

PONTIFÍCIA UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA
DO RIO DE JANEIRO



DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS
Pós-Graduação Lato Sensu em Língua Inglesa

Laís Bazbuz Dos Reis Lima

Why Won't They Calm Down?

Working For Understanding My Own Development As A Literacy Class Teacher

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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.

Profª Sabine Mendes Moura
Orientadora

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to reflect upon my practice as a novice teacher of young learners at an English Course in Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro. After being triggered by some chaotic classes, I started to wonder how I could better help my students. In the next pages, I will analyze my own report on a series of activities done with a literacy class of seven students, as presented in my field diary. Based on the perspectives of Exploratory Practice, I draw a connection between Allwright and Hanks' Five Propositions about learners (2009) and my own development as a practitioner of teaching and learning. Some of the understandings constructed throughout this paper were that, in order to help my students, I first needed to understand them, and that some questions might not be answered, but still need to be asked.

Keywords:

Exploratory Practice, Positive Discipline, Piaget's Stages of Development, Teacher Development, Learners' Propositions

Por que eles não se acalmam?

Trabalhando para entender meu próprio desenvolvimento como professora de letramento.

RESUMO

O objetivo dessa monografia é refletir sobre a minha prática como professora iniciante de crianças entre 5 e 8 anos em um curso de inglês em Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro. Após algumas aulas caóticas, comecei a me perguntar como poderia ajudar meus alunos a terem uma aula mais agradável. A seguir, analisarei meu próprio relatório sobre uma série de aulas de uma turma de sete alunos em nível de alfabetização na Língua Inglesa, baseado em meu próprio diário de campo. Com base nas perspectivas da Prática Exploratória, teço uma conexão entre as Cinco Proposições Sobre Aprendizizes (ALLWRIGHT, HANKS, 2009) e meu próprio desenvolvimento na prática de ensinar e aprender. Alguns dos entendimentos construídos ao longo desta monografia incluem a noção de que, para ajudar meus alunos, preciso, primeiro, entendê-los e que, mesmo que algumas perguntas não possam ser respondidas, ainda assim precisam ser feitas.

Palavras-chave:

Prática Exploratória, Disciplina Positiva, Estados de Desenvolvimento de Piaget, Desenvolvimento do professor, Proposições sobre aprendizizes.

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1 – Introduction

I have never felt comfortable with the idea of students as silent and super controlled creatures and always tended to prefer free children, who think, ask questions, and speak for themselves.

In the same way, I have always believed the best way to teach was by reasoning with the students, understanding that they are unique individuals, who have a different perspective regarding the classroom. Therefore, teachers are not always entitled to the final word.

As an EFL teacher of young learners, I started to struggle with classroom management in 2019, for many reasons. For instance, in a specific literacy stage class, there were seven students who were quite heterogeneous in age (from 5 to 8 years old). Classes could turn into a complete chaos, from my point of view. I will mention some of the disturbing elements I noticed: not being able to cover our program thoroughly; issues like fights between the students; the usage of inappropriate words; complaints in class and from parents, among others.

I felt extremely uncomfortable in that class. Not only because I knew some students were also uncomfortable with that situation, but also because I felt that it could change for the better, becoming an environment where we would feel comfortable. My goal was to help them learn, and I felt that there were some obstacles in-between.

Initially, I was going to describe and analyze this specific class. However, through the process of writing this paper, it became clear to me that the most important aspect of the teaching-learning relationship that year was my own development as a teacher.

As you will probably notice while reading this paper, when I became aware of the challenges I was dealing with, my first reaction was to believe that the students and I needed to monitor and reflect upon the quality of classroom life we were leading. My hope was that it would sensitize them around their behavior with each other and in class.

I focused on changing the scenario. I sought for advice among my colleagues and my coordinator. I tried different pedagogical

strategies/approaches recommended by my coordinator to deal with the difficult moments in class. Some of them seemed to be more effective than others. Anyway, after experimenting with each proposal, chaos would soon come back to class. What puzzled me at those moments was: "Why don't these strategies work?"; "Why won't they calm down?"; "Why can't they get along well together?".

After these first initiatives, the Head Pedagogical Coordination (Coordenação Pedagógica Geral, or CPG) sent us a new project, called *Growth Mindset*, that aimed at working with social-emotional skills. It looked like a solution to all my problems.

Researchers like Forman, Minick and Stone (apud CAZDEM, 2001, p.78) have already commented on the need of working with the emotional aspects of learning in the classroom and seem to think we do not address them as much as we should.

In classrooms, noncognitive aspects of underlying interpersonal relationships – affective aspects – are no less important for children's learning. Nevertheless, in descriptions of even nontraditional classrooms, where interactions are deemed so important, mention of affective qualities of the learning environment are hard to find.

Exploratory Practice (EP) is a research field that aims at understanding teachers and students inside the language classroom and other professional contexts. Both teachers and students are viewed as unique individuals, who are capable of independent decision-making and of developing as learners. These are some of the five propositions about learners (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009) that we will discuss further on.

Since I feared losing control of the situation, I was searching for a solution to the issues we had in class. It was only through working in this paper and getting more in touch with EP that it became clear to me that I needed to reflect upon my own learning and development as a teacher.

While introducing the *Growth Mindset* project and figuring out my own puzzles, it became clearer that this monograph could focus on understanding the development of my practice as a teacher of Young Learners. My objective in writing this paper is to analyze my own practice, as reported by field diaries and

recollections, considering some of the learner characteristics proposed by Exploratory Practice.

2 – Exploratory Practice

Allwright and Hanks (2009, p.172) went straight to the point when explaining that Exploratory Practice (EP) “is action for *understanding*”. The most important notion here is intention. There is no intention for change, only for understanding.

The process of understanding may eventually trigger change; however, this is not the goal of the research. If this is the purpose, then Action Research (AR) would probably be a more suitable starting point, as the authors explain: “AR starts out with an *intention to change* in order to solve a problem, or at least to introduce an innovation” (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 172).

At first, in my journey teaching these kids, I really felt that their behavior needed to change. For that reason, in the next section, I will not analyze our projects in the light of EP, but only describe them for contextual reasons. However, since my final purpose was becoming a better teacher, therefore, developing as a teacher, I will use EP to understand my own development as a practitioner of learning.

One of the key concerns of Exploratory Practice (EP) relates to who is the actor in the teaching-learning practice. Allwright and Hanks (2019) describe not only teachers as practitioners of teaching and students as practitioners of learning but also the opposite. Inside the classroom, teachers are also practicing learning through their experience and students are also teaching.

By seeing students as practitioners of learning, we are reminded that they are not only “targets of teaching” (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p.2). Teachers are the practitioners of language teaching, but they cannot do the learning part for the students; therefore, their roles are parallel, though not identical. As Paulo Freire had already stated (1997, p.28): “Men and women should be the subjects of their own education. They cannot be its object. Therefore, no one educates anyone”.

Furthermore, teachers may use their practice as a context for research. In this sense, they can also be considered practitioners of learning. Actually, practitioners, under this perspective, are “knowers, learners, and researchers”

who work collaboratively, taking their practice as a focus, as suggested by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (apud ALLWRIGHT et. al 2019, p.3).

Lyra, Fish and Braga add to the notion that not only practitioners consider their own practice, but also a specific part of it: life, rather than work-related issues. They prioritize “redefining notions such as motivation, anxiety, discipline, learners and teachers' beliefs, or patterns of classroom interaction” (2003 apud GIEVE;MILLER, 2006 p.34) over productivity, methodological, technical issues.

Most of my puzzles came from behavioral matters, concerning the quality of life we experienced while teaching and learning. Therefore, a focus on the quality of life was central in my practice and will also be the main aspect of my research.

Gieve and Miller (2006) suggest that the task of understanding what goes on in the classroom cannot be appointed to outsiders. Practitioners would be the only ones capable of reaching a more approximate understanding of their reality. Third parties, like researchers, coordinators, colleagues, and even parents, cannot fully understand a reality in which they do not participate directly. Paulo Freire's works also reinforce this idea when he proposes that "whoever really observes, does so from a given point of view" (1998, p.22).

Having to develop daily reports to our coordination regarding productivity and behavior, I would sometimes write full pages (extrapolating the tiny space allotted for this description) so that the situations described there would not be portrayed out of their context.

In his *Six Promising Directions in Applied Linguistics*, (2006) Allwright suggests that it would be healthier for everyone involved if the aim of teaching and learning was targeted beyond productivity. The alternative is to encourage people to be lifelong learners, by suggesting that the quality of classroom life is, in itself, the most crucial matter, instead of short-term results. This would also be a vital determinant of the long-term mental health of humanity (and the mental health of the language teacher!).

What Allwright (2002 apud ALLWRIGHT, 2006, p14) proposes is that

if we start by focusing on the quality of life inside the classroom, we will find ourselves also considering (...) both the quality of

education and the quality of learning there. It is also good to picture that "the productivity of learning opportunities may depend less on the quality of the work that goes into them than to the quality of the classroom life in which they arise.

Nevertheless, teaching and learning represent a pedagogic paradox. Though seeking safety and routine, "the teacher always risks social and emotional equilibrium in the classroom when new learning is proposed", because learning "challenges the known and threatens certainty" – it may disturb learners at a psychological level by creating "chaotic and risky" (WRIGHT, 2005, p120) situations, that can even lead to a loss in the students' motivation to learn.

Forman, Minick and Stone believe that we should mention the affective side of teaching more often. They

(...) blame on Vygotsky himself for not saying more about cognitive/affective connections. In his chapter, Addison Stone calls the quality of interpersonal relationships one of the missing ingredients of the scaffolding metaphor. The affective quality that perhaps best expresses what both teachers and students need is what Stone calls "mutual trust." (FORMAN; MINICK, STONE apud CAZDEM, 2001, p.78)

This was a particularly important concept to me; our social and emotional equilibrium was clearly not working well. I was trying to re-establish it, but I forgot that equilibrium is not fixed, it is variable. I also forgot that we, as learners, are not ready yet. We will always have scope for continuous development.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, in EP, both teachers and students are considered learners, capable of development, and, therefore, subjects to the aforementioned risks.

Besides that, Allwright and Hanks created a summary of how they would like to see learners treated by us, language professionals, in order to help learners (students or teachers) develop as practitioners:

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. (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 192)

Regarding proposition 1, they state that there are no positive consequences if we expect students to go through the same classroom activities and learn and develop in the same way. Even though they may have a lot in common, we should take the differences and individualities in consideration.

Proposition 2 implies that learning, especially language learning, is essentially social. Therefore, learners are social beings who are not entirely free agents in the classroom. What they can do is constrained by the presence of others.

In proposition 3, the role of learners in the classroom is reassured – if we consider them to be ‘key practitioners’, it means that they can take learning seriously. But, as mentioned before, the classroom is a social environment, and sometimes learners may act in disregard of their own abilities, showing signs of lack of motivation, for example. It is important to notice that this does not necessarily mean they are not able to take learning seriously. However, if this is how the teacher sees it, then learners may “conform to others’ expectations of them, (...) positively or negatively” (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 6).

In proposition 4, the authors state that learners are capable of independent decision-making. They do not need to be constantly “told what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and who to do it with” (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 6). But, due to teacher’s fear of losing control, this is what normally happens. We tend to limit the student’s scope of decision making in order to make classroom management easier.

If the teacher turned decisions over to students, therefore giving up on their authority in the classroom, it could be more difficult to reach unanimity, creating the grounds for sensitive situations.

Finally, in proposition 5, they add the important notion that students (and other learners) are most likely not fully developed as learners. They probably still have “scope for development” (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p.7), maybe

even in the areas presented by the other propositions earlier. Teachers and parents may aid or hinder them in the process.

Proposition 5 was the least conceivable to me in my practice that year. I rationally knew my students still had scope for development, but somehow, I expected them to act as if they were fully prepared to deal with the situations our classroom presented.

The closest I was to considering them as capable of developing, was when I gave them new instructions, to things that were unknown by them before, which I expected them to precisely follow.

In fact, this was especially true to me in my practice. I expected me to know how to deal with everything from teaching English, to classroom management and got frustrated when I did not.

Allwright and Hanks said that

Language professionals are increasingly used to thinking of their work in terms of their own professional development, but do not so happily use the term in relation to their own learners. Why should we not consider learner development a viable parallel concept, though? Surely we want learners to develop as learners; to become better at it over time, better able to enjoy and to profit from the courses we provide for them, and, eventually, both able and eager to carry on learning after our courses are over. Of course, whether or not language professionals recognize the fact, learners can develop, do develop, and will develop over time." (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 2)

Even though I have to disagree with the first sentence, since I did not use to think of my work as "professional development", I would get as anxious about it as I did to my learners, I completely agree that it is a viable parallel and that it is healthier when we consider learners as capable of developing.

Within the context of my literacy class, there was no formal testing. However, a high standard on students' productions was still expected by their teachers, coordinators, and parents. Lyotard (1984) explains that when tests and standards are implemented, they create a rather stressing environment for teachers. I found that most of his considerations held true for my environment as well.

According to him, "performativity entails that individual worth is reduced to what a person or a community does and how well they do it" (LYOTARD,

1984 apud GIEVE; MILLER, 2006 p. 207). Shohamy (apud ALLWRIGHT and HANKS, 2009, p.25) stated that tests are " being used for unfair purposes, such as forcing students to learn, teachers to teach, create fear and narrow the learning domain".

For this reason, I do not think I am inclined to see neither teachers' nor learners' development. Due to some anxiety based on high expectations on students' production and my own performance as a teacher, I am programmed to expect me and my students to be always ready, and preferably correct.

Helena Amaral da Fontoura (2007, p. 198) said that understanding life in the classroom may help by contributing to shaping practitioner's perspectives when working through psychological vulnerabilities, by realizing, being aware and dealing with it, or understanding its roots. That is why it was so important for me to work for understanding my own practice. But how do we "do" understanding?

In "The developing language learner" (2009 p. 166), Allwright and Hanks defined EP in one sentence:

Exploratory practice involves: PRACTITIONERS WORKING COLLEGIALLY TO UNDERSTAND: What they want to understand, following their own agendas; Not necessarily in order to bring about change; Not primarily by changing, But by using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools, so that working for understanding is part of the teaching and learning, not extra to it; In a way that does not lead to 'burn out,' but that is indefinitely sustainable; IN ORDER TO CONTRIBUTE TO: Teaching and learning themselves; Development, both individual and collective.

One way that could help hinder the innate search for solutions to any issue is to use "why" questions, instead of "how" or "what". This way, the answers will lead to exploration on the topic at hand, for further understanding. (ALLWRIGHT and HANKS, 2009).

In the end, using EP and especially reading and writing about it, has made me realize it helps us learn to learn, which is useful both for me and my students. Since we both are learners of our own subjects, we can be "better able to enjoy and to profit" from the subjects, and even to be "able and eager to carry on learning after our courses are over", as Allwright and Hanks (2009, p. 2) summarized in their Five Propositions about learners.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the course's goal when implementing its "Growth Mindset" project is also to stimulate the desire to learn in spite of the desire for quantifiable indicators, such as better grades. In the next section, I will describe the context of the language course, our classroom, and the project, in-depth, in order to better analyze my development as a learner.

3 – Methodological Considerations

3.1 - The English Course

As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, 2019 was my first year teaching at this language course, in which I only taught the Young Learners level. The two other levels are Juniors and Teens.

In January 2019, the course offered me and other teachers a Pre-Service Training, held by another branch's coordinator. Both experienced and new course teachers were present in the training.

Every day they would introduce us to adapted articles and exclusively developed material to be read during lunch breaks and/or at home. These materials were based, for example, on Piaget's Stages of Development or articles on VAK (Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic) learning styles and Positive Discipline.

Piaget suggested that every child, even in different environmental context and culture diversity around the world, goes through the same stages of physical and cognitive development, which are the sensorimotor (0-2 years-old), preoperational (2-7), concrete operations (7-11), and formal operations (11 to adulthood) – (MORENO, 2010; HOCKENBURY; HOCKENBURY, 2011 apud BABAKR et al.2019, p.518).

This means that children are expected to go through the same process, show the same main characteristics, and reach the same goals as they pass each stage.

VAK theories suggest that individuals think and learn best in different ways, not necessarily as a matter of abilities but rather preferences for processing certain types of information or for processing information through different stimuli. (Willingham et al., 2015)

Positive Discipline (PD) was also important when considering the *Growth Mindset* project. It is a Parenting/Teaching philosophy, derived from Alfred Adler's and Rudolf Dreikurs's work, which was later developed as a method by Dr. Jane Nelsen. According to her,

the word "discipline" means "to teach". Positive Discipline is the most loving kind of teaching. It involves nurturing trust and connection, sharing skills, and creating an environment where your child can develop feelings of capability and confidence. (2015 p. 19)

These theories and concepts had a tremendous impact on how I communicated, not only to my students, but also to colleagues and the coordination that year.

More than only presenting theoretical background, they would also show us strategies that the course had gathered through its many years of existence and we would practice, hands-on, how to apply this knowledge to the use of the course's materials and tasks..

Some of these concepts were not new to me. What was especially new was being offered such a rich training program, in which we had time to get familiarized with teaching theory, strategies, and techniques. I felt technically, theoretically and even emotionally supported for the first time in an English course.

An important player in this support system is the coordination. They work as intermediaries between parents, the branch's owners, the Head Coordination, CPG, in São Paulo, and the teachers. One of their tasks is to manage teachers' progress since it is part of the course's culture to nurture long-term development.

In order to do that, teachers are guided through self-evaluation processes, observation and even in making a portfolio documenting our strengths, points that need developing, and our progress throughout the year.

One of the tensest moments of this process is class observation, when someone from CPG comes to our branch and observe a small portion of one of our classes. This is scheduled beforehand, and we know exactly at what time we are going to be observed. So, to prepare, we are advised to arrange our activities so we can leave the "most relevant" one for the observation. After that,

we create a report on what activities are going to be developed in that class and more thoroughly describe the one we will perform while being observed.

After the class is over, we are called for a feedback session, where we are invited to share our views and the observer also shares theirs and gives us advice on what we can do to improve. After a few weeks, it is time for our coordinator to go back to the same class and see if we heard and implemented the changes as advised by the CPG.

All of these "evaluations", together with the teacher's and the coordinator's views, are talked through during our "Teacher development" meetings.

As mentioned before, even though I might have felt a little uncomfortable with being observed, I valued the Teacher Development process. It was not portrayed as a judgement where they decide if you succeed as a teacher or not. Rather, it was carried out as sort of a counselling. Moreover, it seemed like they cared about the teachers in the same way that we care about our students.

3.2 - The literacy stage / the class

As mentioned before, the biggest challenge in my first year on this new course was dealing with one specific class in our "literacy stage". This is a special level between young learners' groups and juniors' groups. Ideally, they have just graduated from First Grade in school, which means they have just learned how to read and write in Portuguese, so it is when we start to introduce reading and writing in English.

According to our manual, the main objective of this stage is that students develop awareness of the language at the sound, letters, and word levels. Since reading and writing is introduced, the coursebook starts to get denser. There are also graded readers, which students are invited to start gradually reading by themselves after a few months into the course.

This context is relevant here, since it shows that this level is meant to be an adaptation step, bridging the gap to the next level, considering that the young learners' level is mainly based on storytelling, playful learning, and game-based activities.

Playful learning is practically a trademark of the course, for all levels, but students do notice a big difference between these three core levels, and that is why we have this whole year dedicated to getting the students familiarized with reading, writing, spelling and some book-based activities, but not forgetting art activities, games, and storytelling through our readers.

Again, ideally, the student should be around 7 years old when they get to the literacy level. However, in my 7-student class, they ranged from 5 to 8 years old. Of course, they were not on the same cognitive level. The 5-year-old, for example, started studying with us not knowing how to read or write in Portuguese, and this is a skill of major importance at this point.

At the very beginning, this particular student demanded a lot of attention from me or from volunteer classmates, since we needed to assist her in recognizing letters in reading activities and she also needed more time to write. At some point, she caught up with the rest of her classmates. Due to her parent's close attention at home, her reading and writing skills improved fast.

But most of all, there were some difficult issues regarding behavior and the relationships established between the students, amongst themselves, and between the students and me.

Some students were very disciplined; others had a hard time following classroom routine and agreements. They would fight between themselves; the boys would scream a lot, in a way that made my ear hurt; the girls would complain about that to me, then to the coordination, then to their parents. Even though the course provided me with plenty of background information and strategies, nothing seemed to help with these situations.

As a result, most of the classes were chaotic, and I could not follow our plans thoroughly. For me, this dynamics was impacting in our quality of life in the classroom, therefore, puzzling me regarding how to deal with that.

After the first few classes, I began wondering if this was going to last all year. And what I could do to help the students enjoy the classes a little bit more, so they could be profitable for everybody.

3.3 - The Growth Mindset Project

One of the course's previous strategies to enhance students' motivation, up until 2018, was that every time the kids completed a task, like homework, spelling exercises, among others, the course would give them stickers, which were kept on a "Passport". When this passport was full, they would get a gift from the course.

However, in the end of each year, the CPG revises the course's procedures, and they concluded that this was not a good strategy anymore. Having in mind that Deci et al (1999, p.658) suggested that "tangible rewards tend to have a substantially negative effect on intrinsic motivation (...) Even when tangible rewards are offered as indicators of good performance, they typically decrease intrinsic motivation for interesting activities."

They understood that it did not make sense to reward the kids for doing simple tasks that are an obligation, so they chose to discontinue the program and asked themselves the following question: "How can we help our students' self-motivation and self-regulation development process?"

So, they came up with a new idea: the *Growth Mindset* project. According to the CPG (2019, personal communication) this project's aims are:

"To favor the development of socioemotional skills; To waken and maintain the passion, interest and satisfaction in learning and studying; To discontinue the use of tangible rewards for completed tasks; To create a culture where effort, encouragement and empathy are valued."

And the principles of the project are: "Encouragement; Progress-check; Celebration of group achievements; Growth mindset statements; Intrinsic-motivation."

In order to implement those principles throughout the whole year, the CPG chose the seven themes bellow, one to be worked through each month.

1. Definition of growth and fixed mindset concepts
2. The importance of a good relationship with our classmates
3. How to overcome challenges
4. How to overcome anxiety
5. Developing empathy
6. Fixed mindset triggers

7. The power of yet. (CPG, Personal Communication, 2019).

At the beginning of each month, we would present the theme and work with them in playful ways, following some steps. First, we would launch the activity, then, ask questions and encourage the students to share their perceptions, after that through the other classes, while we may keep repeating the activities, we would watch their progress, checking if they had been exercising the theme as best as they can.

By the end of the month, on the second to last class, we would discuss their progress, if we agreed they had completed the tasks, we could, together, celebrate their efforts in an activity, each celebration could last from 15 to 30 minutes.

They would choose 7 different activities for the 7 celebrations we could have throughout the year, for example: Cooking day, Video Session, Extra game, Slime day, Dancing, Drawing on the board and Picnic day.

As said before, our coordination chose to privilege experiences as a group as a celebration of efforts, rather than giving them gifts as rewards for tasks completed.

As mentioned before, the principles of Encouragement; Progress-check; Celebration of group achievements; Growth mindset statements; are related to Intrinsic-motivation, and to explain the intrinsic motivation importance, Deci and Ryan (1985, p.245) said that "The learning experience is its own reward, students' natural curiosity and interest energize their learning" (apud ARNOLD and BROWN, 1999, p.14).

Moreover, I felt this project could help me create more teachable moments for them and that participating in such activities might help my students deal with their behavioral issues in class, to find it easier to deal with the learning, to make their relationships more pleasurable than they were before. Especially because the first theme we were going to work on was: "The importance of good relationships with our colleagues."

At the same time, I was also worried about how the students felt about the activities, if they thought they helped them or if that only sounded reasonable from the teacher's/coordinator's point of view. After some time, I

realized I needed to understand the activities and of course, my students too. I later decided to resort to Exploratory Practice for that.

By the end of each theme, they had to tell us whether they were able to complete the tasks or not, so we could, together, celebrate their efforts in an activity. They chose 7 different activities for the 7 celebrations we could have throughout the year: Cooking day, Video Session, Extra game, Slime day, Dancing, Drawing on the board and a Picnic day.

So, in the end of the first month, I asked them if they had been saying nice things in their daily lives, to what most said "yes", though some sounded like they were just joining the choral, some of them sounded like they meant it, and just one of them replied with a "so so." It felt for me like the opportune moment to check whether the activity was as valuable for them as it was for me. And this was when I asked them all to draw a before and after "picture" about the project, since I wanted to understand if they felt any differences.

Though I felt the activities we had been doing that whole month had many positive impacts in my classroom, I am not sure they felt the same, at least consciously, since I found most of the before/after pictures rather superficial again, and some didn't even understand the concept of before and after, drawing 2 squares as a comic story, for example, one pictured a character saying "I love you" and another answering "thank you".

Apart from the kids that didn't draw as I asked them to, I had 3 interesting responses, one of those pictured a "before" square where someone is crying and another character saying "You are beautiful" and in the "after" square the first character is not crying anymore and says "Thank you". Another response pictures a character giving a Pokemon Card as a gift to another character, as a way of treating them. And in the last one, the "before" square pictures a character beating another, and after, 2 characters are saying "Thank you" and "(You're*) Welcome".

While doing these activities with them, some other puzzles, related to my expectations came to my mind, such as: why do I have an expected answer in mind when I conduct social-emotional learning activities? Why do I think some of the responses are superficial? Why am I unsatisfied with some of their responses? And other many puzzles related to our relationship, their behaviour in class and the expectations they had.

Though the activity helped my students realize the impact of their words, they still needed remembering and constant rephrasing so as to grasp the "expected understanding" around it. The reason why I insisted on explaining it many times is not that they had to think as I did, but because I felt if I did not explain it, making sure they were on the same path, the activity would not be any useful.

By which I mean, it was good to teach them "new words" (English), but it was even better to leave the classroom knowing that they were closer to the awareness of their kind or unkind words and how this affected the others. Not only that, but also because I felt this helped me with the "teaching new words" part.

After that, I decided to give Exploratory Practice a try, as I felt it was essential to understand my students and our situation, rather than focusing only in trying to change what I felt was wrong.

So I did, I thought about all the puzzles I had in mind and decided that the one that puzzled me the most was the noise they made and if this was an issue for them too.

I asked them if they thought we made lots of noise, and since they answered positively, I asked them, "Why do we make so much noise?" My intention was to get their answers and, in a later class, go back and ask them to explain their answers to everybody by using a Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activity (PEPA).

According to Cunha et al (2017, p. 16) PEPAs are "familiar classroom activities which, with slight adaptations, can be used to generate useful data." Their responses to this first question are available in the table below. The names used to identify them are fictitious.

I included myself in the question (we) because they complained about me speaking too loudly sometimes. So, I also thought it would be important for me to answer the question.

TABLE 1 – "Why do we make so much noise?" (students' answers)

Laís - Teacher	Because we need to communicate
Pedro	às vezes não sei o propósito (Sometimes I do not understand the purpose)

Carolina	Because they want to
Laura	"Porque a gente grita de alegria" (Because we scream of joy)
David	A gente gosta de cantar (We like to sing)
Unknown Author	a gente gritou porque "távamos" cantando (We screamed because we were singing)
Unknown Author	A gente gostou da música (We liked the song)
Unknown Author	Porque a gente faz barulho (Because we make noise)
Unknown Author	A gente faz muito barulho (We make a lot of noise)

However, after more than 2 months working with the similar activities from the *Growth Mindset* project, I thought it would be better to give them some time off, and not insist on asking them to explain themselves, I felt they were getting tired of such activities.

I started thinking about ways to relate these answers with the subjects we had in our books, like animals or objects, so that we could work with them more naturally, but since time passed and I could not make up my mind, I decided to let go of it. As a result, I did not use a PEPA to “generate useful data”.

After that, and shortly before our winter vacations, we had new themes to work in that project on the course's program: "overcoming challenges" and "dealing with anxiety." In which the first we had games to exemplify the theme, and in the second, we had some "Yoga Classes." They felt great to me; I saw the students using the tools they had learned, like breathing deeply, trying their best during activities, and having more autonomy to do so.

After winter break, I felt something changed. We changed our classroom, going from a not that big classroom to an even smaller one. However, they also seemed to have changed. And, of course, I had changed too. Somehow, I felt more prepared and calmer to deal with them.

Our classes seemed to be more productive, not only according to our program, but our interaction was working better, they were less chaotic to me. But still, we had our episodes, when I didn't know how to deal with some situations, like constant yelling, singing Brazilian songs containing swear words, "random" words being shouted out of no apparent reason and more complicated cases, as in the following:

There was this one day when they repeatedly sang "família pão" (bread family, in English) when we were listening to this audio about some family members and the name of a boy was "Brad", which for them sounded very similar to the word "bread", which means "pão" in Portuguese. I have to admit that, even though I thought it was very nice that they could understand the sound and relate to something, creating connections with the language presented. I would love to stop and explain the relations and sounds and enjoy the teachable moment. But it was also somewhat chaotic from my point of view since we were in the middle of an important listening activity, and they would not stop singing so we all could listen to the audio. Even if I wanted to take advantage of the teachable moment, it would be chaotic until they eventually decided to stop singing.

Sometimes when this kind of thing happened, I would fall out of resources, and I automatically appealed to common sense and tried to control them, asking, or even demanding, them to stop. Sometimes it worked, most of them, it did not.

After so many situations, talks, and activities dealing with their behavior, together with a considerable amount of reflection and working for understanding, I still couldn't find an answer on how to deal with them. Of course, I had in mind that I needed to find a definitive solution.

Situations kept happening, chaos kept occurring, but sometimes I felt like I did a good job on dealing with this.

Not surprisingly, this singing loop happened again when we were reading a book where there was a lollipop. The manual asked me to perform a hangman with this word so they could learn how to spell it. When David, the boy that answered "We like to sing" to the PEPA activity described earlier, saw the word on the board, he began singing "Lollipop", repeatedly and was joined by his friends on the loop for what seemed like an eternity.

It bugged me to listen to the same word on and on, but it was actually beautiful to see them having fun with a word they had just learned. So this time, instead of asking them to stop, I told them that they were singing beautifully, but that I thought they could use some more words in the song, so the next class we were going to have a couple of minutes to think of a song and then present it to their classmates and maybe even other students at our school.

They got super excited, so in the next class I let them write their songs, they asked me to do it in groups, so I helped them arrange their chairs in 2 groups of 3. At this point, David started to use his "favorite song" as the tune (a very popular funk song that he used to sing a lot during our classes), and, even though I did not give them specific instructions about the theme, he used the vocabulary from our unit to create his song too.

For me, this activity was a success. Primarily because they could finally sing what they chose to sing, and because I felt a connection was created at that moment. Between us and also what we were doing in class (Talking about our abilities using the modal verb "can").

After that, I decided to give them some time off, not interfering in their behavior that much, observing more than changing. Reasoning more than Controlling.

Though I felt an improvement in quality of classroom life after I decided to do that, I credit this change for the whole process we went through, not only to my posture of realizing I should observe and work towards understanding my students but also for the previous activities.

4 – Analysis

While writing this paper, it became clear to me that my main motivation here is to demonstrate the development process I went through during the year of 2019. The connections between this process and the “5 learners’ propositions” coined by Allwright and Hanks (2009, p. 4) are easily drawn.

First, I want to analyze the fifth proposition, in which they state that “Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning’, since I have previously mentioned, it was hard for me to identify with this proposition. I had a hard time believing that I still had scope for development and I easily questioned my teaching abilities based on the belief that if I was in a teaching position, I needed to be ready, to know things. Especially, I thought I needed to know how to manage a classroom. When I “expected me to know how to deal with everything from teaching English, to classroom management and got frustrated when I did not”, as my report in the previous section suggests, I pressured myself to be a perfect teacher.

It was only through reflecting upon my practice when writing this paper that this notion became clear to me. Every practitioner will develop. This leads me to the next proposition.

In proposition number three, it is stated that “Learners are capable of taking learning seriously.” It is likely that every teacher has had at least one student who did not demonstrate to have taken learning seriously. This, however, does not mean that this student was not capable of doing that. Believing in their ability is a big step towards encouraging them to do so.

In my view, this also has to do with learners’ motivation. Giving learners rewards for their achievements takes motivation away from the task itself and directs it towards the compensation.

However, by stimulating intrinsic motivation, the learner is invited to exercise the ability of taking learning seriously more often. My course strongly emphasizes it, as we could see in the *Growth Mindset* project’s aims, which are not only focused on students’ needs, but also teachers’.

In my case, the desire to improve and learn as a teacher did not come from exterior demands, rather the opposite. Through the year of 2019, while working with this class, I was not pressured by superiors to act in certain ways. I

myself felt the need to learn, to develop as a teacher. Therefore, I kept trying different approaches, different strategies, trying to understand the situation and be a better teacher. Ultimately, I also took learning seriously when I decided to deepen my understanding on this matter and write about this process.

The effort to give the learners autonomy in the learning process is another important step towards believing in their ability to take their learning seriously. If we give them the autonomy to decide about their learning process, we are telling them that we believe in their judgement. This again leads us to another proposition.

The fourth proposition suggests that “Learners are capable of independent decision-making”. If we believe learners can take learning seriously, we also believe that they can decide about their learning process.

This one is easily connected to my teaching reality. In my course, lessons are previously planned by CPG and come ready-made for us in our Manual. We can follow the steps strictly or not. They give us, teachers, full support to adapt classes in any way we see fit.

In my perception, they believe in our ability to decide what is better for our class’s reality. We also do that with our students. Instead of deciding on everything by ourselves, we are encouraged to let them decide. Ideally, we would give them options that are acceptable for us and for them. This strategy is intended to ground them but also trust them with the choice of each action they take. More than demand, we should lead them to good decisions.

It is not always easy to let go of control. Especially in my case, in which I already felt no control of the situation in class at all. Even though I was eager for my students to be autonomous, sometimes the impulse of giving them independence did not come naturally to me. I wanted them to be free, but in my own terms.

A good example of this was the ‘singing situation’. Often, our activities were interrupted by loud singing of inappropriate songs. It took me a long time to give up on the control of this situation. When I finally did, and not only complimented the song they were singing but also suggested we created new songs the next class, they were excited. This was, paradoxically, the class when I felt most in control of the environment.

As for my autonomy, I felt free for changing, adapting, or even creating new activities. And I exercised it a lot. Either by bringing an instrument to class so we could sing the alphabet song in a different way, or by creating a specific grammar worksheet to work on “He’s”, “His”, “She’s” and “Her” when I felt they were struggling to understand the exercises on the book.

It seems to me that having autonomy within a given scenario gives us teachers, as well as students, a sense of safety while following our paths.

This connects to the next proposition. In the first proposition, which says that “Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways.”, we are reminded why it is important to let them decide.

They are unique and have unique needs. Which also need to be met when we teach. In my early years of teaching, I solemnly believed that the best way to teach/learn was the way I had learned. I did not take in consideration that other people might have different processes.

And that is why I think it is important that my course provided us with Piaget’s theories but also VAK theories. Because we learn the most probable stages of development of kids in general, but we are reminded that they are individuals who may go through different learning processes, therefore, teachers should see them as individuals who may need different strategies in order to develop. We are encouraged to use as many different strategies as possible.

Since I started teaching there after already being influenced by EP, I felt this was related to Allwright’s views on *Six Promising Directions in Applied Linguistics*, one of those is “from precision to scattergun”, where, after realizing students’ idiosyncrasy, you either tailor your classes to meet each student’s needs, or you use a scattergun method. Through this metaphor, you either plant seeds in specially dug holes in a controlled environment, or go for the “the traditional technique of sowing seeds by ‘broadcasting’, throwing them all around you, in the expectation that some will fall on ‘stony ground’ but that at least some others will fall on fertile ground, by chance alone.” (ALLWRIGHT, 2006, p.14).

After some time, I realized that even my process of learning English was not as simple as I once believed. After opening my eyes for other possibilities for my students, I also discovered new possibilities for me.

Finally, the last proposition adds the crucial notion that “Learners are social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment”.

In my development process, this played the most important role. As mentioned before, this was the first course where I felt a real support from colleagues, coordination. It was the first one I felt safe to learn and develop as a teacher. Even during the training program I could feel that there was a supportive atmosphere behind each task we performed.

The course’s mission statement, which directs every aspect of the course, from the classes, to communication between teachers and parents for example, could easily be adapted to what I experienced in the training program, that was “serious, responsible, pleasant, natural and fun (...), showing respect for (the teachers’) needs and favoring their interaction.” (CPG, Personal communication, 2019). Even during the feedback sessions, after some presentations we did, they showed us exactly the same empathy they expect we have towards the students.

For all the reasons pointed in this section, I can easily say that this was when I learned the importance of being in an environment where learning is encouraged in all aspects. I will always have scope for development, but this paper was an important effort to document this specific phase I went through.

5 - Final Considerations

This paper marks the beginning of my academic life as an English Teacher. Although I have been studying English for 13 years now, I only started teaching it 5 years ago. It has been almost 3 years since I started the Specialization Course at PUC, so one can say that the course played a big part in shaping the teacher and learner I am today.

Through all the classes, the assignments, the group projects, among others, I have developed as a learner and as a teacher. I was presented to concepts that I could have never imagined, like Exploratory Practice, and had the opportunity to deeper understand some other concepts, like World Englishes. I also learned the importance of being critical, of research paradigms, of reading and writing. In the end, reading for this paper and writing it raised my awareness on how deep the simple act of teaching can be. And how much we can do to try to understand it.

By asking questions, I was able to better understand my students' needs. By reflecting on those questions, my expectations regarding my classes changed. There are still many elements that are still left to understand, though.

Like Rounds and Schachter (1996, p. 108 apud GIEVE; MILLER, 2006 p.14) proposed "classroom-based research entails a very large number of human and institutional factors that can affect research design and outcomes in many unforeseen and unforeseeable ways. It is not for the timid"

As someone that is aware of the many intricacies that happen inside a classroom and that tries to be a lifelong learner, my path is far from finished. As a practitioner, I would like to keep understanding life in the classroom in the light of Exploratory Practice and other related areas.

This paper is a picture of my recent career in language teaching. It captured some details of this specific moment but cannot show the full reality of what goes on in the classroom.

What goes on in the classroom will always be life. As it is. And we do not have answers for life. What we have are questions that might help us reach an understanding of it. Or not. And that is not a problem, we will always have more questions to ask.

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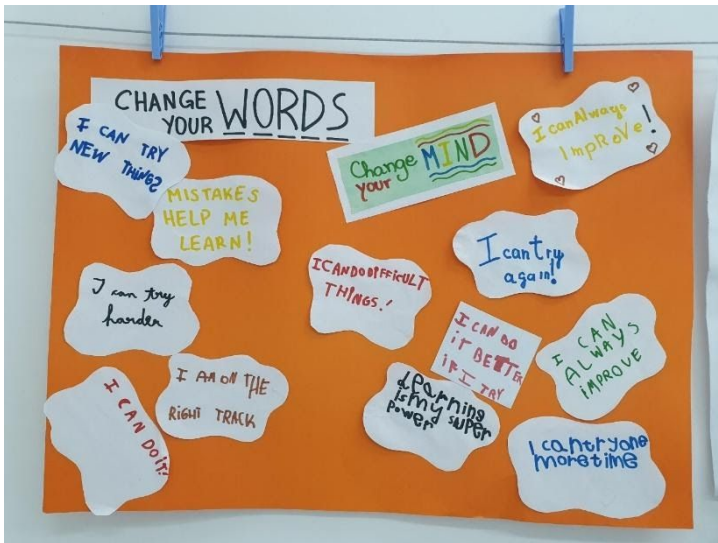
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Annex:

- I- Our first activity from the “Growth Mindset” project, a chain of kindness. The students wrote kind messages on each link of the chain. The objective was to show them that little acts of kindness make a difference. By the end, the chain was so big that they started measuring it by their own heights.



- II- The second activity we developed. After playing a difficult game, I asked them if they believed they could improve in a second try. All of them said “Yes”, so I asked them to choose a positive statement for that feeling they had. Throughout the rest of the year, I used this poster to remember them that they are “able to develop” whenever they felt overwhelmed by a difficult situation.



- III- At the end of each month, we celebrated our efforts with activities unanimously chosen by them.

