong, but such definition has changed over the last ten years. Fortunately, so have many teachers as well.

4.1. Teacher's beliefs: history and expectations

So as to be able to talk about my own beliefs, I need to share some of my history to make my points clear. It is worth remembering that beliefs change during one's lifetime so we are constantly (re)adapting to our new realities, however such changes do not happen overnight. Barcelos (2006) exemplifies this concept by saying that a teacher who is used to a more traditional approach may understand and enjoy the usefulness of a task-based activity, but he/she may not feel comfortable to go off his/her own comfort zone – what is new may be dangerous.

There is a significant correlation between what teachers believe and what they do in the classroom. It can be either that they are doing what they believe or not. The question of whether beliefs are what we think or what we do leads researchers to concepts as abstract beliefs (*crenças abstratas*) and beliefs in action (*crenças em ação*). While the former deals with teacher's assumptions, the latter focuses on how they actually teach. These concepts will be focused on and debated in this paper in another chapter.

4.1.1. My history and my stories: my own beliefs

Studying English was my favourite activity as a teenager. I studied at an audiolingual course and only later did I realize that most of my teachers had never had any official training and only some of them had had a B.A. in Language and Literature. It does not mean they were good or bad teachers, but they lacked some formal training which might have made a difference in terms of knowledge and practice. Had they had the chance to develop themselves as practitioners, maybe they would have had tried different things instead of the strict methodology they

were following. Even though it has been over 10 years, most language institutes still have their guidelines which educators must follow, therefore leaving little space for improvisation and teachers' ideas.

Growing up in a family in which both parents were strict and firmly traditional teachers made me have a more serious outlook on studying than most students. I used to believe that learners would only learn when they had some pressure from school, teachers or parents. However, it is known now that pressure does not mean better results. In other words, students are less likely to have good results when there is pressure (Kumaravedivelu, 2008). What students really need are clear objectives and directions on how to reach their objectives and goals.

As a learner, I also used to believe that perfectionism was the main goal. The more I practiced, the better language user I would be. When I became a teacher, my first groups showed me that I could not expect it from them, especially given that I always have higher expectations than everyone else. The bottom line was that I needed to work on my expectations because, for example, some students prefer not to talk in class and that does not mean they are less likely to become proficient speakers. Learning how to deal with different styles was an important professional step and made me rethink one of my first beliefs.

It is important to say that although tests and exams are still the way most institutions assess learning (How can learning be assessed by using standardised tests?), I have never been fond of them. I have always tried to use different ways to assess learners and show them that being graded 7 in a test did not mean he/she is less capable than others who got 9.

Unfortunately, as most teachers, I also spend a lot of time working for schools and institutes where there are strict rules to be followed, which means that sometimes teachers may stop thinking critically about what they are doing and start doing things *because they are told to*. Dangerous as it seems, when one stops thinking critically about his/her own practice, he/she is likely to label students like the ones I had. If a teacher believes that learners who do not do their homework and do not use English in class are not good students, he/she is relying on the belief that good students do their homework and use English. However, all of us have already taught learners who, although the quantity of English in class was great, lacked the quality expected.

When I started teaching the advanced group I mentioned in the introduction, I used to picture an image of students I would like to teach based not only on institutional beliefs, but mine as well:

- a) one who is interested in English,
- b) one who takes his/her studies seriously,
- c) one who has clear objectives and takes risks;
- d) one who does not believe tests are essential parts of the learning process;

4.1.2. Their history and their stories: learners' beliefs

Unfortunately (or not!?), I did not have a special activity in which I could discover what my students believed in. Barcelos (2012) suggests several activities in which learners take an active role while agreeing or disagreeing on several ideas. Despite its usefulness, I wonder whether my advanced students would have enjoyed a questionnaire-like activity as they did not seem to like writing as a skill. Pessoa & Sebba (2006) also expressed a somewhat widespread discontentment regarding questionnaires as these seem to make people to relate themselves to imposed statements rather than provide room for their real opinion.

After several classes and different activities, we inevitably got to know one another well and it was not difficult to understand what most students believed in, although these concepts may never be accurate, given the fact that they were never properly asked:

- a) they did not believe speaking English in the classroom was the only way to learn;
- b) they did not think books were the only means to learning;
- c) speaking should be the focus of our lessons;
- d) they should be the ones responsible for their own learning.

I need to make it clear that these are things I could observe during our lessons and they may not be shared by all students. Students would express these

ideas and I would write them down in an attempt to remember who said what by the end of the year.

4.2. Comparing beliefs and data: a bird's-eye view

The table below shows the contrast between my students' and my own beliefs. We are going to use these ideas to establish some connections between what was observed in the activity and whether they reflect or not our beliefs.

| My beliefs | Students' beliefs |
|---|--|
| a) one who is interested in English, b) one who takes his/her studies seriously, c) one who has clear objectives and takes risks; d) one who does not believe tests are essential parts in the learning process; | a) they could not actually learn so much in the classroom; b) books were not the only means to learning; c) speaking should be the focus of our lessons; d) they should be the ones responsible for their own learning. (eg. They would bring the topics and ideas) |

The first group mentioned that I would be the mother because the latter helps their children do homework. It is interesting to highlight the fact that they did not mention anything other than homework when, in fact, mothers do more than that. They preferred to focus on the idea that mothers are bossy. Another group characterised me as the father for giving order and guiding them. These ideas contrast with their opinion on how classes should be as pupils mentioned they thought classes were more profitable when they were the ones who decided on topics. If they were the ones to choose, I should be the guide. Another possibility is that my giving orders made them feel uncomfortable and uninterested. This has to do with students' belief D.

Although pupils did not seem fond of speaking English, two students who regularly needed some more help to develop their ideas in English were the first ones to speak out when groups should share their ideas. More outspoken and active students also took part in the activity, but did not take the first step. They

were clearly trying to take more risks than when the module started and, indirectly, they were relating themselves to my own belief (C).

Another striking fact the data shows us is students acknowledging their peers' and their own weaknesses. When G2 states that he is the black sheep and most groups agree that he is the son for his irresponsibility and immaturity, they are acknowledging that his playfulness sometimes disturbs the classroom. When a group says that CL is the daughter who is never home, they again acknowledge they know she is always absent and, perhaps, does not deserve to be evaluated the same way others are. I used to think students would not even notice if a peer was absent, let alone evaluate their peers, but during the activity they expressed their ideas openly.

5. KICK-STARTING A PROCESS: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Guiding questions

- 1) What is Exploratory Practice?
- 2) Why did I work with Exploratory Practice?
- 3) What was the activity developed to gather data?

As a graduate student at PUC-Rio in 2012, I had a module called Exploratory Practice in which students would think about their puzzles and research, that is, study and understand their puzzles. Most of them involved learners – “Why won’t my student behave?”, “Why don’t my students understand listening activities?”. However, my puzzle could not be anything but something related to a somewhat troublesome advanced group of teenagers I was working with.

It is of paramount importance to say that my decision to work with this specific group represented an important step in terms of professional development as I tried to investigate and work on my enquiry so as to establish some connection between theory and practice, which I missed as an undergraduate student.

5.1. Exploratory Practice: whys and because

Most teachers have schedules and deadlines to follow. If they are not able to cover some topics before test dates, then students may fail standardised tests. My case was not different from what most teachers usually face while teaching. This straitjacket certainly represented a big challenge as there was no time to carry out research in the classroom. Research was more of a far-fetched idea than a plan. Doing it meant having extra work to do at home and using precious classroom time and, maybe what I would regard as the worst part, doing something students would perhaps dislike. Exploratory Practice came in handy not only in terms of using precious time while teaching, but as a simple way to make research part of my everyday practice.

Exploratory Practice practitioners work to understand what is happening in the classroom, “not necessarily in order to bring about change” and “by using normal

pedagogic practices as investigative tools, so that working for understanding is part of the teaching and learning, not extra to it” (Allwright, 2009, p. 166-167). Therefore, doing research in the classroom did not mean questionnaires and multiple choice questions as I had always been introduced before. All teachers need to do is find a way to work on their puzzles in the classroom while doing something that is actually part of the lesson, so that precious time is not being wasted and students will not feel it is something extra, but part of their lesson.

As Exploratory Practice “starts out with an intention to try to understand, rather than change” (Allwright, 2009, p. 173), educators around the world find themselves wondering what is taking place in their classroom. They wonder why students do not like textbooks or why they are late. Unfortunately, many educators will find these questions unworthy of any attention and unlikely to be given a second thought. Others will understand that something in their classrooms needs to change, even though no answers can be given at the time. “Thinking”, along with “Doing”, is a key aspect of working to understand.

Teachers thinking about their own classroom will often come across some questions and puzzles. These usually come from long-term concerns, students’ questions and everyday events. (Allwright, 2009, p. 178) and lead educators to analysing them.

Teachers themselves may need reassurance that they will be able to fit EP into their normal working lives in and out of the classroom, without compromising the curriculum. Our case studies illustrate how teachers have managed to reconcile their investigative work with curricular demands. (Allwright, 2009, p. 178)

As educators have always had trouble finding time to do research, the gap between teachers and researchers grew larger and larger to the extent that research felt like some parasitic enterprise conducted by professional academic researchers, as Allwright thoughtfully stated in his article *Planning for understanding: a new approach to the problem of method*.

Once the educator has unveiled his/her puzzle, the next step is to develop a potentially exploitable pedagogical activity (PEPA) which is likely to provide some interesting insights and shed some light on the initial question(s).

5.2. The 20/20 experience: developing my PEPA and working on my puzzle

While tackling the issue of affect in the classroom, some reasons why my advanced group refused to take part in some classroom activities were scrutinized and my actions have also been stated previously. To be able to develop and carry out an activity which would help me think about my puzzle, I had to develop their sense of community by inviting them to bring their ideas and building up rapport. Only after both had been properly worked on would I be able to move to the next step.

After six months, students were finally able to work together, either in pairs or in groups. There were still some problems and sometimes they would refuse to work with someone in the group, but in general, they had become more understanding of the need to use English as their means of communication. After learners became more relaxed and felt the classroom environment had improved, what needed to be done then was an activity which would help me think about what they understood by my role as a teacher and their role as students. Comparing students' beliefs and mine was still an issue I looked forward to trying to do because at first it seemed there was a gap between us. Unfortunately, something easy became a big challenge.

At first, my puzzle was *Why don't my students find it enjoyable to study English?* Oddly enough, after some time it became somewhat clear to me that several were the reasons for their disinterest, but I still felt the urge to go deeper and unearth what their impressions about the group as a whole were – it did not matter anymore whether they found it enjoyable to study English. Slowly, my enquiry changed and took another form, regarding students' beliefs and understandings of their own group, although its initial intention was still there somewhere.

The term was halfway gone, test dates were coming and the next unit theme to be dealt with focused on family issues, recycling lexis to describe people in a family. Taking into consideration that this topic would be dull and repetitive for teenagers as they had already discussed it several times in the years spent at the language institute, my Exploratory Practice professor suggested me to develop

a speaking activity in which they could share ideas and from which I would be able to gather data to analyse afterwards.

At first I thought of asking them to write so that data would be easily collected. However my students' response to activities which involved writing skills were not the best ones, therefore my decision to work on their speaking skill would not only cater for what I felt that was important to develop, but it would also be a regular stage in our lesson. Finally, the activity became a speaking exercise which would serve as part of the pre-reading stage: If this group were a family, who would be who?

When the time to start the unit came, I thought whether it would be advisable to tell students I would like to record their ideas so as to share the following week. I told them I would like to record the activity for the sake of academic purposes and to give them feedback as well – which in fact I did the following week. Surprisingly, they did not mind my carrying my mobile to record them and even seemed to be pleased to hear their own voices when I played the track a week later.

6. WE ARE A FAMILY.... OR NOT?

Guiding questions

- 1) What does the data show?
- 2) Is there anything striking?
- 3) How do students describe themselves and how do they describe their teacher?

Once I was told that classrooms could and should be a family. It is important though to question whether the idea of being a family is a good one, even if most people would consider it the cornerstone of values and principles. Thus, if a classroom is a family, teachers and students would ideally help one another, overcoming obstacles and problems together. Unfortunately, the idea of a bond between teacher and students did seem a far-fetched one when I started teaching the advanced group previously described. Their initial lack of respect and cooperation made me wonder whether they truly saw and understood themselves as classmates or if there was something else there which I had not yet grasped.

As the following book unit would deal with family vocabulary, getting to know what pupils thought family roles were would perhaps depict our own roles in the classroom. At first I wanted to analyse and compare their word choices, therefore the activity I used focused primarily on their choice of lexis.

Below there are two tables with students' ideas concerning their family roles in the activity (See appendix 1 to read all data). The first one (Table 1) shows how students defined roles and which characteristics were attributed to each family part. The second one, Table 2, shows which roles students would play in the family according to each group's ideas. It is worth mentioning that some students were absent and others who were present did not receive any roles.

| Father | Mother | Brother/Son | Sister/Daughter | Dog | Grandpa |
|----------------|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| - gives orders | - tries to help. | - is playful | - is never home | - is lazy | - is older |
| - has to guide | - is serious | - is a rebel | - is never in class | - doesn't like to do anything. | - is more responsible |
| | - tells | - does not go to class. | - doesn't speak | | |
| | | - is a rotten | | | |

| | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| | people to pay attention | apple - is immature - is young | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|---|--|--|--|

Table 1 – Descriptions of roles

| | GROUP 1 | GROUP 2 | GROUP 3 | GROUP 4 |
|---------|---------|----------------|---------|-----------------------|
| RE | Father | - | Father | - |
| Teacher | Mother | Grandfather | Father | - |
| G1 | Son | - | - | - |
| BR | - | - | Dog | - |
| BE | - | Uncle / father | - | Oldest Brother/Son |
| G2 | - | Son | Son | Son |
| CA | - | - | Mother | - |
| PR | - | - | - | Mother |
| HU | - | - | - | Father |
| CL | - | - | - | Sister/Daughter |

Table 2 – Teacher's and students' roles

Unfortunately, I did not have any expectations as far as their lexis was concerned. Had I thought of what family roles should be like beforehand, it would be thought-provoking to compare what I expected students to produce and what they actually produced. However, it does not mean we should not regard their ideas as a complex system. In fact, their views are deeply influenced by their understandings of what a family is and, as striking as it may seem, most students seemed to share the same views when choosing which role each student would play in a family. If not similar in terms of roles, their descriptions shared the same train of thought as we are to see ahead.

6.1. Analysing roles: who would these students be?

As mentioned previously, groups shared the same ideas as to which roles some students would play. However, while some roles were not the same, descriptions easily match and provide thought-provoking insights into how students saw themselves and their peers.

It is interesting to notice how all the four groups mentioned that G2, an 18-year-old high school graduate, was the son. He was described not only as immature and young, but also as a rebel and a rotten apple by the teacher (me!). However dangerous these definitions may be, he jokingly seemed to agree with all of them. He was definitely one of the most motivated students despite his frequent disruptive playfulness. He would always take part in all activities while other students who had better speaking skills would remain silent.

It is also worth highlighting that HL was what we considered a weak student. He would always be reluctant whenever he needed to step in and take a more active role in activities. However, he was the first one to state the group's opinion and share their views. Obviously such behavior was unexpected and an unprecedented step due to his supposedly impolite lack of interest. His sudden urge to be the first to take part in the discussion not only surprised me, but his peers as well. Maybe he wanted to share how he felt about his classmates, but he could not voice his ideas in a straightforward way in the classroom.

Students also took the chance to single out a student who would miss many classes and who, whenever in the room, would not do any activity. At first, CL did not seem pleased to hear that she was considered the *unprodigal* daughter for her unreasonable behavior. As the activity was about an imaginary situation, she decided then not to take her peers' ideas so seriously, but she later admitted that she should change her behavior – which she really did afterwards.

One student was described as the family's dog and it certainly attracted everyone's attention. My first idea was that dogs are loyal, even though BR had never been what most teachers would call a hard-working student. Maybe he described himself perfectly, "lazy" and "not a good dog", but there was more to it than eyes could meet: he had already begun changing his attitude, he was trying to speak English and he had finished both writing tasks by then – something some

other pupils had not. Perhaps, BR had already heard several teachers stating he was lazy that he accepted that label even when he was changing.

Two female students (PR and CA) were chosen as the group's mother. The former was described as one who tells people to pay attention while the latter was described as serious. Both girls were excellent students and seemed to share the same views regarding what students should be like, thus their behavior resembled a teacher's or a mother's.

6.2. Analysing roles: who would the teacher be?

It may be striking to notice that students' opinion was somewhat related to what I believe myself to be. As described previously in the chapter about beliefs, my learning experiences were all influenced by strict and traditional methods, therefore I used to see myself as a strict educator.

While students did mention that as a father I needed to give orders, I also had to guide them. Interestingly enough, they stated they should be given the chance to select what they wanted, however, they understood the father's role, the one bestowed on me, as one to lead them. The father's role seems to be a guiding one: the teacher then would lead and give orders. On the other hand, another group described me as a mother. This role seems to have a more caring aspect than the father's as the group stated mothers try to help their children do homework and "things like that". In general, people tend to think mothers are more caring than fathers and I wonder whether pupils thought about strictness when they gave me the role of a mother. It is funny to realize Group 3 also named me the father even though they had already stated RE was the father. Whether it was a conscious or an unconscious move, I will never know.

In a nutshell, students chose roles which depict older and more experienced people in a family. It might have been a coincidence, but it may have been that unknowingly they did not neglect my presence as an educator in the classroom and they valued my position – even if my understanding of it was not clear.

6.3. Data and beliefs: giving it a second thought

When I first started teaching, I was still very young and I did my best to teach as my favourite teachers did. As time went by, it became clear to me I should move on and try new and different things instead of the basic thing I had been doing for some time. What I used to believe when I first started was not the same after a while – and it is worth mentioning it is not the same today. As Barcelos (2012) stated, beliefs change and mine have been changing since I became a teacher.

Being in a classroom with students who seemed at first difficult to cope with made me question my own beliefs. I mentioned these in Chapter 3 while describing what I expected from students:

- a) one who is interested in English,
- b) one who takes his/her studies seriously,
- c) one who has clear objectives and takes risks;
- d) one who does not believe tests are essential parts in the learning process;

As much as I tried to show these advanced students that they needed to take their studies more seriously, I seemed to fail my own weekly tests. I thought I should model them and turn them into what I expected them to be. Fortunately, I was lucky to understand that all of us, teachers and students, should change.

Data collected provides insights into how students understood our roles as teacher and students. Teachers could be demanding, but at the same time they would have to guide them and listen to their ideas and students also needed to do what they were entitled to. The data also shows interesting thoughts students did not often voice, for instance, they described their peers as lazy or immature. Actually, it seems they were acknowledging their awareness that they knew exactly what learners needed to do and what they should avoid doing.

As far as my beliefs are concerned, when students started bringing their ideas to class, they seemed to be more interested and eager to share their opinion. To be able to keep their interest, several activities had to be adapted from the

book. During the recorded activity, learners were into sharing and seemed more interested than when book-based activities were being dealt with.

Although they did not do their homework, they always handed in their written tasks and, after some time and encouragement, they spoke more English than when we first met. To some extent, I wonder whether this is not taking studies seriously, at least in their terms. Teachers usually expect learners to live up to their expectations and mine had to do with highly committed students.

6.4. How does affect show itself? Four family scenes and one intermission

It has been mentioned previously that affect in the classroom has begun to be seen as an essential key to making learning not only a more memorable experience, but a meaningful one as well. Given that affect was my first focus when I began teaching the group described, it was natural that it should be my focus while analysing data. We intend to scan the text for ideas which express how affect took place during the activity.

6.4.1. Family #1:

| PARTICIPANT | SOCIAL ROLE | DESCRIPTION | MY COMMENTS |
|--------------------|--------------------|---|---|
| RE | Father | “looks like a father” | Not only was RE one of the best student, but he was highly committed and responsible as well. However, he was very serious and reserved. Looking like a father indicates that his friend took him more seriously than I thought they did. |
| Teacher | Mother | “Mothers always try to help their children” | |
| G1 | Son | Lazy (“he never do nothing”) | G1 was definitely a lazy student who procrastinated as much as he could. |

| | | | |
|----|-----|-----------------------|---|
| BR | Son | Rebellious and absent | BR never seemed very interested, therefore the attributed labels could easily suit him. |
|----|-----|-----------------------|---|

It is crucial to highlight that the first group chose students who were not part of their own group: RE and BR did the activity in different groups. However, mentioning their names indicated that students were also aware of BR's disinterest and RE's dedication, although they had never acknowledged so during our lessons.

Something which caught my attention at first was the fact that MV was the first to talk and he decided to do so in English. He used to be absent and insisted on using Portuguese to communicate, so I expected less than they actually did. Also, when they stated that I was the mother instead of the father and justified that by saying mothers always help their children, there is a seemingly noticeable change in behavior from when we first started in February. It seemed strange that they expected me to be the mother, but I could see they referred to me as one because of the help provided.

Another point to be highlighted in Family #1 is that I made a joke about G1 playing with my markers and only after some time did I realize how tired and anguished I was then. When I told G1 not to destroy my markers and interrupted the activity, MR had just stated G1 was the son. I jokingly conceded that I had already understood why G1 was the son, but I went on to enquire the group as to which reasons had led them to such a conclusion. My interference may have prompted them to say something they did not want, but their response was not at all false as CL seemed confident enough to say G1 never did anything. It has already been debated before that negative emotional factors may be detrimental to one's learning experience (Kumaravadivelu, 2008) and I wonder whether my low expectations and lack of concern might have been interpreted by my students as lack of interest. This group showed me that they were engaged and took part in the activity without my having to choose one to 'get the ball rolling'.

6.4.2. Family #2

| PARTICIPANT | SOCIAL ROLE | DESCRIPTION | MY COMMENTS |
|-------------|--------------|------------------|---|
| Teacher | Grandpa | “older” | |
| BE | Father/Uncle | “he has a beard” | The most mature student in the group. Hardly ever did he use L1 and he always did his best to make his friends participate. |
| G2 | ? | “rotten apple” | Although students did not state who he was, the rotten apple label was given him by the teacher. |
| HU | Son | | An excellent student who had great speaking skills, but who often declined to take part in activities. |

While the group which I named Family #1 had all its participants speak, only two out of the Family #2 group expressed their ideas. Oddly enough, it was the group that had three great students in terms of skills and marks: RE (who has already been mentioned), HU and BE. HU and BE were best friends and tried to take part in all activities proposed, although at times they were afraid of losing face and resorted to L1. Although I expected them to speak more than the others, they did not expand their ideas as much as the other students did. At first, such behaviour was interpreted as lack of interest in the activity, but it could also be a sign that maybe they were aware they did not need to hold the floor and should let the other pupils have their chance to speak out as well.

The first person they decided to describe was me: I was the grandpa. As previously mentioned, choosing the word *grandpa* shows some kind of affect that had been established as they could have chosen to describe me as the *grandfather*, a more usual and somewhat formal term. The student who spoke the most was G2, a very talkative and funny student, but sometimes disruptive and lazy. He describe BE as his uncle – therefore he was HU’s son – and while justifying why BE was the father/uncle, he said it was so because of his “shave” instead of “beard”.

After eliciting the right answer, I wondered whether the family was over and G2 immediately said he had apples. His seemingly playful yet disturbing behaviour was the reason why I decided to enquire further as to who in the group would be the rotten apples. Such move only depicts how affect was present: although I was already somewhat fond of these students, it was clear as well that I was emotionally and physically drained at that moment because there was no need to ask who the rotten apple(s) was/were when I know that such a question might prompt them to say things I would not like to hear. However, G2 only replied that that was a good question and he needed to think about it.

6.4.3. Family #3

| PARTICIPANT | SOCIAL ROLE | DESCRIPTION | MY COMMENTS |
|-------------|-------------|--|--|
| RE | Father | ? | RE had previously been chosen as the Family #' father for his appearance. This family, however, did not state why he would be the father |
| CA | Mother | “she’s serious” | CA was a rather serious student who had just joined the group. Although she was able to speak very well, she often preferred not to due to her thinking her peers were childish. |
| BR | The dog | “Lazy”, “I don’t like do (sic) things”, “I’m not really a good dog” | BR was a lazy student who had already started his attitude. |
| G2 | Son | “young and immature” | G2 had already been labelled a “rotten apple” by me. |
| Teacher | Father | “You are always doing things”, “You give orders”, “you have to guide us” | |

Family #3 came as a big surprise as I expected them to be less talkative and involved than the other students. All the four group participants were students

who usually gave me a hard time during classes for several reasons such as misbehaving, using L1 most of the time, not following instructions in class and so on. Thus, my expectations could not be anything but low. However, when their time to speak came, HL, a rather difficult student to deal with and one who had to sit final tests the previous level, was the first to express his ideas. Not only did HL hold the floor, but he also criticised his two favourite peers in the class.

It surprised me that HL expanded his ideas and decided to describe his two friends G2 and BR as young and immature. I have already stated previously that such a move might indicate his dissatisfaction with their friends' attitudes. Often did I complain about their attitude and how they could be better students if they worked harder.

When learners started bringing their ideas to the classroom so that they would talk about their choices and use more L2, HL and BR did not seem very interested and usually made jokes regarding their peers' topics. Their lack of interest at first drew my attention and I had to talk to them after class several times, but their decision to be the spokespeople for their group did derive some impressive positive remarks by me. Even though BR described himself as a bad dog, I felt he had improved a lot since the beginning of the year: he was worried about using L2 and trying to take part in activities. He still had some issues with homework and written assignments though, but every now and then he would do both and jokingly refer to them as his "very own torture". BR was aware his performance could still improve yet he smilingly conceded he was lazy and that he didn't like to do anything.

At the time I was not aware how important HL's and BR's step had been, but looking back on the occasion, it is clear that some affect and rapport had been established and both boys seemed to feel at ease and more comfortable.

6.4.4. Intermission

Between Family #3 and Family #4 turns, G2 grabbed some of my markers and started drawing on the board. He drew a face which resembled mine for the fringe and glasses. Given that I was curious as to why he was not listening to what his peers had to say, I asked him if that was my face in a surprised loud tone. G2

did not have time to answer because BR, the previous family’s dog, replied that it could not be mine as it was not a funny face.

Once again I behaved as most teachers usually do: I laughed and did not really pay much attention to his statement. Only later did I stop to think what he meant by “funny face”. Did BR think I was not to be taken seriously or did he say that because maybe he was fond of me after all the chaos and classroom wars? Did G2’s drawing mean he was having fun or did he want to be in the spotlight? While I will never have answers to these questions, based on what has been discussed throughout this study, it is hard not to argue that their intention was to show they were already comfortable enough to show their ideas and easily communicate them in L2 – which had been one of my primary purposes.

6.4.5. Family #4

| PARTICIPANT | SOCIAL ROLE | DESCRIPTION | MY COMMENTS |
|-------------|----------------|--|--|
| PR | Mother | “She tells us to pay attention” | PR was a very good student who always spoke English and seemed to be really motivated. Every now and then she would tell her classmates to pay attention and help them when they needed. |
| HU | Father | ? | As HU was an excellent student, the group’s decision to place him as the father may have been based on HU’s strong personality and good language command. |
| CL | Sister | “the sister who’s never home”, “she is never here”, “she doesn’t really speak to us” | CL was a weak student who used to miss classes weekly. Whenever in the room, she would not speak English and always complained about how bored she was. |
| BE | Oldest brother | “He’s more responsible than | BE was part of Family #2 and had |

| | | | |
|----|---------------|--|---|
| | | most of us” | been chosen as the father/uncle because of his appearance. He definitely was a very responsible and highly committed learner. |
| G2 | (Younger) Son | “the black sheep”, “I am not responsible” | G2 was mentioned by other groups because of his immaturity. He seemed to be proud of this “I am not responsible” label. |

The last group to express their ideas was also the first and only to make someone in the class rather angry. When the group decided to describe CL as the sister, she did not seem really pleased. Their decision was based on the fact that CL was usually absent and when she was in class, she would not talk to her peers and often used L1 to communicate. I was under the impression the class did not feel CL was part of the group – neither as a good student nor as a good one. When they decided to voice these criticisms, I think they knew they would never had another chance to do it again, so they blatantly described her manner which displeased them. Again, if affect had not been established – that is, begun to be verbalized or exposed, I wonder whether learners would feel as confident as to state what bothered them about CL.

As the group’s mother, they chose PR, a very good student who always interrupted her peers’ jokes and pranks to tell them to pay attention. She used to stand up to help peers as well. Due to the number of students in class, I would always ask some of them to volunteer to help classmates and PR was always the first one, therefore their choosing her as the mother did not come as a surprise and she seemed pleased to see they respected her as much they would a mother. BE had already been described by Family #1 as the father/uncle, but this time he was chosen as the brother along with G2.

When they said BE was also the brother, I asked them who would be the oldest one because there were more people in class who had not been chosen and they might expand their ideas. Once again my interference prompted them to say things they might not say in regular circumstances. No sooner had I asked who the oldest brother would be, many student replied BE would and HE, who seemed to

be the class spokesperson for this issue, justified his choice by saying he is more responsible than most of them. As BE was a student who would always do his best to get great marks and participate, it seemed reasonable that he would be the older brother, known for his responsibility and to play an important role in the family. Definitely they had got their message across: if BE was the older and more responsible brother, logically G2 would be the young and irresponsible one.

As I had asked about the oldest brother and the sister, G2 found it important to mention why he would be the “black sheep” and part of the family, even though he was not in that group and should not be involved. G2 stated he was not responsible and it is necessary to remind that during the activity another student, G1, described G2 as “mentally ill” (“pertubado” in his words), which I pretended not to understand in order to elicit from them this word in English. Immediately, G1 said he meant G2 was mentally disturbed, which motioned everyone to laugh. Did they consent and agree G2 was the black sheep or did they acknowledge they were also tired of his attitude? They might have found it funny, but they started frowning at G2 disapprovingly the following weeks whenever he did something they considered boring. Had his I-am-not-responsible label run its course?

Although it was not the intention to bring change to the classroom, CL did stop arriving late and opted to use English as her main means of communication, though not all the time.

7. CONCLUSION: THIS IS NOT GOODBYE

Not all stories have happy endings, although this is what most readers expect when they finally reach the end. One might think that, after everything that was described in this study, learners would have become what teachers usually call *good students*. It must be highlighted that such was never my expectation and never was it part of this research aim to do so. As stated previously, EP “starts out with an intention to try to understand (the local situation), rather than change (it)” (Allwright, 2009, p. 173).

Teenagers have become a group most educators prefer not to teach due to the challenge they represent to teachers. They are usually deemed to be irresponsible and difficult to cope with, exactly my first impression when I started teaching the group this research focused on. However, to my surprise, my findings suggest that initial ideas were superficial and that students and I shared views on some topics.

The findings of this study also indicate that learners shared my unspoken views that there were not only irresponsible and lazy students, but more committed ones as well. Data suggests that students knew exactly what their peers did and how they behaved in class. It is surprising to realize that some learners knew they might need to change their attitude so as to contribute to the whole group and it is even more surprising to realize some of them shared views and had never had the chance to speak their minds. Not once did they mention they would work towards a single goal together, but pupils seemed to be aware that when one student refused to take part in an activity, some others would silently frown and disapprove of such a move. That is, learners understood my role as a caring yet strict one, thus describing me as a mother or as a grandfather. However, their open criticism of students who would miss classes, for example, is also a sign that they knew there was room for improvement and that, maybe, quality of classroom life would be improved if something was done.

When I started thinking about how my beliefs struggled against my students', I realised that, as an educator, I used to judge students and think some were superior to others, given that some would easily fit into what I expected from

a student – based on my own experience while learning English. Therefore, when I delved deeper into the realm of beliefs, it suddenly dawned on me that if I could only understand and narrow down what seemed to be my students' beliefs, then it would be easier to compare theirs and mine. As one might imagine, their discrepancy only made it easier to think about how these advanced students learnt and about how I would have to approach them. For instance, when it was clear that textbooks and materials would not work, bringing their ideas and adapting our lesson so as to have them speak more resulted in a noticeable and significant increase in their talking time. Obviously, it took time to come to terms with accepting that would happen more frequently than I would have liked it to, but efforts paid off in the long run.

Most teachers may never have given it a second thought, but the notion of sense of community, as described by McMillan & George (1986), is an important aspect when learning a second language. Students will not always live up to teachers' expectations and are likely to lose face and get cold feet whenever they have to take a more active role in the classroom. There are a plethora of reasons as to why learners decide not to take this active role in the classroom, but, based on my observation, the one I focused on in this study is that my students did not seem to feel part of the group. They had already been together for some time yet they did not seem to be part of the same group. Working on affect enabled me not only to re-think my own understanding of the group, but it helped the group express their ideas and realize how much they had in common.

One might wonder what happened when the end of the year came and the group and I parted ways. While writing this research questions kept popping up and some of them still linger: What happened to these students when we parted ways? Did their interest wane or did it remain steady? Are they still studying together? Unfortunately, I do not have these answers, although some of us have come across while shopping or having lunch. What really matters to me is that I was able to figure out and understand these students on a certain level. While my initial question remains somewhat unanswered, *Why don't my advanced students find it enjoyable to study English?*, data provided some interesting insights which definitely are thought-provoking: students portrayed a peer as the youngest son for the irresponsibility and another as the ever-absent sister for missing several classes. Surely, these two are only parts of a wider backdrop in which there are

still roles played by others. Nonetheless, it is still intriguing that those words could ever be verbalised by students.

This story comes to an end, but there is still room for improvement. Throughout this study I came across questions and ideas which would have rendered this project more complete yet harder to accomplish, for instance, what would have happened if I had asked students about their real beliefs? There would have been different ideas and maybe even a different PEPA to be carried out. However, these ideas are still waiting to be picked up by me or someone one day.

At last, this story comes to a *temporary* end.

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