Exploratory Practice: understanding classroom life with a Youth and Adult Education group and their teacher

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Abstract

In this research, intelligibility was built regarding the teaching-learning process of English language for a Youth and Adult Education group and their teacher and the influence that the reflective process has on the construction of beliefs about learning languages and about learning itself. In this article we will reveal the details of how the reflective process was brought to a group of students and their teacher during such research, in addition to reporting relevant aspects of the opportunity that the researcher had to experience with the research participants the ethical, collaborative and inclusive proposal for the research of Exploratory Practice, creating a discursive space so that the research participants could intensify or enrich their understandings about life in the classroom. The proposal of this work, which is in line with the scope of Applied Linguistics, although it aims at building local understandings, can help teachers in the area of English language teaching to reflect on their practices, as well as encouraging them to listen and look more in tune with their students when they encounter teaching situations in which they do not have the learning return they expect from them.

INTRODUCTION

The passion for classroom life is still latent in the hearts of many educators and some of them are concerned about the learners’ perspective on the classes taught. In a capitalist world in which efficiency and results are valued, including with regard to the work performed by the teacher in the classroom, Exploratory Practice and its guiding principles can contribute so that some of those involved in the teaching-learning process assume a more reflective posture, or even transgressive, about classroom life for the purpose of mutual understanding and development.

There are many educators in Brazil and around the world seeking understandings and exploring thought-provoking questions about classroom life. Exploratory Practice is the basis for the research process and the construction of understandings in the works of Rodrigues (2014), Colombo Gomes (2014), Ewald (2015), Brandão (2016), Silva (2020) and other practitioners involved with the teaching-learning process in the academic environment or outside it.

Therefore, a survey was conducted with a Youth and Adult Education group and their teacher at a private school in Rio de Janeiro in order to understand to what extent the Exploratory Practice can lead some individuals to become interested or even concerned with the reflective process. With an ethical, collaborative and inclusive posture, the researcher was able to explore an intriguing question “Why reflecting on life in the classroom?”, generating understandings together with everyone involved with such qualitative research. The Exploratory Practice guided the entire research as a theoretical-methodological framework highlighting the joint work to understand issues regarding the quality of life in the classroom. This exploratory way of working motivated a group of practitioners to develop this look in the academic environment. This form of investigation is called Practitioner Research, “with teachers investigating their own practices” (Allwright, 2003, p. 137). This modality of research in the academic environment...
is represented in the works of Miller (2001), Moraes Bezerra (2007), among others, which refers to a movement that has considered the daily work of the teacher as a work worthy of being investigated, whose experience and knowledge should be valued while also including students in this process, whenever possible. The objective of this investigative posture is explained by the desire to understand the teaching-learning process.

In this way, it was possible to encourage the critical positioning of the participants involved in the reflective process in order to become more aware of how they see their classes in the teaching-learning process. At the same time, this experience generated benefits not only for the students and their teacher, but also for the researcher himself, that is, a true mutual development in which the researcher was also able to reflect on his professional performance as an educator, on his own beliefs from the exchange of experiences since research through Exploratory Practice encourages the researcher to look at himself and build understandings about himself. For these aspects, this work falls within the scope of Contemporary Applied Linguistics, which is characterized by the problematization of life and seeks to create intelligibility about social problems inside and outside the classroom, where language plays a central role. We find support in the works of Moita Lopes (2006), Fabrício (2006) and Pennycook (2006) where there is talk of an Indisciplinary Applied Linguistics.

In the next session, the main aspects related to Exploratory Practice and its guiding principles are addressed. Soon after, in the next session, there is a brief summary about the methodological procedures adopted to carry out the research. Then, in the penultimate session, there is a discussion based on the data generated during the investigation. Finally, in the last session, the understandings that were generated and the research contributions in the field of applied linguistics are presented.

Exploratory Practice

As a new way of being or living in the classroom, Exploratory Practice is mentored by Dick Allwright (2006) who for a long time investigated life in the classroom and realized that students and teachers could work together to understand life more deeply. For Allwright, both the teacher and the learners are learning agents. This perspective dialogues with Paulo Freire’s (1973) criticism about the role of the educator, which did not consist in merely “filling” the student with “knowledge” as if he were a container or “blank slate”. Together, everyone involved in the teaching-learning process can overcome any obstacle. Such union concerns one of the main principles of Exploratory Practice: integration. I believe it is worth highlighting here all 7 key principles of Exploratory Practice according to Allwright and Hanks (2009, p. 149-155) with which I align myself to deal with my concerns as an English language teacher and eternal learner:

1. Put “quality of life” first
2. Work primarily to understand classroom language learning
3. Work for mutual development
4. Work to bring people together (collegiality)
5. Involve everybody (inclusivity)
6. Make the work a continuous enterprise
7. Integrate the work for understanding into “existing curricular practices” (minimize the burden, maximize sustainability)

It is noteworthy that in Exploratory Practice, we seek to understand the quality of life in the classroom in favor of mutual development instead of looking for hasty answers to problems or absolute solutions without first understanding the reason for our actions. Aware of the complexity of life in the classroom and the heterogeneity when it comes to those involved in the teaching-learning process, there is no formula or method capable of guaranteeing the effectiveness of the work carried out in the classroom. However, it is possible to problematize the experiences and take the reflective process into the classroom.
Such ideas bring Exploratory Practice closer or even inscribe it in the scope of Contemporary Applied Linguistics, which can also be called “indisciplinary” (Moita Lopes, 2006).

Thus, with Exploratory Practice, I saw an opportunity to interact with a Youth and Adult Education group and their teacher while conducting an investigation to understand my puzzle about the representation of Exploratory Practice itself that led me to try to understand, for example, ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘if indeed’ this reflexive proposal of Exploratory Practice mobilizes people to reflect on a more significant learning and if it also leads them to become interested in the process of searching for understandings. I also learned that teachers can use their usual teaching-learning activities – Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) – as ways to investigate such puzzles (Miller, 2010, 2012).

Youth and Adult Education (EJA in Brazil)

For the sake of understanding, I felt the need to create a section in which we could speak briefly about Youth and Adult Education (EJA). First, It is worth noting that the reconstruction of the trajectory of Youth and Adult Education is a complex task, especially due to the lack of sufficient records in regarding the various actions implemented, especially in the non-governmental sphere. Therefore, based on the references I was able to gather.

In order to answer the question “How did Youth and Adult Education (EJA) give rise in Brazil?” I looked for some relevant information in an official document prepared by several educators and employees of the Department of Elementary Education from the Brazilian Ministry of Education. The following information is in line with the Curriculum Proposal for the Second Segment of Elementary Education of Youth and Adult Education. According to such proposal (Brasil, 2002), the construction of basic education for young people and adults – focused on citizenship – is not resolved only by guaranteeing vacancies, but by providing teaching committed to quality, taught by teachers capable of incorporate into their work the advances in research in different areas of the knowledge and to be aware of social dynamics and their implications in the school. Paulo Freire’s ideas contributed a lot for the development of Youth and Adult Education, since the access to Education is a right of all citizen.

According to the proposal for EJA (Brasil, 2002, p. 15), in the 1960s, the main reference for the constitution of a new theoretical and pedagogical paradigm was given by educator Paulo Freire, who played a key role in development of EJA in Brazil, by highlighting the importance of the participation of the people in national public life and the role of education in raising awareness. At popular education initiatives were organized based on works that took taking into account the reality of the students, implying the renewal of methods and educational procedures. In January 1964, the National Plan for Literacy, which was provided for the dissemination, throughout Brazil, of programs for literacy courses guided by Paulo Freire’s proposal. However, all this activity was suspended during the military coup, when many of the promoters of the popular education and literacy began to suffer repression (Brasil, 2002). Some initiatives persisted, often developed in churches, neighborhood associations, local-based organizations and other spaces communities, influenced by the conceptions of popular education with political intentionality. According to the aforementioned document, to face the illiteracy, which persisted as a challenge, the military government promoted, between 1965 and 1971, the expansion of the Christian Basic Action Crusade (ABC), educational entity directed by evangelicals, originated in Recife, to teach the illiterate (Brasil, 2002). In 1967, the federal government organized the Brazilian Literacy Movement (Mobral), initiating a massive national literacy and education campaign continued for young people and adults (Brasil, 2002). In 1971, with the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (n° 5.692/71), supplementary education was implemented.

Supplementary education won its own chapter in LDBEN No. 5.692/71, establishing that it was intended to “supply regular schooling for adolescents and adults who had not followed it or completed at the proper age”. This teaching could be provided at a distance, by correspondence or by other suitable
mean (Brasil, 2002). The courses and the exams would be organized within the state systems, according to their respective Education Councils. During this period, the need for adapting teaching to the “special type of student for which it is intended”, resulting in a great curriculum flexibility. Decree No. 699/72 highlights four functions of the then supplementary education: replacement, that is, the compensatory replacement of regular education for the supplementary via courses and exams with the right to 1st degree teaching certification for over 18 years old, and high school education for over 21 years old; supply, or supplementing unfinished schooling through courses in improvement and updating; learning; and qualification. Such functions do not developed in an integrated way with the so-called Elementary education (1st to 9th degree). With the end of the military period, Mobral was extinguished and, in 1985, it occurred the implementation of the National Foundation for Youth and Adult Education (Brasil, 2002). This institution became known as the Educar Foundation and its functions were, among others, to contribute for the development of Elementary Education, the production of material and the evaluation of activities. With the extinction of this foundation in 1990, the public bodies, civil entities and other institutions started to bear it alone with the educational responsibility for the education of young people and adults.

In the following session, I deal with the research methodology and describe the data generation procedures as well as the activities implemented during the interaction between the research participants of a Youth and Adult Education group and me, researcher. It is worth noting that I am based on ethical and inclusive principles that guide the Exploratory Practice which also guided my posture as researcher.

**METHODS**

This work is situated within the participatory and collaborative research paradigm (Heron, Reason, 1997), of a qualitative nature (Chizzorri, 2003), and which involves cooperation, interaction and work together with research participants (practitioners). Qualitative research is valid as it tries to understand in depth social life, the society we live in, describe and understand the complexity of social phenomena, especially when language plays a central role (Moita Lopes, 2006). According to Chizzotti (2003), qualitative research today covers a transdisciplinary field, involving the human and social sciences, assuming traditions or multiparadigms of analysis, derived from phenomenology, hermeneutics, Marxism, critical theory and constructivism and adopting multimethods of investigation for the study of a phenomenon situated in the place where it occurs, and finally, seeking both to find the meaning of this phenomenon and to interpret the meanings people give to them.

This exploratory way of working is nothing new in academia. The ethical, collaborative and inclusive proposal of conducting research inside and outside the classroom motivated a group of practitioners to develop a reflective and critical look at the academic environment. This form of investigation is called Practitioner Research, “with teachers investigating their own practices” (Allwright, 2003, p. 137). This type of research in the academic environment is represented in the works of Miller (2001), Moraes Bezerra (2007), Colombo Gomes (2014), among others, which concerns a movement that has considered the daily work of the teacher as scientific which can be investigated. Their experience and knowledge should be valued including students in this process, whenever possible. The objective of this investigative posture is explained by the desire to understand the teaching-learning process.

The Data generation process followed the steps below:
- Submission of the research project to the Ethics Committee (Plataforma Brasil) in order to obtain the permission for the development of the research.
- Make contact with the school.
- Obtain the consent of the institution and the Youth and Adult Education group teacher.
- Exploratory interaction: interaction with teacher and students with the intention to share ideas and enable mutual development.
- Exploratory teaching: Activity to consolidate some grammatical content (PEPA) in agreement
with the Youth and Adult Education group teacher.

- Share the results and understandings generated to all those involved with the research.
- Final considerations and contributions

First, I submitted the research project to Plataforma Brasil so that the Ethics Committee could assess the way in which the data would be generated and thus an opinion would be made available. After releasing an opinion about the research by the Ethics Committee, adjustments were made by the researcher together with his advisor in order to meet the requirements of the Ethics Committee, which aimed to preserve and respect the freedom of the participants and maintain an ethical posture during the investigation. Establishing contact was essential to clarify the participants about the collaborative research proposal and to provide consent for its realization. The idea was to have an exploratory interaction with the students and the teacher in charge of the class. I adopted and maintained an ethical, collaborative and inclusive posture with the research participants (students and teacher) keeping in mind the principles of Exploratory Practice. In this way, it was possible to create the necessary conditions for both the teacher and their students to feel comfortable to clarify their perspectives on life in the classroom, in addition to sharing ideas and generating understandings with me. A PEPA, that is, “Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity”, can also be conducted as a strategy to understand the perspective of students in relation to life in the classroom. It is worth reaffirming that I understand such activities in light of what Allwright (2003) and Miller (2012) guide as a joint effort to generate understandings of relevant issues for those involved. Mutual development would be associated with the act of “planning to understand” in order to generate opportunities for deeper understanding for practitioners. Therefore, I understand PEPAs in accordance with what Hanks (2017) says about them:

So a PEPA, despite its mysterious acronym, can be something quite simple, mundane even. Above all, it is a familiar classroom activity. It is about taking something so familiar that it is almost invisible, and reconfiguring it to consciously examine the classroom practices that are puzzling to us. It is about using our practices to access the invisible, and to activate our pre-existing acumen (see Iedema et al. 2013) to research our practice. (Hanks, 2017, p. 273)

Students can exercise the grammatical content taught and contribute to generate more data. Any action was taken in accordance with the lesson plan of the teacher. I provide more details about this class I taught and also indicating why it was given in the next session.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The English teacher of the Youth and Adult Education group was invited to answer some questions in order to help the researcher understand the teacher’s perspective about the teaching-learning process as well as promoting a reflective opportunity. Only one answer given by the teacher was selected from the researcher’s Master thesis (SILVA, 2020). The translations is provided soon after the Portuguese version of the teacher’s words for the questions “What is your impression about teaching and learning in Brazil? Would you like to make any criticism or compliment for any approach or method?”, the teacher reveals, through his discourse, some beliefs regarding the teaching-learning process:

“Ensino” e “aprendizagem” são sinônimos daquilo que é chamado de “emissão” e “recepção” de informação. São estágios daquilo que chamamos de comunicação e entre ambos há o meio pelo qual a informação é transmitida [interação escrita exploratória – trecho transcrito da resposta da questão 2 – 21-05-2019 – Professor].

“Teaching” and “learning” are synonymous with what is called “emission” and “reception” of information. These are stages of what we call of communication and between them there is the means by which the information is transmitted [exploratory written interaction - transcribed excerpt from the question 2 – 05-21-2019 – Teacher]. (Personal translation)
The choice of the terms “emission” and “reception” to refer respectively to “teaching” and “learning” reveals that the English teacher of the Youth and Adult Education group cultivates the belief that educating or teaching would be a transmission of knowledge, with the teacher being the knowledge holder and students the information recipients. Such a perspective points to what Freire (1987) calls banking education. In addition, the statement “information is transmitted” further ratifies the idea cultivated by the teacher about the teaching-learning process as transmission of information whereby the student would be “blank slate”. Such aspects reveal the belief of that the role of the educator is to “fill” the student with “knowledge” (Freire, 1973).

After obtaining authorization from the teacher, I introduced myself to the students of the Youth and Adult Education group during the English language class, and I reported my academic trajectory without forgetting to mention that I had also studied at the same school where now they studied. I took the opportunity to talk about my research while attending the Masters, involving life in the classroom and I invited them to participate in my survey. I chose one of the students I had the most contact with both at school and at WhatsApp, because among the 4 students who agreed to participate in the survey (3 girls and 1 boy), only he was able to make more time available for performing an exploratory written interaction with me. As in the experience with the teacher, the student and I had the opportunity to answer the same questions that the teacher had already answered. The idea was also to interact and identify, in the student’s discourse, some indication of what beliefs had been cultivated in what he says when it comes to the teaching-learning process. So I also selected some excerpts from each answer provided by the student after our interaction. The research participant student from the Youth and Adult Education group answered the following questions: “What is your impression about teaching and learning in Brazil? Would you like to make any criticism or compliment for any approach or method?” Talk about your expectations, goals and dreams. Is there any reason for you to continue studying?” the student seems to view the teaching-learning as an ongoing process:

Os estudos são uma coisa muito fundamental para todos nós, continuar estudando só nos ajuda mais e mais. [interação escrita exploratória – trecho transcreto da resposta da questão 2 – 06-06-2019 – Aluno]

Studies are a very fundamental thing for all of us, to keep on studying only helps us more and more. [exploratory written interaction – excerpt transcribed from the answer to question 2 - 06-06-2019 - Student] (Personal translation)

The use of the statement “to keep on studying only helps us more and more” reveals the student’s belief regarding the importance of studies for the life of any individual, that is, an education that can be seen as an ongoing process.

I believe in the ability that teachers and students have to generate understandings regarding classroom life and co-construct knowledge in classes that can be both meaningful and challenging for those involved in the teaching-learning process. After receiving the answers from the teacher and student participating in the research and trying to understand the their perspective on the teaching-learning process, I thought it was fair and it was appropriate that I was also heard by the same research participants, thus maintaining a posture in line with the philosophy of Exploratory Practice that leads us to hear and to be heard, that is, taking advantage of opportunities to negotiate ideas, reflect and generate understandings. So having the philosophy of Exploratory Practice in mind and prioritizing mutual development, I considered that I also deserved to have my perspective on the teaching-learning process understood by the teacher and the research participant student. So I answered the same questions that the teacher and his student had already answered. I took advantage of the opportunity to share my experience with the Exploratory Practice that led me not to be overly concerned with quality of my work and more attentive to the quality of life in the classroom. It is excessive worry led me, naively, to try to keep everything that happened in the classroom under my control. So, I understood the importance of working to understand, rather
than instinctively seeking solutions to problems that may arise in the classroom. I tried to register for the teacher and his student that Exploratory Practice can be an alternative not only to understand the puzzles related to everyday life inside and outside the classroom, but also to contribute for the formation of motivating agents and critical thinkers. Each one lives Exploratory Practice in a specific way, but it is worth emphasizing the importance of reflecting about classroom life. By knowing how things really stand can be a starting point for improvement. I selected an excerpt from my answers given to each question that somehow summarized my beliefs about life in the classroom, the teaching-learning process and the act of researching or reflecting.

I see in Exploratory Practice, a great opportunity to deal with my concerns, because I believe that problematizing and questioning “why” without the pressure to get a resolute answer is a good strategy to generate understandings in an investigation. [interaction exploratory writing - transcribed excerpt from the answer to question 2 – 05-24-2019 - Researcher]

After we exchange ideas through our exploratory interaction, the teacher reflected and wanted to understand how a class that followed the principles of Exploratory Practice could be performed. The teacher wanted to understand how a teacher could integrate teaching practice to the practice of doing research on the classroom life with his own students.

Therefore, I have prepared a lesson plan following the guidelines of the teacher, which consisted of reviewing the grammatical content taught (Modal verbs) so far in order to prepare students for the final exam scheduled for the following week. I sent previously the lesson plan to the teacher so as to make sure he would approve or not. The teacher not only approved, but granted full opening for the realization of my class. My PEPA, available in the Appendix, involved the interpretation of a text that could lead students to reflect on classroom life addressing topics such as the teacher’s work in the classroom, the use of new technologies in the classroom and the future of education. I also worked on the grammatical content as the regent teacher had asked, but I did it in a way he had never seen before. Through such PEPA, I was able to interact with the group, show the importance of a reflective process when it comes to classroom life and approach a grammatical content in a functional way. There were some questions in the PEPA “Is there an ‘ideal’ or ‘monotonous’ class? Explain. Are there any classes that has marked your life? Can you talk about it? How was it?” which contributed to show the teacher how he could investigate and understand his teaching practice from the perspective of students without interrupting their classes to do something which apparently would have nothing to do with the content.

In this way, I kept an ethical posture with the teacher and his students, respecting the demands of all individuals. The intentions was not to discredit “traditional classes” or “expository classes” by trying to label them as “no ideals”. Much less did I want to change the way the teacher deliver his classes. In fact, the real intention throughout this investigation was to be open to listening, understand the demands of the group, show my passion for the reflective process and prioritize the quality of life in the classroom. Acting like that, I tried to understand if Exploratory Practice can mobilize people to reflect on life in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this work, I realized that the perspectives about classroom life and expectations regarding the “ideal class” are beliefs and are relative according to the realities and needs of each individual. Moreover, it is worth noting that teachers can reflect on their practices as well as developing a careful listening and looking to their students instead of assuming the responsibility whenever their classes seem
not to have corresponded to the expectations of those involved in the teaching-learning process.

The demands of the members of a class and their teacher may vary depending on how the interaction takes place, as each individual can present different difficulties or needs in the teaching-learning process. During this work, I understood that life in the classroom is complex and with many idiosyncrasies, as it involves several individuals with their beliefs or peculiar perspectives as well as distinct life experiences. I think that dealing with the teaching-learning process means moving into a terrain full of possibilities and walking in the sphere of the unpredictable. As individuals interact, negotiate ideas and share life experiences, necessary conditions for meaningful learning can be generated.

When I was trying to understand my puzzle “Why reflect on life in the classroom class?”, I found that Exploratory Practice can indeed mobilize people to reflect on a more meaningful learning, as their reflective proposal enables the development of critical individuals who can be integrated for sake of quality of life in the classroom. The passion for the reflective process becomes possible as there is interaction and integration of individuals for the co-construction of knowledge. Instead of trying to control what happens in the classroom focusing exclusively on the efficiency of the work performed by the teacher or solution for problems in the class, we could actually work harder for generating understandings, recognizing the agency of both the teacher and the students in the teaching-learning process. I believe that the classroom is the place for questioning, problematizing and definitely reflecting.

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REFERENCES


