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UNDERSTANDING WHY SOME FUTURE TEACHERS FIND IT SO DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS

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Abstract

This study consists of a participatory action research (Brandão & Streck 2006; Thiollent 2006, 2011) based on the Exploratory Practice theory (Allwright 2002, 2003, 2008; Gieve & Miller, 2008); the complexity theory (Morin 2006; 2015; 2017) and reflective teaching (Liberali 2015). It is an attempt to understand the difficulties some of my students, who are (future) teachers, encounter in following simple written instructions. One may argue that the answer is probably related to their habits as "digital natives" (Prensky 2007). In the past, we presented as one of the characteristics of this "connected generation" (Cardoso 2013) the difficulty to concentrate and, therefore, to read long texts. However, when taking exams, these learners fail to follow even very short instructions, such as "write in ink" or "correct the following sentences". On the other hand, these learners' success at university depends on these short instructions. Moreover, being these students (future) teachers, we wonder how they will be able to give clear instructions to their own learners.
To try to understand this *puzzle* (Allwright 1991), we have developed this Exploratory Practice project. The idea is not to find a solution to the problem, but to understand and make learners aware of this fact. The study will take about four months and the results will be presented at the END 2019 conference in June.
Another point to be discussed during the presentation is how far can we still consider the differences between the *connected generation* and the other generations, as we have all become in a way or another deeply influenced by modern technology, and in some cases (cultures), even addicted to it.

Keywords: *Reflective teaching, written instructions, connected generation, exploratory practice, complexity theory*.

1. Introduction

As university teachers, we have been experiencing a change in our students' profile for some time. This new generation born after the 1980's, sometimes called "digital natives" (Prensky 2007) or, as I prefer to call them, "connected generation" (Cardoso 2013) has not experienced life without computers. Most of these learners cannot imagine their lives without a mobile phone or outside a virtual social network.

In the case of teacher education, it is important to understand how this change will affect the educational process when these learners become the teachers. Besides, I completely agree with Michel Serres (2018, p. 11) when he says that "before teaching anything to anybody, it is necessary at least to know who our students are."

The motivation to begin this study was the difficulties some of my students, who are (future) teachers, encounter in following simple written instructions. At first, I believed that this difficulty had to do with their lack of concentration and therefore difficulties to read long instructions, but I have noticed that they face this same kind of difficulties when reading very short exercises or exam rubrics.

Therefore, this study consists of a participatory action research (Brandão & Streck 2006; Thiollent 2006, 2011) based on the Exploratory Practice theory (Allwright 2002, 2003, 2008; Given & Miller, 2008); the complexity theory (Morin 2006; 2015; 2017) and reflective teaching (Liberali 2015). It is an attempt to answer the following question: *Why do some future teachers find it so difficult to follow written instructions?*

2. Objectives

The main objective is to better understand these learners reading skills and how they affect the activities which depend on instructions. Another point to be discussed is how far we can still consider the differences between the *connected generation* and the other generations, as we have all become in a way or another deeply influenced by modern technology, and in some cultures (cases), even addicted to it. By developing a collaborative study with other teachers, these future teachers and other learners, they will have the possibility of experiencing the exploratory practice and the participatory action research and hopefully become more critical, collaborative and reflective teachers in the future.

3. Connected generation

In the text "Developing a new generation of connected teachers" (Cardoso 2013), I already mentioned that "it was worthwhile to analyze the characteristics of these new generations". There was much study on Generation Y learners, but these learners were becoming teachers and probably they would face some problems at work (Cardoso 2013, 2015). One characteristics pointed by the research was that these learners (future teachers) would read less and less well. Nowadays I would change the sentence. I do not believe the quantity, but the quality of the reading that is different. They read a lot what they really like. The fanfiction is a good example. Maybe the problem with written instructions lies exactly in that. Perhaps, they only consider instructions important when they have been unable to do what they were supposed to do. That is, when they feel the importance of the instructions. Another characteristic of these learners is that they are often exposed to visual stimuli, making it more difficult for them to imagine a picture based on a written or oral text. This dependence on visual stimuli may also be responsible for the difficulties following written instructions.

These children inhabit the virtual. The cognitive sciences have shown us that using the Internet, reading or writing messages (with the one's thumb), or consulting Wikipedia or Facebook does not stimulate the same neurons or the same cortical zones as does the use of a book, a chalkboard or a notebook. They can manipulate several forms of information at the same time, yet they neither understand it, nor integrate it, nor synthetize it as do we, their ancestors. They no longer have the same head." (Serres 2018, p. 19; Serres 2015)[1]

Serres (2018, p. 19) goes deeper saying that they no longer inhabit the same space nor speak the same language. After these affirmations, Serres (2018, p. 25) asks three questions: What to teach? To whom? And how? The problem is that Serres, or at least the translator, uses the term "transmit", keeping the sense of the idea that teaching is simply the transmission of knowledge. I do not agree with this definition of teaching, but I believe we, as educators, have to get to know these learners better. Besides, this new generation of teachers "will have to deal with teachers, coordinators and principals from other generations (Cardoso 2013, p. 17) so they will have to communicate to work together. Therefore, it is important to understand these learners' singularities and to make them reflect about the diversity they will face.

4. Complexity theory

The language learning process is complex. There are many factors internal and external to the learners and the teachers that may affect directly or indirectly the process. Ellis (1994 apud Cardoso 2016, p. 40) as for Naiman (1995 apud Cardoso 2016, p. 41) mention individual and social factors, such as the sociolinguistic context, learners' characteristics (e.g. age, motivation, intelligence, aptitude, etc.), the environment, the teaching and other aspects.

Allwright (2008, p. 13) says that applied linguistic is moving from a more simplistic way of looking at the world, trying to find the best method of language teaching for all learners, all teachers, all the time, towards "a recognition of the essential and irreducible complexity of the phenomenon of classroom language learning and teaching. He adds that

part of this recognition of complexity meant that it was no longer worth looking for general solutions to general problems, because all 'problems' are reducible, ultimately, and in practice to 'local' ones, and so require 'local' solutions, solutions that respect the uniqueness of all human situations, and all humans. (Allwright 2003 apud Allwright 2008, p. 13)

For Morin (2006; 2015; 2017) complexity means that we have to stop considering just to one or another aspect of our lives: local or global, unique or multiplicity, process or product. For him, all the aspects should be considered: *uniduality* (brain, mind and culture; reason, emotion and impulse). Human

[1]Translation by Daniel W. Smith from the English version of the book (Serres 2015).

beings are at same time unity and diversity, so we must consider the individual, the society and the species. At the same time, we should respect the diversity, we have to learn how to live together in the social level. Morin (2006) the global as being composed by parts (the relation between the whole and the parts). In this way, the local knowledge is as important as the global one. He also mentions the uncertain knowledge – the more we study about a specific topic, the more we understand that we now less about other areas. Therefore, different experts should work together. We have to consider many aspects of the same problem, to understand how it works. He proposes that instead of teaching content (information), we should teach the understanding of each other, the human condition, the earth identity, and how to confront the uncertainties. Therefore, Morin goes beyond the level of the classroom and believes that the whole earth becomes part of the educational environment. We may think global but act local.

Gieve & Miller (2008, p. 8) also mention the complexity of classroom when mentioning reflective practice and action research to teacher development, by mentioning Breen' article (chapter 10 of the same book).

The potential of both reflective practice and action research to teacher development are examined and their basis in the rationalization of personal experience is questioned in the light of the complexity of classroom life and the limitations of enquiry restricted to teacher's own immediate work. The potential of a collaborative critical reflection approach is outlined, Allwright's proposal for Exploratory practice as a means of understanding the quality life of the classroom… (Gieve & Miller 2008, p.8)

5. Methods

5.1. Research participants and questions

As stated in the title and explained before, the main objective of this exploratory practice project is to try to answer the following *puzzle* (Allwright 1991): Why do some future teachers find it so difficult to follow written instructions?

As mentioned before, the idea is not to find a solution to the problem, but to understand it and to make learners aware of this fact. The first phase of the research will take place in the first semester of 2019, about 100 learners will be invited[2] to answer the following questions (in class or online):

(a) Why do you believe some university students find it so hard to follow written instructions?
(b) Have you ever faced this kind of problem as a teacher or student? If so, what happened?
(c) Could you mention a situation in which you got into trouble because you failed to follow some instructions? What kind of trouble was it? What did you do? Why didn't you follow the instructions?

They are all university students (undergraduate and post-graduate) from a public university in Rio de Janeiro. At first, we thought about using only the questionnaires, and we expected to receive about 50 questionnaires back. The questionnaires would be analyzed by other teachers and even some students. The idea was to try to find similar answers or some interesting/creative ones. However, in accordance to the Exploratory Practice Theory, we found more interesting, to use a more classroom-centered research. There will be two kinds of activities one to be developed in class and the other online.

In class, the idea is to develop a poster session, in which groups of learners try to answer the question (a) about them, their students or other learners they know. When the posters are ready, they visit their colleagues' posters and compare the answers. Later, we have an open discussion about the *puzzle*. If they allow, this open discussion will be recorded.

For the online version, we will use an online questionnaire, and try to use the forum of a virtual environment for the discussion. In order to make these learners narrate what happened to them, the questions will be open. In this way they will feel more motivated to present reasons and/or tell their stories (narratives).

The study will take about four months (February-May) and the results will be presented at the END 2019 conference in June.

5.2. Research methods: Teachers as researchers

This qualitative research consists of a participatory action research (Brandão & Streck 2006; Thiollent 2006, 2011), but is based on the Exploratory Practice theory (Allwright 2002, 2003, 2008; Gieve & Miller 2008). In common these research methodologies have the view that the *practitioners* as the people who will conduct the most productive research in the field (Allwright 2008, p.15). The study was proposed by a teacher, who and not an external researcher and the participants include her students and other teachers. Thiollent (2011 sees the action research as a way of involving all the educational

[2]As this is an ongoing research, in this paper, sometimes the future tense or the present perfect will be used.

system (including teachers, coordinators and learners) in the construction or reconstruction of the educational system. These two research methods differ in the fact that action research is generally associate with solution of problems while the Exploratory Practice is more interested in the understanding the situation, which may be considered more like a *puzzle*.

5.2.1. Participatory action research. This research in the educational environment and has as its main aim to better understand what is going on in this environment. The researcher is not an outsider, but the teacher who invites her students and other colleagues to take part in the research project, not as subjects, but participants.

Thiollent (2006) mentions that participatory action research differs from the conventional research because it consists of "social knowledge with the participation of different actors" (Thiollent 2006, p. 152). Knowledge is not produced to be shared later, but constructed during the learning process.

"The social construction of knowledge presupposes some interaction and some sort of cooperation between different actors. This participation may be implicit or explicit" (Thiollent 2006, p. 155). However, it is not enough to be based on interactive practice, the methodology needs to adopt other dimensions, in particular, has to be critical, reflective and emancipatory (Thiollent 2006, p. 157).

He mentions that participatory action research is participative, critical and reflective.

5.2.2. Exploratory practice. In action research, generally the participants expect a change as a future result, but in the case of exploratory practice projects, and that is the case of the present research, the change is not in the behavior, but in the "understanding of the practitioners' own classroom" (Gieve & Miller 2008, p. 2).

The main aim of the Exploratory Practice is not to find "new methods," but understand what is taking place in the educational environment. Bailey (2008) uses two metaphors (work and life) to explain the difference between some other kind of classroom-based research and Exploratory Practice. While in other kinds of research teaching/learning is seen as "work" and the researcher is looking for "efficiency", in relation to EP, the teaching/learning process is seen as "life" and the search is for a better life quality in education.

Presenting Allwright's ideas about research, Bailey (2008) mentions that classroom-centered research differs from other kinds of educational research because it does not concentrate on *inputs to* the classroom or *outputs from* the classroom.

It simply tries to investigate what happens inside the classroom when learners and teachers are together. At its most narrow view, classroom-centered research is in fact research that treats the language classroom not just as the *setting for* investigation but, more importantly, as the *object of* investigation. Classroom processes become the central focus. (Allwright 1983 apud Bailey 2008, p. XI)

She also mentions that the teachers' role has been changing gradually from teacher as subject or *implementers* of treatments (experiments organized by other researchers – outsiders) to a broader view in which teachers are seen as *partners* in the research project, but Allwright and other researchers have advocated teachers as *producers* of research. This research is a good example of that.

By asking learners to answer to Why- questions, you invite the participants to think about their own reality. You assume that something is taking place based on your experience as a teacher and you ask for help to understand the problem. Even if we just use the questionnaire, learners will start to think about the *puzzle*. They may be unaware of the fact and the questions will help them consider the puzzle and it is clear that someone has experienced the problem and needs some help to understand it. There is no right answer, it works more like a brainstorm. If they have already faced the problem, probably they become aware that they were not the only ones. Transformation may or may not occur, but some kind of awareness will.

6. Final remarks

As the research has not been developed yet, it is impossible to present the results, but we can anticipate some possible developments. One of them is that by the end of the research, all the participants will have a better understanding of these learners' reading skills and level of awareness that they have of the fact being studied. As mentioned before, the idea is not to solve a problem, but to understand what is going on. However, I do believe that by simply taking part in the study, these learners will rethink the way they deal with instructions. And the teachers involved in the project will also consider their learners' characteristics when giving future instructions.

These learners, who are future teachers, will also be able to experience the Exploratory Practice as "a viable alternative to technicism" (Allwright 2008, p. 143) and the participatory action research as an alternative to more conventional research.

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