Critical reflection for empowering teachers' practices in ELT

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ABSTRACT

Reflective teaching is a powerful tool for professional development in the sense that the teacher engages in self-monitoring of his/her own beliefs about English Language Teaching (ELT) with reflections on classroom practices and procedures. What follows is an account on important concepts related to critical reflections on the role of the teacher in ELT beyond the boundaries of current methodologies and an example of an actual experience with the work of acting upon one's own pedagogy within an English learning classroom.

Keywords: ELT. Reflection. Self-monitoring.

Reflexão crítica para capacitar as práticas dos professores no Ensino de Língua Inglesa

RESUMO

A reflexão sobre o ensino é uma ferramenta poderosa para o desenvolvimento professional no sentido de que o professor engaja no auto monitoramento de suas crenças sobre o ensino de língua inglesa com reflexos em práticas e procedimentos pedagógicos. Segue uma abordagem sobre conceitos importantes relacionados com a reflexão crítica sobre o papel do professor no ensino de língua inglesa para além das fronteiras de metodologias vigentes e um exemplo de uma experiência real com o trabalho de agir sobre a própria pedagogia do professor dentro de uma sala de aula de aprendizado da língua inglesa.

Palavras-chave: ensino de língua inglesa. Reflexão. Auto monitoramento.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the current assignment is to discuss several aspects related, either directly or indirectly, to the effectiveness and usefulness of a teacher's classroom behavior. In addition, we discuss the extent to which teachers may be enlightened by theory and practice. The teacher's crucial role as a mediator and facilitator throughout the learning process is highlighted and measured according to classroom procedures adopted.

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In the initial section, the role of English as a global language and its influence on the approaches to teaching EFL adopted by Brazilian educational authorities are presented. Such views are confronted with the actual needs, aims and interests of Brazilian learners.

An overview of the teaching principles that seem to underlie teaching practices in a broader sense are also focused. The variety of pre-established principles that should take into account target learners, contexts and aims, among other relevant key-elements influencing the teacher's decisions in the language classroom are praised and discussed.

Finally, for the purpose of this piece of work, I would also appreciate to take the opportunity and draw upon my own experience and impressions as a teacher of English as a foreign language. Thus, in the final section of the assignment, the fundamental role played by self-monitoring in the language classroom is highlighted. I discuss its importance as a self-awareness raising tool in the light of the analysis of three aspects observable in the recording of one of my own lessons.

2 EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

According to the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*, the inclusion of foreign languages teaching in the school curriculum should be determined by three major factors: (a) *historical factors*, (b) *social factors such as the degree of social relevance of those same languages within a specific context and* (c) *factors related to tradition* (p. 11). These three factors are expected to embody the specificities of individuals from a given milieu. In the case of Brazil, more specifically, it would be pertinent to point out that the teaching of English in our schools, chiefly those belonging to the public sector, appears to be far from the ideal envisaged by our educational policies.

Just like elsewhere, the learning of English in Brazil is often regarded as a passport to better life conditions. This is certainly a misconception. Considering the chaotic reality faced by the Brazilian population as far as education is concerned, it seems quite naive and simplistic to assume that each and every Brazilian learner is likely to make use of the English language as a passport to well-paid jobs. In addition, the current approach to EFL learning at most Brazilian public schools appears demotivating and ineffective, which seems to contribute enormously to the increasing lack of interest for the language. "A lot of is taught, but little is learned".

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To teach or not to teach the four skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening) at the Brazilian public schools still emerges as a recurrent question, which seems far from being answered satisfactorily. Teaching the four skills has become a nearly unattainable goal, mainly in schools of the public sector, where teachers have to "squeeze" the content so that it fits the pre-determined timetable which most of the time does not correspond to the learners long-term needs and aims.

As Vereza highlights, "the English language teaching profession in Brazil seems to be facing what would be characterized as a paradox". (VEREZA, 1998, p. 1). On one side, the Brazilian scenario acknowledges the global tendency embedded in the teaching of English. A wide number of language schools have been mushrooming all over the country and hundreds or maybe thousands of course books have been imported in order to materialize the learners' goal of acquiring a foreign language and, as a consequence, achieving a higher social status as well as access to a wider range of benefits. There is also a trend among major language schools to produce their own learning materials, though, following pedagogic trends already consolidated overseas.

On the other side, the way foreign language teaching has been treated in Brazil in nothing reflects what is established in the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*. Although it seems to acknowledge the fact that learning languages may contribute positively to one's professional as well as personal well-being, an attentive look at the Brazilian foreign language teaching scenario is likely to reveal that foreign languages do not seem to be regarded as valuable tools towards promoting individuals' educational development in a broader sense. Unfortunately, it seems that nothing or very little has been done in order to change this situation.

In fact, a reformulation of our means and aims in order to justify language teaching in our country seems urgent and fundamental. We ought to question and re-consider the assumption of the mastery of the English language as the key to professional success. Moreover, it appears of a great deal of importance to adapt and adjust our teaching practice to our own needs, which certainly differ from the needs of several if not to say many other third-world nations. Regarding English as the "magic potion" with solutions to the hardships faced by a great percentage of Brazilian citizens sounds rather ambitious. However, English may certainly function as a useful and helpful tool within our competitive job market if its teaching is adapted to our learner's needs, aims and contexts. As pointed out in the *Parâmetros Currículares Nacionais*, to consider the development of the four skills a central aim in foreign

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language teaching in Brazil appears to disregard the fundamental aspect of social relevance that foreign language teaching and learning should comprise.

3 TEACHING PRINCIPLES

Research in the field of language acquisition has revealed that a harmonious combination between theory and practice is far from being reached. Much on the contrary, an attentive look at the principles from which reflective teaching should derive seems to corroborate the belief that there is a number of variables that must not be disregarded if teachers wish to promote effective teaching and learning in the language classroom. Brown (1994) addresses such variables by discussing the twelve principles that teachers need to bear in mind in order to engage learners in the process of meaningful language acquisition. Brown's principled approach to language pedagogy appears in three main sets of principles known as the Cognitive Principles, the Affective Principle and the Linguistic Principles. Each of these categories are believed to present specific roles towards promoting effective language learning. The first set of principles is entitled "*cognitive*" because of its relation to mental and intellectual functions. (BROWN, 1994, p. 16). The cognitive principles, as Brown puts it, would comprise five sub-principles:

(1)   The Principle of automaticity suggests: "*efficient second language learning involves a timely movement of the control of a few language forms into the automatic processing of a relatively unlimited number of language forms. Overanalyzing language, thinking too much about its forms, and consciously lingering on rules of language all tend to impede this graduation to automaticity*" (p. 17).

(2)   The Principle of Meaningful Learning that, according to Brown, promotes long-term retention through associative links between one's existing cognitive structures and recently-acquired information (p. 18).

(3)   The Anticipation of Reward Principle that may be beneficial or harmful to learners depending on how it is administered by teachers. Brown argues that the development of the learners' intrinsic system of rewards seems far more beneficial then conditioning learners to short-term rewards (p. 19).

(4)   The Intrinsic Motivation Principle advocates *"The most powerful rewards are those that are intrinsically motivated within the learner"* (p. 20).

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In other words, motivation should stem from "*needs, wants, or desires within oneself, the behavior itself is self-rewarding*" (p. 20).

(5)   The Strategic Investment Principle focuses on the learner's own personal "investment". In other words, his/her individualized battery of strategies and techniques towards achieving the mastery of the target language.

The second set of principles is entitled Affective Principles and, as the title suggests, this principle is closely related to the emotional processing of human beings. It demands that feelings be carefully considered. Thus, "feelings about self, about relationships in a community of learners, and about the emotional ties between language and culture must not be discharged, but carefully considered" throughout the language acquisition process (p. 22). The Affective Principles comprise:

(1)   The Language Ego Principle that advocates that the learners' sense of fragility and defensiveness throughout the target language learning process needs to be respected and treated with "tender loving care" (p. 22).

(2)   The Self-Confidence Principle preaches the belief that "the eventual *success that learners attain in a task is at least partially a factor of their belief that they are fully capable of accomplishing the task*" (p. 23). That is to say, learners need to believe in their capacity to succeed.

(3)   According to the Risk-taking Principle, learners need to be encouraged to "try out" language, that is, to take calculated risks in attempting to use the target language. They need to recognize that they will be able to produce the language both productively and receptively despite the difficulties they may encounter as the learning process progresses.

(4)   The Language-Culture Connection Principle. The teaching of a language would also imply the teaching of a highly complex system of "*cultural norms, values, and ways of thinking, feeling and acting*" (p. 25) that belong to the speakers of that language.

Finally, stand the Linguistic Principles that focus on the language itself as well as on how learners cope with the recently-acquired linguistic systems. The Linguistic Principles are subdivided into three major subcategories, which are:

(1) The Native language Effect: this principle stresses the importance of the learners' native language and how interfering or facilitating it may be on the process of second/foreign language acquisition.

(2) The Interlanguage Principle that deals with the developmental processes undergone by learners in order to become linguistically competent in the target language.

(3) The Communicative Competence Principle: it consists of a harmonious combination of Organizational and Pragmatic Competences, Strategic Competence and Psychomotor skills. As Brown puts it, communicative competence may be best achieved when equal attention is provided to all the preceding components. Thus, there should be a balance among use and usage, fluency and accuracy, authentic language and contexts and the learners' eventual need to confront "*unrehearsed contexts in the real world*" (p. 29).

Brown highlights in his article that the moment language teachers, mainly foreign language teachers, are undergoing today may be considered as "the best of times and the worst of times" (p. 15) in the language teaching scenario. According to him, such a paradox could be justified by the recent breakthroughs in the field of language learning.

It seems undeniable that language teachers have benefited a great deal from research. The principled approach to language pedagogy developed by Brown seems to corroborate the belief that there seems to be a number of variables to be considered apart from methods. Methods are certainly important, however, they cannot be regarded as the unique elements responsible for the development of an individual's mastery of the target language. It is at this point where teachers emerge as valuable tools in favor of the learner. Teachers need to make use of their common sense whenever appropriate and attempt to develop the crucial "ability to comprehend when to use a technique, with whom it will work, how to adapt if for their audience, or how to judge its effectiveness". (BROWN, 1994, p. 16). Thus, the teacher's education appears to constitute a fundamental element in order to promote effective learning in the classroom.

Studies of classroom events have demonstrated that teaching is not a static element. Much on the contrary, it unquestionably constitutes a dynamic and interactional process in which the teacher needs to be attentive not only to his/her teaching style but also to the learner's profile to adjust such factors to the method used. Teachers need to be aware of their roles as mediators/facilitators of the learning process as a whole. They need to be consciously aware of the existing diversity within the classroom boundaries and switch

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strategies whenever they feel appropriate to promote a positive interaction among learners, instructional tasks and activities.

4 BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

"Every teacher aims to be an effective teacher". (RICHARDS, 1990, p. 38). Such a quotation corroborates the belief that teachers are often attributed the primary role throughout the teaching/learning process. However, the source from where effective teaching stems may be difficult to identify. According to researchers, effective teaching may be measured on the grounds of the learners' positive outcomes when attempting to master the target language.

Thus, effective teaching would be often associated with a set of effective classroom procedures such as careful guidance to lessons, monitoring of the learning progress, patterns of interaction among others. It may be inferred, therefore, that teachers are often regarded as the individuals responsible for employing a set of classroom procedures that, when perfectly combined, are likely to promote effective learning. However what the teacher does in the classroom is just half of the picture. The other half concerns the strategies employed by learners in order to achieve successful learning. It is certainly true that whenever teachers step into the classroom, they seem to be dragging a number of pre-established beliefs and aims behind them (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Such beliefs may stem from theory or simply from his/her experience both as a teacher and as a language learner. As Richards (1990, p. 42) points out:

> good teaching is not viewed as something that results from using Method Y or Method X, or something that results from the teacher modifying teaching behaviors to match some external set of rules and principles. Rather, it results from the teacher's active control and management of the processes of teaching, learning, and communication within the classroom and from an understanding of such processes. (RICHARDS, 1990, p. 42).

The learners' crucial role throughout the learning process must not be overlooked or ignored. Very often we, teachers, are confronted with situations in which learners manage to achieve high levels of linguistic competence despite the methods or techniques used. Therefore, methods and techniques cannot be regarded as the sole elements responsible for promoting effective learning within the classroom. Different from ineffective learners, successful learners seem to employ a battery of learning strategies which facilitate their own

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learning and which, to a certain extent, enables them to achieve positive outcomes in their attempts to acquire the target language.

It is important that teachers be aware of the existing strategies within the learners' reach as well as encourage them to make use of such strategies. It seems fundamental that learners achieve a broader understanding as well as control over their own learning processes so that their "selves" may absorb new content. On the other hand, in order to raise learners' awareness in relation to the tools at their disposal, it is of crucial importance that teachers evaluate their teaching strategies on a regular basis. They should play the role of the investigators who engage in detecting which types of learning strategies they are promoting in the classroom so that the learners' already existing strategies may be improved or enhanced. That is when self-assessment emerges as a powerful tool in order to collect data regarding the teacher's open, secret, blind and undiscovered self. Such information is likely to equip the teacher with the necessary knowledge to improve their classroom behavior and, therefore, achieve better results.

Thus, prior to replicating the ideas imposed by methods and theories, it is of crucial importance to think of ourselves as language learners in the first place. In addition, we need to consider what types of feelings we would like to experience when being introduced to the target language. I believe that by "putting ourselves in the learners' shoes" EFL teachers are not only more likely to achieve a broader understanding of the processes undergone by learners but also to identify how learners tend to react to such processes.

5 SELF-MONITORING: a powerful self-awareness raising tool

> "Self-monitoring provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect critically on their teaching. Reflection is acknowledged to be a key component of many models of teacher development." (RICHARDS, 1990, p. 119).

Richards highlights that "the classroom practices of language teachers are of interest to many different people" (1990, p. 118) such as researchers, learners, supervisors and course administrators. In fact, all individuals involved, either directly or indirectly, in the learning process are always curious about discovering whether the teacher's practices in the classroom will promote the fulfillment of their goals and needs, either intellectually or financially. However, teachers seem to be the professionals with the greatest interest in knowing whether

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what they are doing in the classroom is being fruitful or not. That is the moment when self-monitoring may emerge as a powerful self-awareness raising tool at the teacher's disposal. Self-monitoring might be viewed as a precious component that must not me ignored if teachers are willing to engage in their professional growth and development. "It refers to a systematic approach to the observation, and management of one's own behavior, for the purposes of achieving a better understanding and control over one's behavior". (RICHARDS, 1990, p. 118).

For a number of reasons, among which we might highlight time constraints, teachers do not seem to employ self-monitoring on a regular basis. Research has revealed that few teachers make use of this powerful tool, preventing themselves from attesting how beneficial and useful self-monitoring may be in the language classroom environment. Rather than a mere form of assessment, self-monitoring appears as a continuous practice that seems to enrich our performance and promote our continuous development as professionals through critical reflection. It enables us to move from a level where we seem to be largely guided by intuition to a level where our actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking. That process would enable us, teachers, to arrive at our own judgements as to what works and what does not work with our learners, regardless of the considerations or comments made by outsiders such as supervisors, directors or coordinators.

There seems to exist a number of variables that should not be ignored in order to promote effective and meaningful learning in the classroom. Teachers are certainly the most valuable tools in order to promote learning. It seems fundamental that they develop the ability to analyze their performance critically and be always willing to improve their performance through critical thinking. We, as teachers, need to bear in mind that not all groups of learners are the same. Consequently, relying solely on methods does not provide us with any guarantee that what is being done in the classroom will promote the desired outcome. Valuable insights are often generated through self-monitoring and it may be argued that it is certainly one of the reasons why this powerful self-awareness raising tool should always have a place in a teacher's timetable.

6 RECORDED LESSON

This section constitutes an attempt to analyze and discuss my classroom behavior in the light of one of my own lessons recorded at a renowned school of English in Brazil. In

order to illustrate our belief in the importance of self-monitoring, we proceed to an analysis of part of a class given to learners of English as a foreign language. Within this analysis, we provide comments on a number of points raised by Richards (1990: 126). Richards describes a set of 12 behaviors on which teachers should focus when monitoring their own teaching. For our purposes in this paper, we decided to narrow down the focus to *feedback*, *classroom management* and *classroom interactions*.

6.1 Feedback

Feedback on the teacher's part within the lesson under analysis is analyzed in terms of the presence or the absence of the teacher´s comments in view of the adequacy of forms and structures employed by the learners. A sample of such concern would be the following passage:

> T: *What's your favorite restaurant in São Gonçalo?*
> *Whole class: Rodo Grill!!!*
> T: *Rodo Grill? Yeah! It's very good, isn't it? It's my favorite, too. What about*
> *Niterói? What's your favorite restaurant in Niterói?*
> St1: *Everybody! I Think everybody!*
> St3: *La mole!*
> St1: *No. It's the Sagrado Coração! In São Francisco, too! In Santa Rosa,*
> *it1s a very restaurants, very goods!*
> T: *Very Good! (...)*

In this passage, learners seem highly motivated to participate and contribute with samples of restaurants. Since this was an introduction (a kind of warm up activity) to the main theme of the lesson, the teacher did not provide feedback on form. She was only interested in keeping students involved in this sharing of preferences concerning restaurants. Therefore, she opted for not insisting on accuracy at this stage. However, she could have used a number of techniques that would have helped learners perceive the most appropriate ways to convey their ideas without being time-consuming. For instance, St1 says:

> *"Everybody! I think everybody!"*

In this part, she could have written on the board *everybody = all people Vs everything = all things Vs every restaurant, etc.* Then, she could have elicited from the same learner the

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appropriate form: "Every restaurant! I think every restaurant!" or "All the restaurants! I think all the restaurants!"

Another sample would be (again St1):

"...In Santa Rosa, it's a very restaurants, very goods!"

Here, the teacher could simply have isolated the problematic parts and asked the same student first, and later the class as a whole to repeat. Thus:

> *"Ok, St1. Say: "There are lots of restaurants"* (St1 repeats)
> *Now everybody!* (whole class repeats)

The same procedure goes for *very goods*.

6.2 Classroom management

The teacher could have been more attentive when planning instructions for the tasks proposed. They did not seem clear and straightforward to the learners, which resulted in an unnecessary high TTT (Teacher Talking Time). This is noticed in certain instances of the lesson that the teacher spent some precious time over explaining instructions. The passage below attempts to serve as a sample of such drawback:

> *T: Very good! There are many good restaurants in Niterói! All right! Now, today we're going to talk about something that you like very much (*T writes on the board*): foods and drinks, yeah? So, what I would like you to do now is... you're going to work with your partner, yes? And you're going to make a list of foods and drinks that you know in English. I'll give you about three minutes. When I say stop, you have to stop, ok?*
>
> *St5: favorites?*
>
> *T: Not your favorite. Foods and drinks that you know.*
>
> *St2: In Portuguese too, Teacher?*
> *T: No, only in English. Yes? Foods and drinks that you know in English. Ok? Let's go? In three minutes.*
>
> *(While the learners are performing the activity. Teacher monitors and provides learners with words they do not know).*

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The teacher could have minimized the problem by providing learners with clear instructions. She could have even provided examples or asked learners for examples and, by writing them on the board, explained what she expected from them. The instructions needed sequencing and exemplification so that the learners did not get lost when performing the task. Thus, she could have adopted the following procedure:

(After writing foods and drinks on the board) Now let's make a list of foods and drinks that we know in English, only in English. Can you give me some suggestions? (as she writes the suggestions on the board). Ok, now you're going to work in pairs and add more items to the list for three minutes, ok?

6.3 Classroom interactions

The teacher talk was quite superior to the learner talk throughout the development of the part of the lesson under analysis. The major pattern of interaction observed is Teacher-individual student or Teacher-whole class, which leads us to conclude that this segment of the lesson was mainly teacher-centered. The teacher could have provided learners with more opportunities to interact among themselves and report their conclusions instead of "spoon feeding" them. The passage below attempts to exemplify an instance of the lesson in which the teacher could have asked for more collaborative work from the learners' part.

T: Because he is an accountant, he is very logical... he's a very logical person, a very logical man, right? And the text you have on page 108 in your books is about the things that the mysterious Mr. Zact likes and dislikes. So, have a look at page 108, please (Sts open their books and look carefully at the pictures). What can you see in the picture about Mr. Zact? What can you see in the picture?

(Silence)

T: What can you see? What examples of foods and drinks can you see in the picture?

Rather than 'spoon feeding' the learners, the teacher could have referred to their course book and asked them to discuss what the text is about via group or pair work.

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7 ENLIGHTENED BY THEORY AND PRACTICE

Considering that the aim of this piece of work consists of providing my profile as an EFL teacher and to what extent my practice has been enlightened by theory and practice, it appears of a great deal of importance to draw upon my professional experience prior to starting my academic career. When I started working as an EFL teacher, I was not much sure whether I really wanted to become a teacher. Therefore, much of what I did in the classroom reflected either my own experience as a language learner or the procedures dictated by the audiolingual method, which was the methodology adopted by the language school where I worked at that time.

My performance as a teacher stemmed not from my critical thinking, but from a number of pre-established procedures and rules, which in nothing seemed to reflect my learners' long-term objectives. I had no knowledge whatsoever as to the approaches or strategies that could be employed in order to promote meaningful learning in the classroom. I just accepted everything that was imposed upon me and was "brainwashed" into believing that my group of learners would only learn if I did exactly what was prescribed in the teacher's manual. I cannot recall having treated my learners differently from what was established in that manual, which assumed that all learners and teaching contexts were the same. Much on the contrary, I followed it "step by step" and whenever I went back home, I had the feeling that my job had been done perfectly well. Actually, I never regarded my groups of learners as human beings who certainly had the need to express themselves more freely and I failed to experience one of the most rewarding things about teaching: the exchanges among teachers and learners. The use of the mother tongue was forbidden in class and I do not remember having used the mother tongue very often in order to clear out my learners' doubts.

Nowadays, however, as I look back in time, I see that those days are gone and much has changed since then. I view myself as a much better professional whose teaching has been enlightened by a harmonious combination between practice and theory. I have come to realize that we, as teachers, have a lot to contribute to our learners' learning process and that, as Richards (ibid.) points out, teachers can certainly go further beyond methods. Through self-monitoring, I have managed to pinpoint my strengths and weaknesses as a professional and have come to realize that despite being much more professionally mature, I still seem to follow a variety of principles and beliefs that I already had when I started my career. The

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difference lies in the fact that nowadays my classroom behavior emerges not only from intuition but also from critical thinking. I am no longer strict regarding methods. I have learned to be more flexible and am fully aware of the fact that there is no perfect or best method whatsoever. Thus, the techniques and strategies I use nowadays seem to constitute a mixture of beliefs and concerns that, most of the times, have managed to produce positive outcomes. As I progressed in my career, I not only gained more professional experience but I also became more sensitive to my learners' needs and I have come to realize that effective teaching certainly stems from a number of variables apart from methods.

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