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Understanding the role of democracy in my classes

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Abstract

This research aims to understand a puzzle which emerged during one of my classes. I used Exploratory Practice as the pedagogic framework to understand this puzzle through a PEPA (Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity) and a PERA (Potentially Exploitable Reflective Activity). While we were developing the PEPA in which sixth graders should ask "why questions", a student came up with the following question "Why isn't there democracy in class?" This question called my attention and I started to reflect upon my practice in relation to democracy. The PEPA led to the PERA in which students should choose one of the sentences to complete, "There is democracy in class because . . ." or "There isn't democracy in class because . . ." In this study, I try to understand the characteristics of a democratic classroom and also if there is democracy in my classroom. The findings of this paper might arouse the curiosity in other learners about their practices, their classrooms and democracy.

Key words: Exploratory Practice, Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity, Potentially Exploitable Reflective Activity, work for understanding, Democracy in the classroom.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo entender uma questão que surgiu durante uma das minhas aulas. Usei a Prática Exploratória como estrutura pedagógica para entender essa questão através de uma APPE (Atividade Pedagógica Potencialmente Explorável) e uma ARPE (Atividade Reflexiva Potencialmente Explorável). Enquanto estávamos desenvolvendo a APPE na qual os alunos do sexto ano deveriam formular perguntas usando "por que", um aluno fez a seguinte pergunta: "Por que não há democracia na aula?" Essa pergunta chamou minha atenção e eu comecei a refletir sobre a minha prática em relação à democracia. A APPE levou à ARPE na qual os alunos deveriam escolher uma das frases para completar: "Há democracia em aula porque..." ou "Não há democracia em aula porque..." Neste estudo, eu tento entender as características de uma sala de aula democrática e também se há democracia na minha sala de aula. As descobertas deste trabalho podem despertar a curiosidade em outros aprendizes sobre suas práticas, suas salas de aula e democracia.

Palavras-chave: Prática Exploratória, Atividade Pedagógica Potencialmente Explorável, Atividade Reflexiva Potencialmente Explorável, trabalho para o entendimento, Democracia em sala de aula.

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1. Introduction

> Deciding what to investigate involves two distinct phases:
> choosing an issue that is puzzling; and developing it into a
> researchable puzzle.
>
> Allwright and Hanks, 2009

I have been teaching English at a public school in Rio de Janeiro since 2010. I have taught many different groups, with different ages and behavior. It is interesting to observe how much I have changed throughout these years.

During the Specialization Course in English language I learned about Exploratory Practice. In some classes, we used to live this practice in the classroom, creating puzzles, discussing our points of interest and our practice in our own classrooms as teachers.

I started to become even more aware of my responsibility with my groups of learners, and also about reflecting upon my participation in class and my students' participation as well. I started to understand that they were able to participate a lot more during our moments of interaction. Students can take learning really seriously if we give them the chance.

It was during a class that the puzzle which I am about to develop in this monograph emerged. The sixth graders were learning "question words". I proposed an activity in which each student should ask a "why question" and one of the questions called my attention the most. It was about democracy.

I have chosen this subject, democracy in the classroom, first of all because it was something that emerged during a class, and also because I think I might not be such a democratic teacher. Among many different questions, related to students' personal lives, to school issues, the one that called my attention the most was, "Why isn't there democracy in class?" Maybe I need to reflect about how democratic I am as a teacher, and I need to learn to listen to students and the other people from school community a little (or lot) more. Maybe I do not listen to my students as much as I should or could.

After choosing this topic I have been more careful and reflective about my practice. I started to try to understand my own decisions and how much my students

are involved in taking decisions and participating as much as possible during class. Now I keep on thinking and trying to understand: How democratic is my own classroom?

This paper is divided into four other sections, after this introduction. Section 2 brings the Theoretical Background in which this study is based on: Exploratory Practice, and it also brings some theory on the characteristics of Democracy in the classroom. In section 3, Methodology, I present the data collected in class with my students. Section 4 is a Discussion about the data and a Reflection based on my practice as a teacher and a learner. Finally, in section 5, there are the Final Considerations.

2. Theoretical background

So why not try to think of learners as practitioners of learning, and not just as 'targets of teaching'?
Allwright and Hanks, 2009

2.1 Exploratory Practice (EP)

Exploratory Practice (EP) is the pedagogic framework which this monograph is based on. It takes into consideration that research is not a field only for professional researchers, but it can be developed by all those involved in the educational process. "Exploratory Practice is a form of practitioner research in which learners as well as teachers are encouraged to investigate their own learning/teaching practices, while concurrently practising the target language (HANKS, 2017, p. 2)."

EP ideas have been in progress since early 90's (MILLER AND CUNHA, 2018), when Dick Allwright started to be concerned about its central concepts. His main goal was to involve teachers and learners in the process of researching. Teachers and learners are invited to understand better their classrooms, working to understand what goes on in the process of teaching and learning.

According to Allwright and Hanks (2009), teachers are no longer the only center of the educational process, and students do not take alone this place either. It is shared by teachers and students with a new perspective, they become researchers. They aim at understanding what goes on in the learning and teaching environment. It is the quality of life in the classroom that matters.

Most importantly, Exploratory Practice has not only reinvented the roles of teachers and learners as full agents of such work for understanding, but also considered teachers and learners as practitioners of learning (MILLER AND CUNHA, 2018).

The intention of EP is to foster critical thinking upon the reality inside the classroom, which is the place in which teachers and students work and learn, in search of understanding the various situations that take place during their interaction, while working collaboratively.

EP starts out with an *intention to understand,* rather than change. It recognizes that any understanding may suggest change is

> needed, but it also acknowledges that sometimes understanding, or even just the process of working together to understand, will bring sufficient change in itself (ALLWRIGHT AND HANKS, 2009, p. 173).

When raising the relationship between 'understanding' and 'noticing', Allwright and Miller (2001) state that "…we don't notice *everything* equally. We also notice different things in different ways, at different times." EP proposes a process of 'selective attention' that occurs not in a conscious way, but depending on our interests and purposes throughout life.

The authors consider that teachers should become aware of what puzzles them in order to understand rather than change their reality. Changing might happen even without being the main goal of EP, "but if it produces satisfactory understandings then they should help us decide what if anything does in fact need changing, and what might be a satisfactory change to try to make (p. 3)." It is the teacher's awareness that can bring this improvement in the quality of life in the classroom.

Allwright and Hanks (2009) explain that instead of thinking about 'problems' for EP it is useful to think in terms of 'puzzles'. Problems call for solutions and puzzles intrigue for understanding. Teachers should reformulate their questions using 'why' questions in order to think about what happens in their classrooms in search of what can be understood from their diverse experiences. "This deliberate shift of formulation from 'problem to solve' to 'puzzle to understand' is a central and highly productive characteristic of EP (p. 156)."

Allwright (2003) argues that it is impossible to plan and control an educational event in its totality when it comes to the real world, the real classroom. Planning is important, but in a "macro- (but not micro-) management of language teaching and learning". He brings the notion of planning to a different area, "the area of developing an **understanding** of language teaching and learning." Teachers should plan for understanding, they should work for understanding and not for control. Teachers cannot control students process of learning and their interactions, but they can involve learners in the process of understanding to be able to take responsibility over it.

The author goes on to explain that using class time wisely with effective language activities is what makes the difference in "quality of life" in the classroom. Keeping teachers and learners involved in this process as researchers of their own puzzles is essential. The following principles of EP have been developed over the years of practice and research:

> Principle 1: put 'quality of life' first.
> Principle 2: work primarily to understand language classroom life.
> Principle 3: involve everybody.
> Principle 4: work to bring people together.
> Principle 5: work also for mutual development.
> Principle 6: do not let the work "burn you out".
> Practical corollary to Principle 6: integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice.
> Principle 7: make the work a continuous enterprise.
> Practical corollary to Principle 7: avoid time-limited funding (ALLWRIGHT, 2003, p. 24).

The first two principles are related to the classroom, the quality of life in it and the understanding of what happens there. EP is concerned with the quality of life inside and outside the classroom. Principles 3, 4 and 5 are related to the participants, the necessity of involving all the community in the process of understanding, everybody working together, seriously, with the same objectives. Principle 6 brings the concern of not exceeding teachers' limits and also keeping the work inside the classroom, proposing on-going research. And Principle 7 ensures that if the process is relevant to the participants, it turns out to be sustainable.

Taking into consideration these principles, some key terms on EP are: quality of life in the classroom, understanding, puzzles, practitioner research, autonomy, working together, thinking critically, integration, and work in progress.

The reflections and understandings that emerge from the classroom come mainly from the activities developed in it. Teachers and learners work together creating, developing, taking part in such activities, observing what happens and growing from the experiences simultaneously. The more seriously this process is taken, the more profitable it is to all those involved in it.

2.2 Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity (PEPA) and Potentially Exploitable Reflective Activity (PERA)

Working for understanding through pedagogic and reflective activities is the strategy EP professionals regularly choose. It is a procedure which involves teachers and learners in the educational process as researchers of their own puzzles.

Allwright and Hanks (2009, p. 157) use the term PEPA, Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity, to refer to the classroom activities which aim at understanding teachers and students' practices. Miller and Cunha (2018), bring up the concept of PERA, Potentially Exploitable Reflective Activity, in addition to PEPA.

> According to Allwright (2003a) they are 'discursive actions for understanding' since they are slight adaptations made to everyday activities with the intention of promoting reflection and digging for further understanding of puzzles and questions (ALLWRIGHT, 2003a apud MILLER AND CUNHA, 2018).

Sometimes PEPAs might lead to PERAs. First, teachers and learners take part in a pedagogic activity with the purpose of understanding something that happens in their classroom and then they can feel the necessity of reflecting more deeply based on what arises from the activity.

2.3 Democracy in the classroom

To begin this section, it is important to try to answer the following question, "What is democracy?" According to the definition in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary,

> 1. **Democracy** is a system of government in which people choose their rulers by voting for them in elections.
> 2. A **democracy** is a country in which the people choose their government by voting for it.
> 3. **Democracy** is a system of running organizations, businesses, and groups in which each member is entitled to vote and take part in decisions (SINCLAIR, 2003, p. 373).

When thinking about democracy, the first thing that generally comes to people's minds is government and politics, but it can also be related to other organizations and groups in general, as it is stated in the third definition above.

This definition can be adapted to the classroom reality, if we understand that everybody involved in the process of teaching and learning is able to take part in the decisions to be made. "Everybody" meaning all the community which belongs to the school environment, "teaching-learning communities – learners, parents, teachers, supervisors, coordinators, school psychologists, etc. (MILLER AND CUNHA, 2018)."

In her article "Democratic Classrooms", Morrison (2008) argues that a democratic classroom is one in which students have voice and choice, the process of teaching and learning is co-constructed by teachers and students, and students participate in helping the teacher to develop the course content, the assignments, and also the evaluation. She claims that it is not an easy task to work democratically, mainly taking into consideration the present conventional educational system. "There are three main areas of challenge when attempting to institute democratic practices in classrooms and schools – students, teachers, and the institution as a whole (para. 18)."

In relation to students, the author mentions that they might be one of the biggest challenges. Some of them might resist a change of rules, fearing the unknown and feeling uncomfortable. In general, students are not used to taking part in the decisions and being responsible for their choices. Some might feel insecure when they are given the chance to choose, they might never have thought about what their interests really are.

When it comes to teachers, Morrison (2008) states that they are not used to sharing their duties, so they might also resist changes and fear the unknown. Some of them worry about being considered unprepared, weak or lacking in authority. Some teachers do not trust the students' ability to choose what they want to learn, because students are not used to it or because students "don't know what they don't know." The author also points out that teachers must learn to listen more than talk.

And as to the institutions, the author mentions that some problems are related to space and time, to the system of grading and the amount of students in each class. It is also a concern the fact that the institutions want to make sure that certain "vital

information" is not left behind if students have the right to participate choosing what to learn.

When it comes to democracy in the classroom, one of the most important Brazilian authors and the first name that most people think about in Brazil is Paulo Freire. As an educator, he dedicated great part of his life to educational, political and social issues.

With regards to democracy, Freire (2000, p. 117) states that "Democracy is not received as a present. One has to fight for democracy."[1] (my translation). He connects the concept of democracy to discipline, mentioning that there is a lack of discipline in many situations people are commonly involved in, such as at home, at school, on the streets.

> The more we respect the students independently of their color, gender, social class, the more testimony we give of respect in our daily lives, at school, in our relationship with colleagues, with doormen, cooks, watchmen, students' parents, the more we narrow the distance between what we say and what we do, the more we are contributing to the strengthening of democratic experiences[2] (FREIRE, 2000, pp. 119-120) (my translation).

Freire (2000) considers that to act democratically educators have to be examples to their students, doing their best to be coherent between what they do and say. Educators cannot say one thing and act differently, because students notice this difference and educators lose their credibility. It is important to create an atmosphere of mutual respect in the relationship between teachers and students, respecting their differences, their limitations, their freedom, their citizenship.

Freire explains that it is difficult to practice democracy, it requires reflection and practice. He believes that educators should fight for a democratic school in which they can talk *to* and *with* the students. By talking *to* he means telling the students what to do, guiding them, and by talking *with* he means including the students in the conversation, listening to their voices. "Talking *to* and *with* the

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[1] "Não se recebe democracia de presente. Luta-se pela democracia."
[2] "Quanto mais respeitamos os alunos e alunas independentemente de sua cor, sexo, classe social, quanto mais testemunho dermos de respeito em nossa vida diária, na escola, em nossas relações com os colegas, com zeladores, cozinheiras, vigias, pais e mães de alunos, quanto mais diminuirmos a distância entre o que dizemos e o que fazemos, tanto mais estaremos contribuindo para o fortalecimento de experiências democráticas."

students is an unpretentious but highly positive way for the democratic teacher to give, at her school, her contribution to the formation of responsible and critical citizens[3] (FREIRE, 2000, p. 87) (my translation)."

It is pointed out by Freire (2016) that it is through dialogue that the contradiction between educators and learners can be overcome. Educators do not only teach, but they also learn throughout the process of teaching-learning. Freire suggests that both teachers and learners become critical investigators through dialogue. There is nothing more democratic than an open dialogue in which all the participants are heard and hear what is being discussed.

Trusting the learners' capacity to make choices and to fully participate in the process of teaching-learning is essential. As Miller and Cunha (2018) point out, learners are not only the students but also teachers. "Another important contribution of Exploratory Practice to the reconceptualization of practitioner research has been to consider all members of an educational community as *learners*." Allwright and Hanks (2009) come up with "Five Propositions about learners", which refer to the learners' role as practitioners of their process of learning. They state that learners are able to investigate what puzzles them. Their propositions are the following:

> *Proposition 1*: Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways.
> *Proposition 2*: Learners are social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment.
> *Proposition 3*: Learners are capable of taking learning seriously.
> *Proposition 4*: Learners are capable of independent decision-making.
> *Proposition 5*: Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning (p. 7).

According to Propositions 1 and 2, each learner is a different individual who notices things in different ways. The content being presented might be the same, but each one is going to learn it differently according to his or her experiences. Besides being unique individuals, learners are social beings who are generally part

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[3] "Falar *a* e *com* os educandos é uma forma despretensiosa mas altamente positiva que tem a professora democrática de dar, em sua escola, sua contribuição para a formação de cidadãos e cidadãs responsáveis e críticos."

of a group, for example, in the classroom. This group provides them with the possibility of mutual support.

Propositions 3 and 4 are related to learners' capacity of being serious and responsible for their process of learning. If teachers trust students and expect them to act seriously, students are probably going to behave positively and make good decisions in relation to what, when and how to do things.

If these four propositions are practiced in the classroom by teachers and students, Proposition 5 becomes a real possibility, because learners can fully develop their ability acting as practitioners of learning, in charge of their own learning.

Giving voice to learners is a democratic attitude. They are surely capable of thinking critically and autonomously. An Exploratory Practice classroom is surely a democratic one. "The emphasis in Exploratory Practice work lies on helping learners themselves to raise their own puzzles or intriguing questions about issues that they wish to understand better and elaborate their own 'action for understanding' (MILLER AND CUNHA, 2018)."

In order to have a democratic classroom, it is necessary that the teacher acts democratically. Freire (2017) reflects about the teaching practice of critical educators in his book *Pedagogy of Autonomy*[4]. Among other attributes, he considers that teaching demands:

- research,
- respect for learners' knowledge,
- criticality,
- critical reflection of practice,
- respect for the autonomy of the learner,
- humility, tolerance and fight for learners' rights,
- joy and hope,
- the conviction that change is possible,
- curiosity,

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[4] "Pedagogia da Autonomia"

- commitment,

- freedom and authority,

- conscious decision-making,

- knowing how to listen,

- availability for dialogue, and

- wishing learners well.

These are some attributes teachers should try to accomplish if they really want to teach and learn together with their students. Freire (2017) argues that there is no teaching without learning and no learning without teaching. "Whoever teaches learns while teaching, and whoever learns teaches while learning[5] (p. 25) (my translation)."

The author also claims that educators should not behave hypocritically in the classroom. "It's no use, unless to irritate the learner and demoralize the hypocritical discourse of the educator, talking about democracy and freedom but imposing on the learner the arrogant will of the master[6] (p. 61) (my translation)."

Morrison (2008) considers that it is the teachers' responsibility to give the students the chance to experience democracy in class, especially those students who are studying to be future teachers.

In an article in response to Morrison's (2008) article, Clabaugh (2008) argues that schools might not be ready for what Morrison describes as "Democratic Classrooms". He claims that a more democratic country is necessary to give students voice and choice, but he still believes that the reform might happen in the future through the effort of teachers. Teachers are the ones who can begin the process of making the difference.

> Happily, reform need not be all or nothing. One can, with a little luck, quietly introduce more student voice and choice into one's own classroom. And we should all congratulate any teacher who can elevate the importance of intrinsic motivation; emphasize social and emotional development as well as academics; deemphasize mere obedience; and get the kids to define their own worth rather than let others do it for them (CLABAUGH, 2008).

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[5] "Quem ensina aprende ao ensinar e quem aprende ensina ao aprender."
[6] "De nada serve, a não ser para irritar o educando e desmoralizar o discurso hipócrita do educador, falar em democracia e liberdade mas impor ao educando a vontade arrogante do mestre."

Teachers who allow others to take part in the process of understanding students' skills and needs in general, and negotiate ways of attending to their expectations while working with the different contents in class can be considered democratic ones. It is important that educators act democratically so that learners can have a reference on democracy.

Democratic classrooms are made of teachers who keep in mind that they inspire the students, they are examples to them, and who give students room to fully participate in their process of learning. It is also made of students who take their learning seriously, who express their voice and who, together with their teachers, are practitioners of learning and teaching. Democratic classrooms are built together by all the people involved in the process of teaching and learning.

3. Methodology

> EP can help make time spent in class to be more enjoyable, and so enhance both learner and teacher motivation.
>
> Allwright and Hanks, 2009

3.1 The PEPA and the PERA

The activities that are going to be presented were developed at a public school in Rio de Janeiro. The first one is a PEPA (Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity) and the second one is a PERA (Potentially Exploitable Reflective Activity). The group chosen to take part in the activities was composed of 18 students aged from 11 to 14 years old. They were sixth graders, and their level of English was beginner.

This group had fifty-minute-long English classes twice a week. The great majority of the students were interested in the classes and liked to participate during the activities proposed. Some students were eager to take part in the activities mainly when they were "different" ones. By "different" they meant the ones in which we did not use the English book.

I really liked to work with these students because they formed a very receptive group. That is why I chose them to propose the PEPA that is going to be described below.

3.2 The first activity, a PEPA

The first activity, a PEPA, was the production of a poster by the students. It occurred in a class in which the topic being developed was *question words*. They were learning the question word "why", so I suggested that they asked some "why questions". They had the chance to reflect for some minutes in order to come up with their questions. There was not a specific topic to talk about, they could choose whatever they were interested in.

At first, I was a little apprehensive. I thought they could have some difficulty in asking the questions. Their level of English was beginner, so their vocabulary was limited. However, this was not a problem for them, they started to ask their

questions using Portuguese. Each student wrote a question on a slip of paper. Since they were beginners, some of them asked their questions in Portuguese, which is their first language, and we worked together to translate the questions into English.

An interesting fact occurred while the students were producing their questions: a boy asked, "Why do I have to study?" and a girl next to him immediately answered, "To have a better life". I was happy to see that she thought studying was important, and that she was courageous enough to say that.

After writing the questions, I asked each student to present their questions to the whole group. Some shy students were not very comfortable with this, but they did it anyway. Then I suggested that they could think of different groups in which they could separate their questions, and then classify them. While they were reading the questions again, whenever they thought there was a new category, a different student would hold the questions. I tried not to interfere during this part.

When they finished reading all the questions, three students were standing in front of the group. It took them some minutes to decide how they would classify the questions, I tried to help them when they asked me to do so. They came up with three categories: negative feelings, school rules, and violence in the world. While we were preparing the poster, a student suggested that we could have a title for the poster: Reflections. The group and I agreed with the suggestion.

I had not thought about giving a title for the poster, but it was good to see that the students were so involved in the activity that they felt confident to propose their ideas.

Here are the students' questions:

NEGATIVE FEELINGS
"Why am I a simple person?"
"Why is there sadness?"
"Why do some people still bully each other?"

SCHOOL RULES
"Why isn't there democracy in class?"
"Why can't I wear my sweatshirt closed?"

"Why are there backpacks?"

"Why can't I bring a snack to school?"

"Why do I have to study?"

"Why do we have to wear uniforms?"

"Why can't we use cell phones at school?"

"Why do we have English classes?"

VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD

"Why is there war near my house?"

"Why don't wars ever end?"

"Why is there violence?"

"Why is there so much violence in the world?"

"Why don't cigarettes end?"

One of the questions related to the category SCHOOL RULES called my attention, "Why isn't there democracy in class?" I became interested in hearing from the students what they thought about democracy in class. So, I proposed another activity.

3.3 The second activity, a PERA

The second activity, a PERA, was a conversation about democracy in the classroom. This activity took place two weeks after the first one. This time, I asked them to help me understand if they thought that there was democracy in class or not. I reminded them of the first activity and told them the question that had interested me the most: "Why isn't there democracy in class?". I suggested that they could complete the following sentences: "There is democracy in class because . . ." and "There isn't democracy in class because . . ."

Before they started writing their sentences, a student asked the following question: "What is democracy?" He asked the question in English, and right afterwards he translated it into Portuguese to be sure that all the students would understand it. We started to think and comment about democracy before filling in the proposed sentences.

I thought this student was brilliant! I started the class asking the question about democracy, but I forgot to check if they knew what democracy was. This student helped me when he asked this question. And it was really smart of him to translate the question, because he knew some of his classmates would not understand the question in English.

The conversation was in Portuguese, but I have translated it here. The students' original sentences can be found in the annex. A student said that *"Democracy is everything by the people and for the people."* Another student said, *"Politicians stealing."* This one was interrupted by another one saying, *"Then it is not democracy."* Two words were mentioned: *"Justice."* and *"Equality."* Then I asked them to talk about democracy in the classroom. Some of their comments were: *"Democracy is being punished because you haven't done your homework."* *"The teacher scolding." "When someone does something wrong and he or she is punished." "Democracy is being punished."* I asked them if democracy was only related to negative aspects. They said that, *"in the classroom, it is knowing the rules, complying with the rules, taking part in the activities." "Rights and duties."* When we were talking about duties, a student said, *"That is what we don't like."*

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?
"Democracy is everything by the people and for the people."
"Politicians stealing."
"Then it is not democracy."
"Justice."
"Equality."

After talking about democracy, we went back to the sentence to be completed. Some students did not want to participate writing the sentence. The ones who participated asked if they could complete the sentences in Portuguese, and I said there was no problem. Some students read their sentences to the whole group. This time I did not ask all the students to read because most of them had already participated during the talk and because I decided to respect their decision not to expose themselves.

Here are the students' sentences:

THERE IS DEMOCRACY IN CLASS BECAUSE . . .

". . . Jenifer is the president and she is not corrupt."

". . . we obey the rules."

". . . we respect the rules."

". . . we respect the rules. Because we respect each other."

". . . there is equality."

". . . most of the students respect the teachers."

". . . everybody has to respect each other."

". . . there is respect and education at school."

". . . everybody has to respect the rules."

THERE ISN'T DEMOCRACY IN CLASS BECAUSE . . .

". . . there is no justice."

". . . justice."

I noticed that they participated much more while we were talking, but when they were supposed to write, some of them did not want to. Most of the students who talked about no democracy in class did not want to write their sentences.

Fortunately, we had a great time during the two activities. Some classes later, a student asked me when we were going to do "a different activity" again. I was glad to see that they enjoyed the activities and that they thought they were profitable.

4. Discussion and reflections

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It is by critically thinking about the practice of today or
yesterday that one can improve the next practice[7].
Freire, 2017 (my translation)

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Reflecting about our own practice is a great opportunity to try to improve it. It is not an easy task, but it is surely worth it. This process might start from a puzzle. As Allwright and Hanks (2009) point out, puzzles can be shared by teachers and students. Sometimes puzzles come from the teachers' curiosity and interests, and sometimes the students are the ones to raise the puzzles.

During one of my classes, I suggested the PEPA previously described in this research thinking that the students would come up with puzzles to be understood by themselves, but it turned out to be a puzzle to myself.

It has been mentioned before that, "The emphasis in Exploratory Practice work lies on helping learners themselves to raise their own puzzles or intriguing questions about issues that they wish to understand better and elaborate their own 'action for understanding' (MILLER AND CUNHA, 2018)."

The PEPA began with my students' questions, they could be seen as the language learners formulating their puzzles. But developing this monograph made me assume the position of a learner, since I became the one to be intrigued by my student's question, "Why isn't there democracy in class?", and wished to understand better my own practice in the classroom. So, now I am in action for understanding this puzzle that emerged in one of my classes.

Allwright and Hanks (2009) state that understanding is good for learners, and they consider that all members of the educational community can be considered learners. That is why I return to the "Five Propositions about learners" to reflect upon my position as a practitioner of learning.

Assuming the role of a learner with my students made me understand and respect even more their support in class. As it is presented in Propositions 1 and 2 we are unique individuals and we can contribute to a better quality of life in our

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[7] "É pensando criticamente a prática de hoje ou de ontem que se pode melhorar a próxima prática."

classroom. All of us took the activities seriously and were able to learn from them, as it is stated in Propositions 3 and 4. And I have developed as a practitioner of learning through the experience of writing this research, and having the possibility of understanding my own practice, as it is pointed out in Proposition 5.

Some examples that can illustrate my students' participation during the PEPA in relation to Proposition 1 are their questions about their feelings, "Why am I a simple person?", "Why do some people still bully each other?", and also their questioning about the school rules, "Why do we have to wear uniforms?", "Why can't we use cell phones at school?", "Why do we have English classes?", and the ones related to violence in the world, "Why is there violence?", "Why is there so much violence in the world?" They were able to express themselves referring to their personal experiences.

When it comes to Proposition 2, while we were developing the PERA, the group interacted in an interesting way, they would respect each other's opinions and even complement one another, sometimes saying similar things, "Democracy is being punished because you haven't done your homework.", "When someone does something wrong and he or she is punished." or even disagreeing, when a student said that democracy was "Politicians stealing." another one interrupted him to say, "Then it is not democracy."

Proposition 3 can be exemplified by the dialogue between the boy who asked, "Why do I have to study?", and the girl who answered, "To have a better life." She showed how seriously she was in relation to learning. It can also be taken into consideration that the students were really engaged during the activities. When I asked them to complete a sentence saying if they thought that there was democracy in class or not, one of the students made us think about the definition of democracy before talking about democracy in class, he asked the whole group, "What is democracy?" and the group answered his question before completing the activity I had proposed.

As for Proposition 5, when the students were talking and writing about democracy in class, they expressed their opinions as if they were the educators, assuming the position of practitioners of learning, "There is democracy in class

because we respect the rules. Because we respect each other.", "There is democracy in class because there is equality.", "There is democracy in class because most of the students respect the teachers.", "There is democracy in class because there is respect and education at school."

It is interesting to notice that when my students wrote the sentences, they were theorizing about democracy in the classroom, many of them mentioned "respect". They wrote about respecting each other, the rules, the teachers. It is one of the topics Freire (2000, 2016 and 2017) considers most important in relation to democratic educators. He says that it is essential to create an atmosphere of mutual respect in the classroom.

Morrison (2008) mentions that sometimes it is difficult to work democratically in the classroom because of the students' resistance or because of their fear of the unknown, but in my experience, students were not uncomfortable when they had the opportunity to participate during the PEPA and PERA proposed. They felt at ease with one another and also with me.

The author also mentions that the teachers might resist changing, and they should listen to their students more. It is true in relation to my practice. I think that sometimes I should let my students participate more in our process of teaching and learning. When the students show me that they are much more interested in the activities that they call "different" ones, and they take these activities seriously, it is a sign that they can make good choices and develop their learning and teaching process critically and with responsibility.

I have also understood that I should also try to respect the students a little more when they do not want to expose themselves. During the PEPA I did not let the shy students not participate. I only realized that later, and while we were developing the PERA, I changed my attitude and gave the students the right not to read their sentences out loud. I told them that they could read their sentences if they wanted to, and if they did not want to read their sentences to the whole group, there was no problem. I understood that they were participating in another way. Allwright and Hanks (2009) explain that understanding might bring changes even not being its main goal.

My students were able to talk about their ideas in relation to democracy and a democratic classroom in a confident way. They seemed to be comfortable during our dialogue even when they were saying that there wasn't democracy in class. During the PERA, two students wrote their sentences saying that, "There isn't democracy in class because there is no justice." and "There isn't democracy in class because justice." An open dialogue is another topic Freire (2000, 2016 and 2017) considers to be necessary in a democratic process of teaching and learning. I have noticed that after starting this project, I became more aware of the fact that I should give my students more opportunities to participate and I should listen to them much more. It was really important when, during the PERA, my student interrupted me and asked the class, "What is democracy?" I had forgotten to ask such a basic question, and he helped me a lot, giving his contribution to our teaching and learning experience. Giving voice to learners is a democratic attitude.

As part of my reflections after the awareness that the PEPA and PERA brought to me, here are two moments of interaction with the same group of students which I consider democratic experiences:

One day, a student asked me if I could take a song to class and I told him to suggest a song. In reality, he already had a song in mind, and he immediately said the name of the song, "Apologize". I told him that I did not know that song, so I would have to search for its lyrics. It is interesting to mention his comment: "Oh, there aren't any bad words in the lyrics." All of a sudden, the whole class was engaged in producing a list of possible songs to be learned in class. I took the list home and the following class was all about their favorite songs. They had a really good time singing and dancing.

Another moment happened when I was teaching the question word "who". A student suggested that they could prepare a homework answering the question: "Who is your favorite singer?" I told them to do so. Some students did it, and the student who suggested it took it really seriously. Her paper was very good.

I hope that these moments of democratic interaction with my students are more and more frequent as I develop my ability of sharing the decisions and responsibilities with them.

5. Final considerations

This research paper has been developed to share two experiences with my students during activities in class. I could only have these practices with them after becoming familiar with Exploratory Practice during the Specialization Course in English language. Learning how to propose a PEPA was essential for these experiences.

I found out that we can reflect about our practice not with the intention of changing it, but in order to understand it better (ALLWRIGHT and HANKS, 2009). The actions we take are not to solve problems, but for understanding what goes on in our classrooms.

I have received a present from one of my students when he asked, "Why isn't there democracy in class?" during the PEPA. He made me aware of the fact that I should try to understand how democratic I am as a teacher, and how democratic my classroom is. He has given me the opportunity to try to know myself better in order to become a better teacher. A puzzle that could have been my student's, turned out to be my own puzzle. I will never be the same after this awakening to democracy. As mentioned before, according to Freire (2017), "Whoever teaches learns while teaching, and whoever learns teaches while learning[8] (p. 25) (my translation)."

I became more aware of the students' participation, trying to let them take part in the co-construction of the process of teaching and learning with me (MORISSON, 2008). Now I try to give them more room to express themselves and to participate in the planning of our classes. They can give good ideas and they might feel even more interested in our classes because of their participation. They suggest what they like, so it is not what I think they like.

I have noticed that what allowed me to act democratically in the classroom was my experience with EP. What is EP, if not a democratic attitude towards education?

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[8] "Quem ensina aprende ao ensinar e quem aprende ensina ao aprender."

Freire (2000) states that "One has to fight for democracy." And that is exactly what I am trying to do together with my students, fighting for a democratic classroom for us to teach and learn.

I hope that other teachers and learners are inspired by this work to research their practices, and their democratic participation in the teaching and learning process.

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7. Annex

7.1 Students' poster
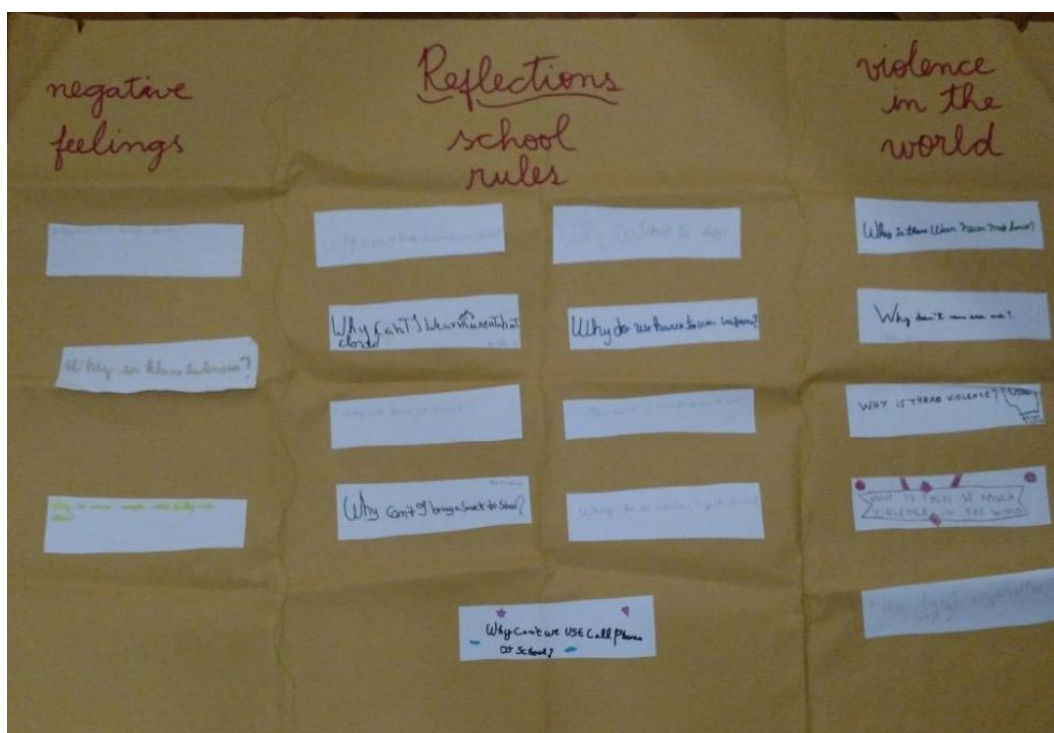
7.2 Students' sentences

"Democracia é tudo pelo povo e para o povo."

"Políticos roubando."

"Então não é democracia."

"Justiça."

"Igualdade."

"Democracia é tomar advertência porque não fez o trabalho de casa."

"A professora dando bronca."

"Quando alguém faz alguma coisa errada e é punido."

"Democracia é ser punido."

"na sala de aula é saber as regras, cumprir as regras, participar das atividades"

"Direitos e deveres."

"Que é o que a gente não gosta."

"There is democracy in class because *a Jenifer é a presidente não é corrupita.*"

"There isn't democracy in class because *não tem justiça.*"

"There isn't democracy in class because *justiça.*"

"There is democracy in class because *obedecemos as regras*"

"There is democracy in class because *porque a gente respeita as regras.*"

"There is democracy in class because *porque nós respeitamos as regras. Porque respeitamos uns aos outros.*"

"There is democracy in class because *tem igualdade.*"

"There is democracy in class because *a maioria dos alunos respeitam os professores.*"

"There is democracy in class because *todos tem que respeitar uns as outro.*"

"There is democracy in class because *porque tem respeito e educação na escola.*"

"There is democracy in class because *porque todos tem que respeitar as regras.*"