JOURNAL-WRITING AS A FEEDBACK AND
AN EFL-RELATED-ISSUE DISCUSSION TOOL

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INTRODUCTION

The "Letras" curriculum which any university level institution in Brazil has to adopt reflects the Ministry's of Education belief that "Letras" undergraduate programs should teach the English language to future teachers. Though every student has to take courses such as "Teaching Practicum" where he/she is put in contact with the experience of teaching a foreign language, these courses have traditionally left the discussion of more recent research findings in EFL learning and teaching as an area to treat in graduate programs. The undergradute student thus ends his/her course without this important information in the curriculum requirements he/she has completed.

In most university settings, courses such as "Teaching Practicum" focus on the study of methodological approaches to the teaching of English and on the development of classroom and testing materials. Issues such as second language acquisition research, the teaching of specific skills, and new trends in second/foreign language teaching are barely discussed. Since the discussion of EFL learning/teaching issues is important, students should be sensitized as future EFL teachers to the processes involved in teaching and learning a foreign language.

At the same time, "Letras" students are usually very passive as learners. Usually, they expect the teacher to bring them sundry materials and techniques which have to promote "learning" at the end of the term. Good or bad "learning" is expressed through grades which the majority does not know how to interpret. In short, students are usually unaware of the issues involved in the teaching/learning process.

As future EFL teachers, students should analyze the teaching/learning process which they experience. Analyzing and reflecting about themselves as learners will make students see such process critically so as in future act on it conscious of its kaleidoscopic nature.

In this paper, I will report a project which aimed at providing students with the chance to discuss EFL teaching/learning issues in classes which

traditionally are "language" classes. The project also intended to make students more aware of themselves as learners so as make them realize their active role in the teaching/learning process. Both of these objectives would better prepare "Letras" students to become EFL teachers.

THE PROJECT

Journal writing was chosen as the most appropriate way for students to analyze and reflect about their teaching/learning process. Journal writing has been usually used as one of the ways to foster personal language use of a second/foreign language in classroom settings. Students are usually asked to write about their own interests once a week. Journals are not evaluated for grammar or style, they are responded to with comments and queries about the content (Celce-Murcia et al., 1979 & Savignon, 1983). Journals have also been used as a feedback tool for the teacher and the student involved in a language teaching/learning situation (Miccoli, 1984a).

In this project, journal writing served not only as a tool for feedback for teacher and student but also as a starting point for the discussion of a variety of issues related to EFL teaching.

In all, there were 35 students involved in this project which was carried out during the second semester of 1985 with 9 students from Língua Inglesa III during the first semester of 1986 with 13 students from Língua Inglesa III 13 students from Língua Inglesa IV at Faculdade de Letras, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.

The discussion of the project is based on 20 students´ journals – spontaneously offered to contribute to this report, 26 final evaluation questionnaires (answered by the students of Língua Inglesa III and IV at the end of the first semester of 1984), and on the montly Teaching Methodology Discussions (TMD).

The journal was presented to students as one of the course assignments. Students were given the following guidelines as to how they should proceed to write it. First, they were told that the journal would be written in Portuguese. This would avoid the limitations that writing in English might bring. Secondly, they were instructed to write according to two roles – as observers and as learners.

As observers, they should describe each classroom activity step by step depicting what had been done and how the teacher had conducted the activity. They should be objective and focus on details. As part of their role as observers, they were to speculate as to what may be the rationale underlying each of the classroom activities the teacher brought to class.

As learners, students should write about their feelings towards each of the classroom activities. This included reporting feelings of success or frustration as a result of their performance. They should also try to explain what/

who had either helped or affected their performance.

The teacher assured the students that the journals were confidential. Students would only report those journal parts which they felt at ease with. It was also stressed that the journals would be assessed according to the quality of analysis and argumentation in them. This allowed students to disagree with any class activity without affecting the original purpose of the whole project.

It was suggested that it would be better if students wrote their observations and feelings as soon as the class finished. For those who could not do that - evening class students, the teacher asked them to outline the class activities so as to help them remember impressions at the moment of writing.

Journals should be written as explained above, starting on the second day of class until the end of the semester. At the end of each month, the teacher would assign a 30-45 minute session for the TMD. Students should bring their journals to class on that day. Their observations would serve as the starting point for the discussion, and at the end of the session the teacher would collect the journals for comments.

At the end of the semester, the teacher distributed a questionnaire for students to answer as a final evaluation of the whole project. (See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire).

As this project required the students' commitment, organization and initiative, reactions against it were expected. Surprisingly they were not as strong as anticipated. Probably because it counted for the final grade.

However, there were still 5 students who did not keep the journal regularly. Two of them argued that assigning a grade to the project made it compulsory rather than "spontaneous" account of the teaching/learning process. The other two suggested that students should write the journal as a monthly assignment instead of as a day by day evaluation of the teaching/learning process. The last one stated that she had not understood the journal´s objective, thus neglecting it.

Except for the student who reported not having understood the project, the arguments against the journal as a course assignment did not seem valid when confronted by the other students´ evaluation of the project.

In the following paragraphs the process students go through during the academic term, the journal as a feedback tool for the teacher, and the TMD´s are analyzed and illustrated with excerpts taken from different journals. Excerpts were kept in Portuguese. Finally, the whole project is assessed in terms of its value for teacher and students.

DISCUSSION

After reading the journals of all students, a similar adaptation process to the classes was identified. At first, the student feels lost. As one student writes: "às vezes me sinto perdida... eu me perco e muitas vezes não consigo

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captar o que ela diz." Next, the student questions if he/she should drop out. For example, "Estou pensando seriamente em trancar." Then, he/she starts feeling as the oly one with problems in class; this passage illustrates this phase well: "A maioria não tem dificuldades porque já estudou fora. Comigo é diferente."

At a second moment, students start feeling more comfortable in class. This student comments on this part of the process: "Sinto-me mais 'engajada' no trabalho e isto me alegra." At the same time, students start participating in class activities more actively. However, they are still unaware of the rationale underlying the activities in which they participate. For instance, "Achei bem a discussão em grupos, pois quando temos dúvidas é bom poder discutí-las com os outros."

In the next stage, students start to identify the rationale behind classroom activities. For example, "Quando ao freewriting, à primeira vista achei péssimo. Me sentia cobrada a escrever, pois me cobrariam... à medida que fui escrevendo... agora já estou me sentindo mais à vontade... ." Later, they start realizing that good performance is not so important anymore. It is important to go through the process, as this student comments: "Há dias em que escrevo mais e em outros escrevo menos. Isto já não me assusta mais." Then, there is full comprehension of the rationale underlying classroom activities. For example, "Pequenas passagens, aparentemente sem importância, podem mudar completamente a mensagem. É nesse sentido que sinto... está... exigindo maior acuidade da nossa parte com relação ao texto gravado."

By the end of the awareness raising process, students realize that they are responsible for their own learning. This awareness will serve them for any new learning process. A student wrote: "Nós estamos aprendendo a ser auto-didatas e depois complementamos o que faltou sozinhos."

The journal has two purposes for estudents, then. The first one is to make them aware of their learning process. The second one is to give them immediate feedback about their performance.

For the teacher, the journal provides constant feedback. Through the journal the teacher has a communication channel open for suggestions or for the statement of problems. For example, "Mas de minha parte tenho que confessar que detesto o som do gravador." After reading this comment in most students journals, the tape recorder was substituted. The teacher can even adapt or modify his/her teaching program according to feedback received though journals. This students comments on the teacher's decision to let students self-evaluate themselves in speaking activities: "Discutimos... as questões práticas e as de possível e imediata resolução foram encaminhadas a fim de sanar os problemas levantados."

The culmination of the journalwriting process is the TMD. Here the students voice their impressions, feelings and criticisms of the teaching/learning process. Therefore, the classroom is transformed into a forum where everybody has a chance to express his own point of view.

The issues discussed in the TMD's are the same as those found in students' journals. However, it is here that issues which are related do EFL teaching, such as second language acquisition, classroom management, syllabus design, materials selection, are included in the program.

For instance, when the students question the teacher for the lack of error correction during a speaking activity, or when they demand correction which is not given, the discussion of Krashen's monitor model may be introduced; it may explain the teacher's decision not to correct. Other more down-to-earth problems are discussed, such as the teaching of the four skills or even the handling of very large groups in secondary schools.

This type of discussion widens the students' outlook they participate more actively in classroom activities because they see their responsibility as future EFP teachers. It also helps them realize that they are not alone in their difficulties in following the program. This leaves them less anxious and encourages them to continue striving in the learning process. This student's comment illustrates this aspect very well.

> No começo das aulas eu não estava entendendo bem a
> necessidade dessas discussões mas ... eu descobri a
> validade ... Discutiu-se a metodologia ... foi
> interessante ver o grau de dificuldade de cada um
> ... isto é bom, sinal de que não estou como um
> peixe fora d'água.

CONCLUSION

Journal writing has proved to be an invaluable communication channel between teacher and students. It has shown that through this channel, students can voice their opinions on their learning process so as to contribute positively to it. It has also demonstrated that because of the awareness that journal writing brings about, students move from a passive to an active role in the teaching/learning process. Success does not depend solely on the teacher anymore. The student understands the importance of his/her role as a learner.

From the teacher's point of view, journal writing is a tool for feedback about the teaching process. Students write about their reacting to class activities, which allows the teacher to change goals and objectives in order to makes them more appropriate to the students' needs. As students write about their reactions to the teacher, they ofter an honest feedback to teacher performance. Students also write about their own failures, thus giving the teacher an account of the reasons for individual low performance. In short, the journal approximates the students to the teacher.

Finally, journal writing has also shown that the discussion of EFL teaching/learning issues can be introduced in usual "language" classes. The analysis of classroom activities makes students realize that language teaching is an extensive field where there is still much to know about its nature. From the discussion of issues involved in the teaching/learning process, future EFL teachers learn an invaluable lesson: that only through research, experimentation and creativity can the profession be a more exciting activity.

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APPENDIX A

COPY OF THE FINAL EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Em até no máximo duas folhas datilografadas, escreva sobre seu proces-
so de aprendizagem durante este semestre. Reflita a partir do seu journal, baseando-
se nas suas observações sobre as aulas e sobre seu processo individual. Tente respon-
der as seguintes perguntas:

1. Você conseguiu desenvolver uma visão pessoal sobre o ensino de línguas? Por que
   (não?)

2. Você usaria alguma(s) técnica(s) e/ou material dos usados em sala? Quais? Por que
   (não)?

3. Como você vê seu desempenho nas seguintes áreas após o fim do semestre:

        a) aprendizado de língua
        b) aprendizado sobre metodologia de ensino
        c) crescimento pessoal.

4. Comentários finais.