EXPERIENTIAL RESEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Narratives nestle complex nets of experiences, typical of dynamic systems. Disentangling them reveals their nature, broadening and deepening the understanding of complex language teaching and learning processes. In this paper, we present over 20 years of research done in Brazil, focusing on foreign language teaching and learning experiences. Reviewing the motivation that led Miccoli to the emergence of experiential research, we discuss experience as a construct and unit of analysis and its complex nature; share visual representations of the complexity of teaching and learning experiences with illustrative data excerpts; and finally present teachers' and students' experiential frames of reference for research. To conclude, we defend experiential research as a successful approach to

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investigate language teaching and learning, hoping that other researchers may find it useful.

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Introduction

In this article, we aim to share the findings that support the use of experience research for understanding the complexity of teaching and learning English as a foreign language that has gathered academics in Brazil. The paper is organized into seven sections: understanding experience as a construct and unit of analysis; the complexity of experience; the complexity of teaching and learning experiences; the complexity of teacher experiences; the complexity of student experiences; the complexity of classroom teaching and learning; and experience research for understanding the complexity of FL teaching and learning. To contextualize the findings, we present Miccoli's motivation for an original study on students' learning experiences, followed by a brief description of its research design, since this study is the basis for the experiential research done in Brazil.

Research on experiences of English language learning and teaching emerged in Canada in the 1990's from Miccoli's identification of a gap in Applied Linguistics literature, which, at that time, did not contemplate students` points of view. Back in Brazil, experiential research has aimed to disclose the point of view of those living through events in present or virtual classrooms, in informal or incidental learning situations, in pre or in-service teaching, as well as in teacher development or continuing education programs since 1997.

On deciding to make sense of what happens inside the classroom and accepting the challenge of dealing with messy data, a pilot study (Swain & Miccoli, 1994) provided the initial path to the research design that allowed capturing students' points of view.

In Miccoli (1997), the methodology, which included videos and oral narratives, tapped into students' classroom experiences, yielding a view of how learning emerges. The method included quantitative and qualitative data analyses. The goal was to avoid the risk of falling into the reductionism of the parts, i.e., restricting research to identifying, counting and describing, as well as the reductionism of the whole that ignores the parts. Thus, quantitative data privileged the analysis of experiences; qualitative data analysis aimed to understand relationships among experiences. Cross-integrative analyses of data yielded the results.

A triangulated research format (van Lier, 1988) documented the voluntary participation of six undergraduate students in an intermediate-level English class at a university in Brazil. Classes were video-recorded. Students' in-action videos were scripted for detailed accounts of the lesson structure and of their behavior. Participants individually viewed themselves on videos to remind them of what had happened in class prior to the beginning of interviews. Videos were paused at selected moments to ask for specific descriptions of how students made sense of tasks and of their behaviors. In addition, participants responded to interview questions on: (a) what they thought was the teacher's goal with every specific activity; (b) what they had learned from them; (c) if anything special had either helped or disturbed them – in any case they were asked to elaborate on their

answers; and (d) if there was anything else they wanted to add about any specific activity, moment or their performance in class.

This data collection cycle happened every three weeks. Data came from thirty percent of the classes taught in the semester. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to Donato and McCormick (1994), following a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; van Mannen, 1990). As subcategories emerged, Miccoli (1997) established seven as the maximum number for categories and subcategories (Miller, 1956).

Results demonstrated that students' language learning narratives refer to an array of intertwined experiences of cognitive, social, affective, personal, *circumstantial, conceptual* or *projective*[1] nature (Miccoli, 1997), to be addressed later.

Since then, Miccoli (2006; 2007a) has continued investigating L2 teaching and learning experiences in Brazilian public and private schools. Data generation has generally used mainly oral or written narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), classroom video recordings, observations, viewing sessions and interviews.

In 2007, experiential research was formalized in an academic project, named ACCOOLHER[2] coordinated by Miccoli. Within this project, a group of researchers have expanded its scope investigating students', teachers', and the inter-relation of students' and teacher's experiences.

So far, research on students' experiences have focused on: (a) students' cognition, emotion and reflection (Aragão, 2014), (b) Dörnyei's (2001) process model for motivation management (Bambirra, 2014), (c) agency and autonomy (Silva e Souza, 2014), (d) on-line experiences (Ferreira, 2014), and (e) the learning of Portuguese (Lima Junior & Conceição 2014).

Teacher experience research, in turn, has investigated: (a) identity transformation experiences (Zolnier, 2014), (b) emotions in a continued education program (Coelho, 2014), (c) instructional coaching along in-service teacher development (Cunha, 2014b), and (d) teacher agency (Vianini, 2014a).

Finally, research on students' and teachers' experiences has explored: (a) assessment (Barata, 2014), (b) indiscipline (Vianini, 2009; 2014b), (c) agency and affordance in public school (Arruda, 2014), (d) successful English learning experiences (Arruda, 2014), and, more recently, (e) the promotion of hope and critical teaching in pre-service teachers-to-be in an internship program (Silva e Souza, 2018). Under a dynamic perspective, the inter-relation among students' motivation, teacher's motivation and the learning context has also been researched (Bambirra, 2016; 2017a; 2017b).

Understanding experience as a construct and unit of analysis

Experience is inherently dual: collective, as it occurs in social contexts, as well as individual, as individuals observe events – an intriguing concept since Plato and Aristotle. Dewey (1938) views experience as part of a triad that joins world, mind and humans. Nuñez (1995) and Maturana (2001) have established a connection among experience, humans' consciousness and environmental interactions.

According to Wautier (2003), social experience refers to "individual or collective behaviors dominated by the heterogeneity of its constitutive principles and by the activities of individuals who must construct it in the direction of their practices in the midst of this heterogeneity" (p. 180). Thus, experience makes possible a cognitive construction of reality – a reflexive and subjective representation of the experienced. Feminist research regards experience as the true source of knowledge. Weedon (1997) states "the belief in the primacy of experience rests on a liberal-humanistic assumption that subjectivity is the coherent, authentic source of interpretation of the meaning of 'reality'" (p. 8). In psychology, Rogers (1976) attributes self-recognition to experience, developed from past and present experiences, as well as expectations of future experiences. Thus, experience as an observation, when followed by reflection, allows for questioning the validity of experiential meanings, functioning as catalysts for transformation through rational discourse. In view of these understandings, Miccoli (2010) considers experience as a construct and unit of analysis, defining it as

> a process of a complex and organic nature that constellates in itself several other related experiences, forming a web of dynamic relations among those who experience it, in the midst of which experience emerges. This makes of an experience a starting point for reflection, with implications for its understanding, for the transformation of its original meaning, as well as for the one who experiences it. (p. 31-32)

Narratives disclose experiences that involve "a constellation of circumstances, dynamics, emotions, and relationships lived in a specific environment of interactions that, when narrated … [lose] their randomness" (Miccoli, 2010, p. 142).[3] Experiences disclose observations, whose underlying meanings allow for in-depth understandings of the experiencer's 'reality', which involves other experiences. Thus, experiences have a revelatory power for understanding complex language development phenomena.

The complexity of experience

Experiences function as dynamic systems. Life is full of unpredictable and non-linear experiences. Given any system's sensitivity to changes in modulating conditions, experience integrates human beings and context – each a complex system.

Vianini (2014b) investigated a class of unruly teenagers in a private language institute. When their teacher yelled at them, some of their classmates sympathized with those yelled at, joining in the disruptive behavior. Both groups were sent to the principal's office. Some of those who remained in class disapproved the teachers' decision, and others despised such criticism. The teacher lost class control, and strived to regain it until she asked to be removed from teaching that group. The initial conditions: a few disruptive students joined by other classmates; the final

system state (end experience): a teacher who leaves her class – unpredictable. Transformations in the elements or behavior of a dynamic system led to changes in the whole system. To regain balance, by means of coadaptation, the system adjusted itself in response to successive changes (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Another feature of dynamic systems is its organization through recursion (Morin, 2001). Experiences repeat. Some classrooms experiences are recursive and understood by recurrence. Evidence of recurrence comes when teachers from one country identify with experiential testimonies of teachers or students from their own or other countries.

Reflection can play a role by generating bifurcation points in the system, with sudden and dramatic changes. Suppose that grammar-only study and vocabulary translation represent a strong attractor in a student's system of experiences. An attractor, as a preferred mode of behavior, gives the system temporary stability. In other words, for that student, grammar and vocabulary learning represent a standard state/behavior (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Resende, 2009). Without disturbance in the system or no reflection, it is unlikely that the student will consider any other possibility, except that of continuing with his/her learning habits. Yet, in a conversation class, this student may reflect and question if his/her conception makes sense. In face of this, s/he may embrace new learning experiences.

In short, reflection does not guarantee change, but, among other possibilities, it increases chances of change. By reflecting, the system (a student, a teacher, an institution *etc*.) that experiences an event can re-signify the understanding of whatever is experienced. These "reflected" experiences (Cunha, 2014a) will be the trigger for new experiences, paving the way for transformation and change. The student whose study experiences favor grammar and vocabulary faces dynamics in the classroom that provide the possibility of a bifurcation point, mobilizing new experiences and opportunities for new behaviors, opening space for other ways of learning.

Thus, reflection to adhere to new ways of learning may reinforce bifurcations that mark the differentiation in initial and after states in a system. The emerging result of such phase transition differs from what it was before – the student in our example may learn that not being afraid of making mistakes is more important than using the right grammar points.

Any system cannot be explained in a reductionist way from the activity of its parts alone, since any system, after a phase change, is qualitatively different from the previous one (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Experiential research has documented elements composing the complex nature of language learning and teaching, as we demonstrate in the following sections.

The complexity of teaching and learning experiences

According to Miccoli (2014), teachers and students refer to the classroom as an entity, characterized by the participants' collective behavior. Experiences

are complex and fleeting, constantly flowing from the fact of being intertwined with other experiences. They emerge from narrators' subjective observations, influenced by their stories – a product of the observers' previous cognitive, affective or social experiences, influenced by circumstantial, conceptual, personal and/or projective experiences. In this process, events may be ignored or disregarded.

The subjectivity and fugacity of experiences multiply in three domains of social interrelations. The first is that of teacher and students interactions. Teacher-structured learning activities may lead to students' different meaning-making of what is taught. The other domain comprises interactions among students, from which meaning-making emerges by external interrelated events. A third domain involves inner interaction and regulation, i.e., self-mediation – a decisive domain for a student's development.

Traditionally, teachers play a central role in classrooms, reinforcing hierarchical relationships that separate them from students. Teachers may lead the class, but students unconsciously interpret what is taught and eventually learn. Currently, teaching tends to establish less hierarchical relations, which involve teachers' practices in mediating students' realization and use of immediate affordances. They also support them in developing agency,[4] towards learning by means of cognitive experiences.

Whatever happens between teachers and students and among classmates in the social domain of classroom experiences plays a role on the climate in class, mainly molded by relationships established among participants. When teachers enter classrooms they bring in their personality, casted by family upbringing and formal education, which influence professional decisions as well as their conceptions of teaching, learning and teacher's role. Thus, two other domains of experiences are identified – those of personal and conceptual experiences (Miccoli, 2014).

The same happens with students – when they enter classrooms, they bring in their personality, individualities, temperaments, behaviors, and role conceptions, developed along upbringing and school trajectories. These elements forge and imprint peculiarities on teachers' and students' behaviors. From the inter-relations between teacher and students, classroom complexity becomes evident. The climate in class emerges from such dynamics that may stir up harmonious or conflicting in-classroom relationships.

The complexity of classroom experiences expands with emotions. Students and teacher commonly refer to different feelings along class time. Students' affective experiences reveal that mood and feelings play a role as to how they relate to teachers, to themselves as students, and to their classmates (Miccoli, 2014).
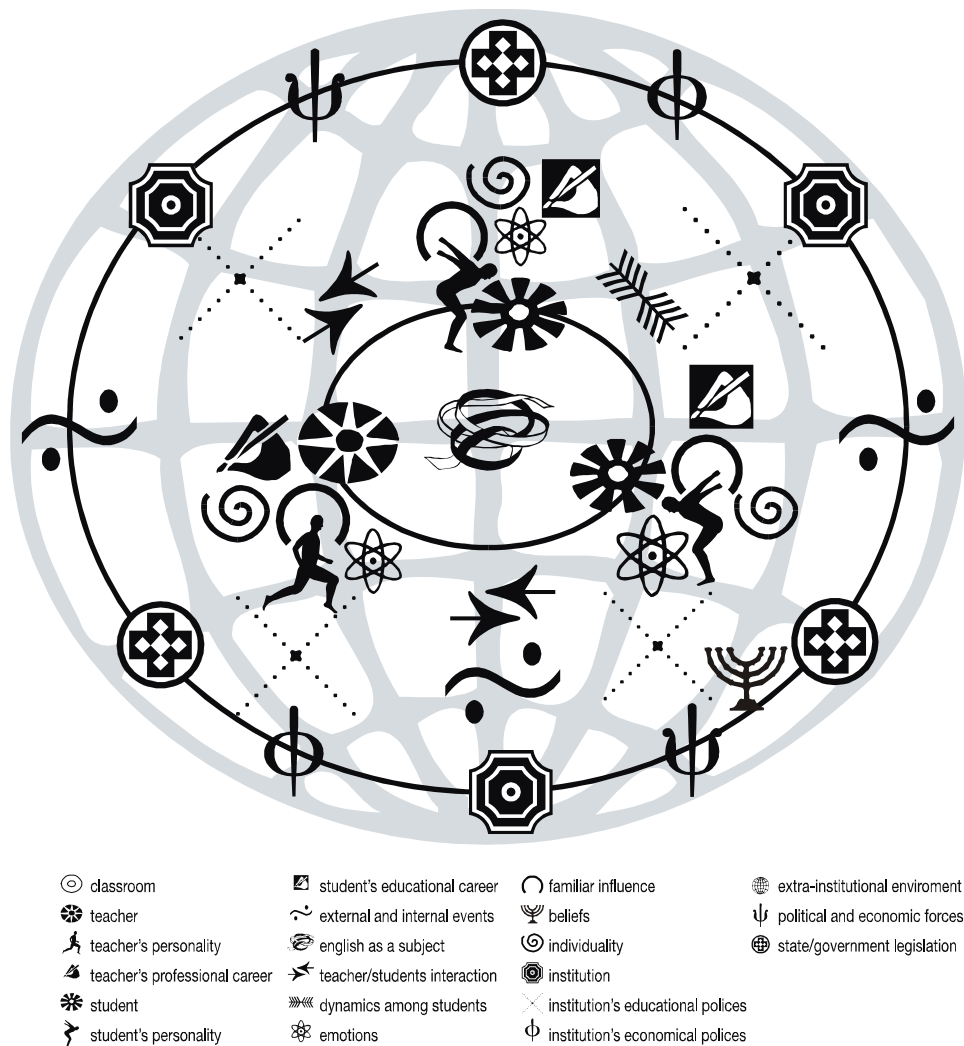
Teachers and students refer to what is around them – the milieu,[5] which encompasses a holistic sense of culture, including physical, social conditions and temporal elements, influenced by the interpretation of these narrators, forming the domain of circumstantial experiences – how specific situations can singularly influence classroom events. Private school teachers and students refer to strict control experiences with impact on their autonomy and classroom dynamics

(Vianini, 2014). The influence of the extra-institutional milieu materializes in the impact of political and economic policies on class events. Circumstantial experiences also refer to teaching resources, technological devices or any other affordances provided by the milieu.

In sum, teaching complexity meets learning complexity in class, defining classroom complexity. Figures 1 to 4 represent the complexity of language teaching and learning as dynamic systems that emerge from the experiences in narratives, which reveal embedded elements that may play a role in teachers' and students' language teaching and learning processes (Miccoli, 2010; 2014).

Figure 1 illustrates the elements that compose such complexity of classroom as an entity. Each symbol represents the elements that teachers and students have referred to illustrating the complexity of classroom as an entity.

Figure 1 – The Complexity of a Classroom as an Entity

⊚ classroom	▨ student's educational career	⌒ familiar influence	⊕ extra-institutional enviroment
✳ teacher	∿ external and internal events	♆ beliefs	ψ political and economic forces
⚡ teacher's personality	✆ english as a subject	⊚ individuality	⊕ state/government legislation
⬳ teacher's professional career	⤜ teacher/students interaction	◉ institution	
✳ student	⟫⟪ dynamics among students	⤫ institution's educational polices	
⚡ student's personality	⚛ emotions	ϕ institution's economical polices	

Source: Miccoli, 2014, p. 43.

The following excerpts, collected by different researchers as indicated, illustrate teachers and students references to the classroom as an entity:

The class was silent, paying attention to the explanation. [People] have to pay attention because when we look at the class, we observe ... the mistakes whoever is presenting commits, we can also make them… And it's a way for us to correct those mistakes, right? - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

I'm not afraid of the class, no [laughs]. But I'm afraid of the criticism from the class. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

I would like to participate more, right? But ... you also have to see that there are many [students in class]. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

It's that this community exists, I mean - people are the class - they should be participative, right? But the class looks [at each other] very little; addresses [each other] very little by name; If you… you rarely see ... [someone] disagree with a classmate. I mean, I do not know if it's something that I'm the only one to see this... as an old monkey inside the classroom ... I mean I've been in the classroom for 20 years. – Teacher oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

We realize that [the presentation] did not impact the class; No one responded; Everyone [sat] silently, including myself and [the teacher] fulfilled her role; She tried, [she] was just calling [on the class] to see if [her questions] would stimulate [reactions]. But, it is this thing – one comes, another comes, until one feels the class climate, [one] sees what is being done. I think that's a mess. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).
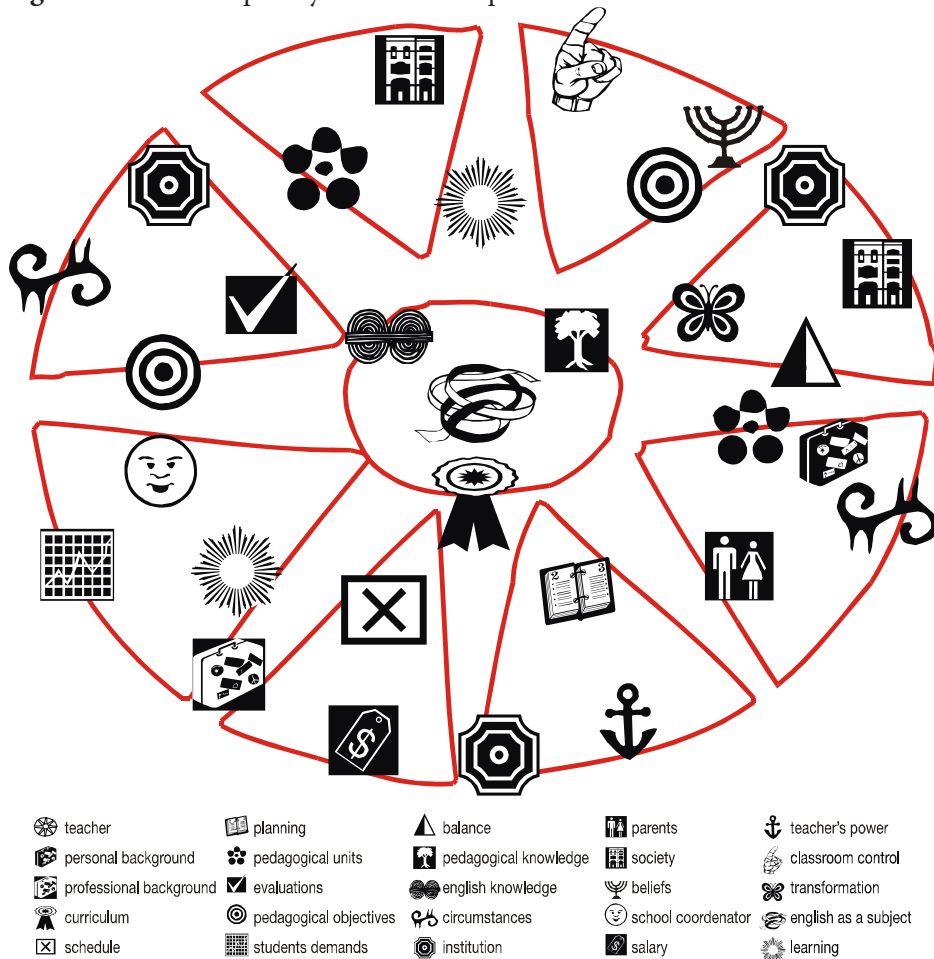
There are days that the class is more attentive. So you're following [classroom activities]. But I think, for example, [on] that [specific] day, no. I do not think anyone was reading. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

The class is very restless, hyperactive and misbehaved. – Teacher written narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

I cannot teach the class if I'm not dressed with the high school colors. – Teacher oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

The complexity of teacher experiences

The elements characterizing the complexity of teacher narrated experiences are represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – The Complexity of Teacher Experiences

teacher	planning	balance	parents	teacher's power
personal background	pedagogical units	pedagogical knowledge	society	classroom control
professional background	evaluations	english knowledge	beliefs	transformation
curriculum	pedagogical objectives	circumstances	school coordenator	english as a subject
schedule	students demands	institution	salary	learning

Source: Miccoli, 2014, p. 47.

The following excerpts illustrate the complexity of teachers' experiences:

I love English [...]. I will not feel good earning a salary that I do not live up to it. Is it too little? IT IS! But if I sit there and do nothing ... If I [had to] go to school, sit down and do nothing, I'd rather not go. – Teacher oral narrative (Zolnier, 2011, p. 108).

It is sacrificed, one earns little, but I do [it] because I like it. [...]. I like to see my students progressing. – Teacher oral narrative (Zolnier, 2011, p. 108).

Time is short. It is difficult for me, as a teacher, to articulate so many doubts at the same time. There are too many students and it's complicated. I think it goes through the student too, he tries. – Teacher written narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

The students, the school, my colleagues and the educational system were convincing me that it was not necessary to teach English, [...]. Unfortunately, I believed them. [...] I was a real mess. It is very sad and

extremely difficult to do something when even we do not believe (it) will work. We work as if we were machines, without any emotion. The only wish is for the clock to run fast so that everything will come to an end, including the month, so we can see the meager moneys deposited in our accounts. –Teacher written narrative (Coelho, 2011, p. 66).
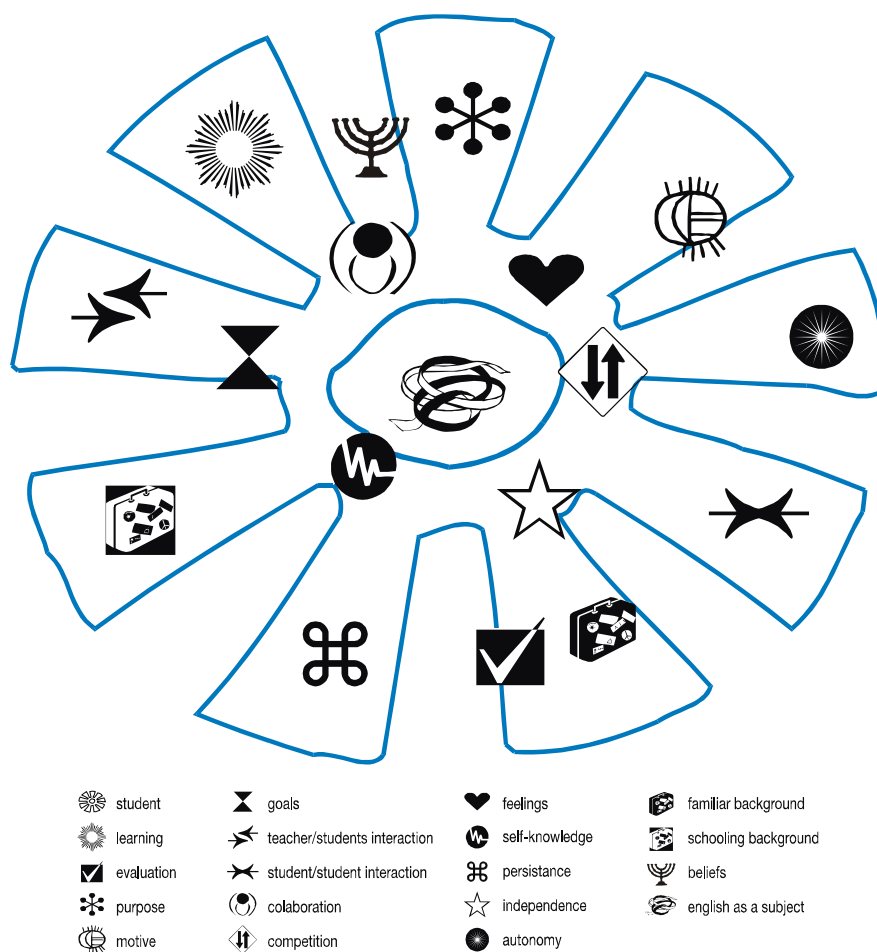
There are about 40 students in each room. The room is not very big. – Teacher written narrative (Miccoli, 2007b).

In the four semesters, a student could receive Cs, Ds & Fs and be still promoted. There was no failing a year for English at the school. – Teacher written narrative (Miccoli, 2007b).

The complexity of student experiences

The complexity of student experiences is illustrated in Figure 3 that refers to some of the recurrent elements composing the system of student experiences.

Figure 3 – The Complexity of Student Experiences

✳ student	⚋ goals	♥ feelings	🗃 familiar background
✳ learning	↣ teacher/students interaction	⚫ self-knowledge	🗃 schooling background
☑ evaluation	✸ student/student interaction	⌘ persistance	♆ beliefs
✳ purpose	◉ colaboration	☆ independence	✺ english as a subject
✳ motive	⇕ competition	⚫ autonomy	

Source: Miccoli, 2014, p. 50.

The following excerpts illustrate student complex experiences:

Because when I reached the bottom of the page, I had trouble. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

I did very well in the test, although I found it long and rather complicated. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

English is my passion. I force myself to study. I write sentences and I force myself to learn them. I pay attention to class; I ask questions if I have questions. I try to do everything required. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

If I want to be a good teacher, I have to invest in myself. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

I do not know what happens, when I have to go up there, I start shaking. Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

I do not know if I'm going to give up, if I'm going to throw the towel, [learning] is a job I'm doing and [it] does not justify doing that. I'll finish the course, you know? ... I have courage to study; I have the strength to continue; I will not give up. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

Then we started doing it – kind of the way we understood it. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

When I speak about a hierarchy, I say – well, there is the question of not being able to discuss much with the teacher. Yeah, [it's] no use because you know the person is there – she deserves [that position]. She has competence for that. – Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

It's because [it's the] morning class, [the] afternoon class, work at night, [getting] little sleep – so that's it ... I being tired, I struggle to learn, to participate. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

I work until noon. Until I get home it's already two-thirty. Now with the bridge [traffic] problem, I've been home by three-thirty. And Saturday [is] there already [makes a sound with his mouth] puff – it's gone. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

Personally, I need to have more ... more interaction with the class ... to be able to help in learning, right? ... I need to improve my relationship in the classroom to improve learning. - Student oral narrative (Miccoli, 1997).

The complexity of classroom teaching and learning

The complexity of language teaching and learning can be appreciated in Figure 4. It superimposes the three previous illustrations to reveal all elements involved in the system that emerges when teachers and students meet – those from narratives that refer to the classroom as an entity, those that stand out in teachers' narratives, and those referring to students' experiences.

Figure 4 – The Complexity of Classroom Language Teaching and Learning

⊚ classroom	∩ familiar influence	📖 planning	💰 salary	‡ competition
✣ teacher	⑨ individuality	✿ pedagogical units	⚡ teacher's power	♥ feelings
🏃 teacher's personality	◎ institution	✓ evaluations	✂ classroom control	🔘 self-knowledge
⛵ teacher's professional career	✕ institution's educational polices	◎ pedagogical objectives	✺ transformation	⌘ persistance
❄ student	φ institution's economical polices	▦ students demands	✺ learning	☆ independence
🏃 student's personality	⊕ extra-institutional enviroment	⚠ balance	✻ student	✳ autonomy
🖼 student's educational career	⩔ political and economic forces	🔴 pedagogical knowledge	✷ purpose	📱 family background
∿ external and internal events	⊕ state/government legislation	🌐 english knowledge	⚙ motive	📱 schooling background
✉ english as a subject	♕ beliefs	♉ circumstances	⏳ goals	
✂ teacher/students interaction	✣ teacher	📅 parents	✂ teacher/students interaction	
》《 dynamics among students	🐅 curriculum	▦ society	⤜ student/student interaction	
❄ emotions	⊠ schedule	☺ school coordenador	☺ colaboration	

Source: Miccoli, 2014, p. 53.

Figure 4 shows that experiences intertwine in classrooms – a complexity that makes it impossible to consider teacher' and students' experiences in isolation, as exemplified by Bambirra (2016; 2017a). The complexity found in the process of language teaching and learning compels the recognition of the tangle of relationships emerging from interactions among participants in class, modulating narrated experiences, unequivocally exposing some of the recurrent interrelated elements that constitute them.

Dynamicity is a fundamental property of complex systems and capturing the entire dynamics within a system and among systems is simply impossible. As Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) explain,

> in applying the complexity lens to an aspect of classroom action, we will need to select out of all that is connected and interacting, particular systems to focus on. Other aspects and systems become dynamic environment in which these systems operate, but are still connected to and able to influence them. The 'initial conditions' of the focal systems, i.e. the state of a system when it commences the activity we are interested in, are very important to understand, since these conditions form the system's initial landscape and influence its trajectory as it changes over time. (p. 203)

Research and analyses of varied classroom realities in Brazil for over 20 years have allowed us to organize and synthesize the elements presented in Figures 1-4 into frames of reference of teaching and learning experiences. These frames can be a point of departure for guiding experiential research, opening the possibility of broadening and deepening the understanding of teaching and learning processes.

Experience research for understanding the complexity of FL teaching and learning

In this section, we describe the categories of experiences that have been documented in such narratives.

Cognitive and *Pedagogical* experiences refer to aspects involved in learning and teaching respectively. *Social* experiences refer to interactions between teacher and students as well as among students. *Affective* experiences refer to emotions. *Personal* experiences denote students' and teachers' private lives' issues that relate to or affect learning and teaching. *Circumstantial* experiences refer to the milieu modulated by the experiencer's interpretation. *Conceptual* experiences form a singular dimension for they refer to experiences not only 'actually' experienced, but to those imagined, felt, re-signified or even learned in coexistence with others. *Projective* experiences refer to events that have a compound structure – partly experienced now, partly projected as possible to be realized in the future.

These eight dimensions capture the nature of experiences that language teachers and students highlight in their oral or written narratives and the inter-relation among them.

The following excerpts capture how an experience constellates others:

> Ann Esther: *I wish I could speak more in class. When I learned the present perfect, which now I know how and when to use and that it is more used than the others [tenses], I want to use it more, but time [in class] is short. I wish I had more opportunities to speak and improve [my English].*[6] (Miccoli, 2010, p. 41)

The student mentions she wished she could speak more in class – a projective experience, followed by cognitive experiences, i.e., having learned the present perfect that she realizes how and when to use, and its special trait – a more used tense. She wants to use it more – a projective experience, but class time is short – a circumstantial experience. She ends repeating the projective experience of wishing for more opportunities to speak.

> Diana: *It seems that every time I think of something cool, a pair-work activity [for example], it does not work! It's a class that does not make me feel comfortable, I do not feel confident, really. I would like to do different things there, but the students themselves (…) not only because of indiscipline, but because of their apathy. Because sometimes they are quiet but extremely apathetic. So, that does not give me any confidence, let alone enthusiasm.* (Vianini, 2014a, p. 111)

The teacher describes her intentions – do something different, 'cool' with the class – a projective experience that falls flat due to students' behavior – a social experience – which, in turn, affects directly how the teacher feels, impacting her motivation – affective experiences.

Deeper analyses of teachers and students oral and written narratives have allowed us to identify elements – patterns of behavior – typical of each category of experience, which form frames of reference of teaching and learning experiences whose interconnectedness explain the emergence of a particular experience, yielding deep, detailed and thick analyses of language teaching and learning processes (Miccoli, 2015).

Charts 1 and 2 present the categories and sub-categories forming the experiential frames of reference that have been used as a departing point for data analyses.

Chart 1 – L2 Teaching Frame of Reference

Teachers' Pedagogical Experiences (Ped.) - Events related to the actions initiated by the *teacher* (T) for the goal of teaching specific contents or skills to students

Ped. 1. Teaching Procedures (T refers to experiences related to what the teachers bring to students, i.e., tasks and activities for teaching).
Ped. 2. Teaching Resources (T refers to how teachers deal with teaching resources or to the absence of them).

Ped. 3. Four Skills Integration (T refers to the four skills; to reasons for difficulties in integrating them into teaching).
Ped. 4. Self-Assessment of Teaching (T refers to (1) self-initiated observations and assessment of tasks and activities; (2) identification of objectives, difficulties or doubts over the process of dealing with tasks and activities).
Ped. 5. New Technologies (T refers to (1) the use of new technologies (or not) or the realization of their pervasiveness in class.
Ped. 6. Formal Learning Evaluation (T refers to formally assessing learning with tests, assignments, and/or quizzes).
Ped. 7. Teaching Strategies (T refers to strategies used to boost teaching as well as to help students reach learning goals)**.**

   Teachers' Social Experiences - Events related to *teacher's* actions involving teacher-student or student-student interactions

Soc. 1. Being a Teacher (T refers to (1) personal observations on their own performance as teachers or to (2) how they relate to their students).
Soc. 2. Class/Students' Profile/ (T refers to students' or to the attitudes of the class towards teaching; (2) to the class or the students' profile as language learners).
Soc. 3. Interacting with Students or Class (T refers to (1) teacher interaction with students or class; (2) interaction among students; (3) difficulties in dealing with students; (4) references to disruptive behavior or any other singular behavior).
Soc. 4. Social Strategies (T refers to (1) how teacher deals with criticism; (2) how teachers manage student criticism; (3) how teachers deal with students' interactional issues in class).

   Teachers' Affective Experiences (Aff.) – Events related to *teacher* actions involving emotions

Aff. 1. Feeling Experiences (T refers to positive or negative feelings related to teaching).
Aff. 2. Motivation, Interest and Effort (T refers (1) to being motivated or not; (2) to interest in his/her own work and (3) to effort to overcome teaching challenges).
Aff. 3. Self-esteem and Personal Attitude Experiences (T refers to how (s)he sees self affectively in teaching)
Aff. 4. Affective Strategies (T refers to (1) ways to manage feelings that emerge in teaching dynamics; (2) management of feelings related to other aspects of teaching.

   Teachers' Circumstantial Experiences (Cir.) – Events relates to the immediate context; events and circumstances that interact with the *teacher's* teaching situation, including - people involved and time

Cir. 1. Extra-Institutional (T refers to events related to circumstances outside the institution affecting his/her teaching).
Cir. 2. Institutional (T refers to (1) the institution where T works; (2) out of class relations and interactions with directors/ coordinators, colleagues and staff, parents, other students in school).
Cir. 3. Class Composition (T refers to peculiarities of classes (1) large or small classes; (2) mixed-skills classes; (3) homogeneous/heterogeneous.
Cir. 4. Time (T refers to time influencing teaching inside and outside the classroom).
Cir. 5. Place (T refers to (1) distance; (2) classroom physical environment; (3) classroom physical structure; (4) classroom/a location, neighborhood; (4) spatial issues influencing teaching and/or class dynamics).
Cir. 6. Foreign Language (T refers to the use of the language that is taught; contact (or not) with it; (3) what T does to keep in touch with the foreign language).
Cir. 7. Research Related (T refers to events related to the researcher's influence on the classroom and on the teacher's performance).

Teachers' Conceptual Experiences (Cpt.) – Events related to actions involving ***teachers'*** beliefs

Cpt. 1. Conceptions on Teaching (T refers to conceptions on the teaching of English).
Cpt. 2. Conceptions on Learning (T refers to conceptions about learning English).
Cpt. 3. Students' Role (T refers to conceptions on the student's role).
Cpt. 4. Teacher's Role (T refers to conceptions on the role of the teacher in class).
Cpt. 5. Professional Status (T refers to the status of being a teacher in the institution, in Society).
Cpt. 6. Re-signifying and/or Re-signified Conceptions (T refers to having changed a conception practice).

Teachers' Personal Experiences (Per.) – Events taking place outside the teaching situation that directly influence the teacher

Per.1. Experiences Related to Socio-economic Status (T refers to socio-economic status and its relationship to the teaching process).
Per.2. Former Experiences (T refers to any former experiences that affect current teaching practices).
Per.3. Current Experiences (T refers to experiences related to personal life and teaching or working).
Per. 4. Reflection (T refers to their reflections on self, teaching self or own teaching).
Per.5. Re-signified Experiences (T refers to changes in teaching practice because of reflection).
Per. 6. Personal Identities (T refers to (1) the many identities s/he enacts while teaching or (2) how she/he sees her (him) self or (3) to what or whom they identify with, and (4) self-perception/self-awareness).
Teachers' Projective Experiences (Pro.) – Current experiences that lead to projections related to them

Pro.1. Plans (T refers to a plan of action; to something (s)he intends to do).
Pro.2. Desires (T refers to something desirable but hard to achieve; to something that would be nice to change/to attain).
Pro.3. Needs (T refers to issues that deserve attention: fluency, behaviors, feelings, eating, leisure, living in one's own home, *etc.*).
Pro.4. Glimpses (T refers to more distant goals; wishes/visions/dreams; something impossible to attain at the moment, ideal selves).

Chart 2 – L2 Learning Frame of Reference

Students' Cognitive Experiences (Cog.) - Events related to the actions initiated by ***students*** (S) in the process of learning specific contents or skills

Cog. 1. Classroom Activity (S refers to class activities or tasks).
Cog. 2. Objectives, Difficulties and Doubts (S refers to identified objectives of activities or tasks, to difficulties or doubts in the process of carrying them out).
Cog. 3. Participation and Performance (S refers to his (her) participation/performance in class either by paying attention, reading or actively discussing, reflecting *etc.*).
Cog. 4. Intake / Assessment (S refer to what (s)he has learned from class activities or tasks / S assess their learning).
Cog. 5. Teaching-Related Experiences (S refers to the T's teaching; to the classroom as a learning space; to how the T presents activities or tasks).
Cog. 6. Parallel Experiences (S refers to textbook, homework, quizzes, tests, exams, digital technology use, affordances perception and use, *etc.*).
Cog. 7. Learning Strategies Experiences (S refer to how they deal with class challenges by either taking notes, memorizing, asking questions, *etc.*).

Students' Social Experiences (Soc.) - Events related to *students'* actions involving teacher-student or student-student interaction

Soc. 1. Interaction and interpersonal experiences (S refers to his (her) interaction and interpersonal relationship with his (her) classmates).
Soc. 2. Interpersonal Tension experiences (S refers to competition, criticism, risk-taking *etc.*).
Soc. 3. Being a Student (S refers to how (s)he understands the situations s/he lives as a student; as part of the class).
Soc. 4. Relating to Teacher (S refers to power relations; how (s)he interacts with the teacher; to teacher evaluation).
Soc. 5. Group and Group Dynamics (S refer to specifics of group work – being and doing tasks in groups).
Soc. 6. Classroom Experiences (S refer to descriptions of the class as a whole; the class as a place for coexistence).
Soc. 7. Social Strategy Experiences (S refers to how (s)he deals with competition, criticism; to other challenging social situations in class).

Students' Affective Experiences (Aff.) – Events related to *student* actions involving emotions

Aff. 1. Feeling Experiences (S refers to positive and negative feelings that emerge in class).
Aff. 2. Motivation, Interest and Effort Experiences (S refers to (1) have interest in class; (2) be motivated or not and (3) to his (her) effort to overcome learning challenges).
Aff. 3. Teacher Attitude Experiences (S refers to observed in-class teacher feelings and emotions).
Aff. 4. Affective Strategy Experiences (S refers to how (s)he deals with feelings and emotions).

Students' Circumstantial Experiences (Cir.) – Events that refer to the immediate context – events and circumstances that interact with *student* while learning - including people involved and time

Cir. 1. Institutional Experiences (S refers to processes such as enrollment, requirements, other institutional demands).
Cir. 2. Foreign Language Experiences (S refers to the foreign language status; the status of being a speaker of the foreign language, to having access to English or not *etc.*).
Cir. 3. Time Related Experiences (S refers to (1) lack of time for in-class/out-of-class activities and tasks; (2) the passing of time; (3) seasonal issues *etc.*).
Cir. 4. Place Related Experiences (S refers to (1) distance; (2) classroom physical environment; (3) classroom physical structure; (4) classroom a/location, neighborhood; (4) spatial issues such as the position s/he sits in class, immediate surroundings *etc.*)
Cir. 5. Research Related Experiences (S refers to attitudes, feelings and observations on the impact of research; to events related to the researcher's influence on the classroom and on the students' performance).

Students' Conceptual Experiences (Cpt.) – Events related to actions involving *students'* beliefs

Cpt. 1. Conceptions on Teaching (S refers to his/her conceptions on the teaching of English; ideal T/S relationship; teacher's role; activities and tasks).
Cpt. 2. Conceptions on Learning (S refers to conceptions about learning English; student's role/responsibility *etc.*).
Cpt. 3. Conceptions on Personal Learning (S refers to his/her own learning process).
Cpt. 4. Other Conceptions (S refers to conceptions related to parents, family, relationships, school directors, society, theory/practice).

Students' Personal Experiences (Per.) - Events taking place outside the learning situation that directly influence the student

Pes. 1. Status Experiences (S refers to his (her) socio-economic status or that of the school where (s)he studies).
Pes. 2. Former Experiences (S refers to any former learning experience).
Pes. 3. Personal Life Experiences (S refers to singular experiences in or out of the classroom).
Pes. 4. Study or Work Related Experiences (S refers to study experiences at school; to working affecting studies).
Per. 5. Reflection (S refers to his (her) reflections on self, learning self or own learning).
Per. 6. Personal Identities (S refers to (1) the many identities s/he enacts while in class while learning or (2) self-perception/self-awareness as individuals (3) to what or whom they identify with).

Students' Projective Experiences (Pro.) – Current experiences that lead to projections related to these experiences

**Pro.1. Plans** (S refers to a plan of action; to something (s)he intends to do).
Pro.2. Desires (S refers to something desirable but hard to achieve; to something that would be nice to change/to attain).
Pro.3. Needs (S refers to issues that deserve attention: fluency, behaviors, feelings, eating, leisure, living in one's own home *etc.*).
Pro.4. Glimpses (S refers to more distant goals; wishes/visions/dreams; something impossible to attain at the moment, ideal selves).

The dynamic interconnectedness of the experiences listed in these frames of reference could be represented as in Figure 5 (a), in which each dot would be an experience, constituted by a net of other experiences nested into it (b).

Figure 5 – The net pattern of experiences emergence (a) and their composition (b)
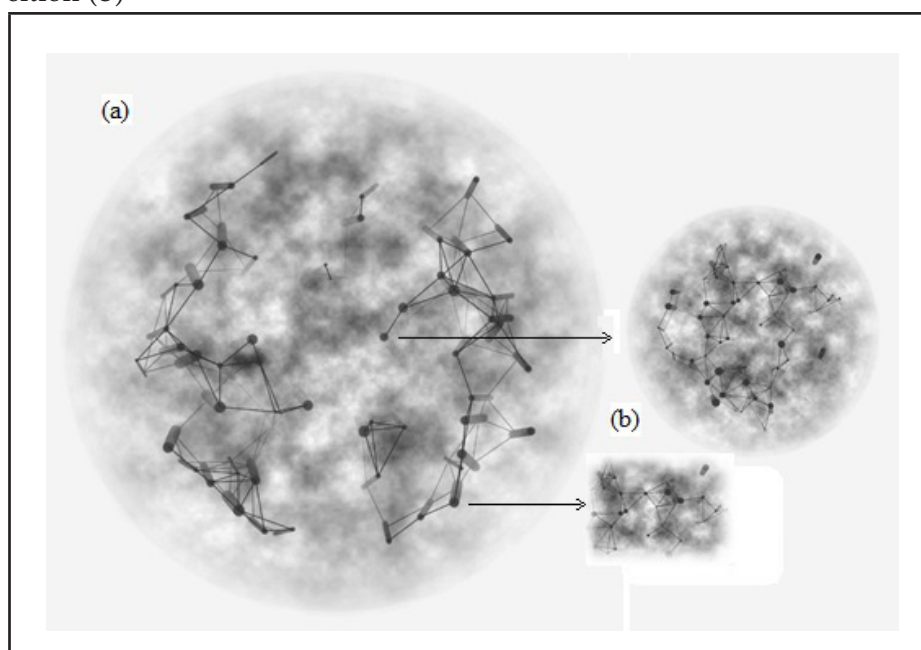
Source: Miccoli (unpublished material).

As the representation tries to illustrate, the frames of reference are not static. On the contrary, they are dynamic, in constant movement and interaction. As so, they can guide research of complex phenomena, working as initial conditions of focal systems or even as a system itself to focus on. Teaching and learning experiences emerge from the interconnections among these – other elements in a dynamic and situated way. Focusing on the emergence of an experience means disentangling the elements that provoked it, in a holistic manner, rejecting cause-effect explanations. Besides, the relations and interactions among the frames allow understanding how change in one part of the system can influence the system as a whole, enabling, ultimately, action to be taken. In this process of analysis, control parameters can be identified, that is, elements that can influence the behavior of the system and affect its trajectory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). For example, reflection on lived experiences, as stated before, has been found to be an element that can disturb the stability of teaching and learning systems provoking change, co-adaptation and soft-assembly processes.

These frames of reference emerged, as patterns of behavior, from narratives of Brazilian teachers and students of English. Other contexts and realities will certainly bring to light other elements. We speculate, however, that the frames of reference might be representative of most teaching and learning contexts. ACCOOLHER members' research results have been welcomed in conferences in our country and abroad. They have received the audiences' immediate identification with data excerpts. This encourages the sharing of experiences, which validates results given that many classroom experiences remain recurrent and recursive.

Further research, in different contexts and realities, with varied foci, would certainly contribute to the expansion of experiential research and, eventually, to a holistic understanding of L2 teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have reviewed Miccoli's motivation leading to experiential research (1997), defined experience as unit of analysis, and revealed the organic processes by which, due to its dynamic nature, nests other experiences. The visual representations and data excerpts have displayed the complexity of elements in teachers' and students' narratives. Finally, we have presented frames of reference that constitute important outcomes of an experiential approach for researching and understanding the complexity of teaching and learning experiences used by ACCOOLHER.

Thus, we hope to have demonstrated that experience and experiential research permit capturing the essential – the point of view of the ones that experience teaching and learning in the complexity of formal and informal learning contexts. By means of a profound and detailed analysis of countless narratives, experiential research has allowed to retrieve initial conditions and uncoil the narrators' meaningful coadaptation processes, explaining emblematic teaching and learning aspects of Foreign Language Acquisition[7] (FLA). Experiential research has also

revealed the organic character of lived experiences in the emergence of processes, enabling a broader and deeper comprehension of investigated phenomena.

We hope that other researchers will find experiential research and the experiential frames of reference presented here useful for further and deeper understandings of FLA.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. The categories in italics have been recently renamed following the evolution of our studies. Changes have affected the denomination of categories only (Miccoli, 2007a).

2. Acronym for a project framed with the constructs of **A**ctivity, **C**omplexity, **C**ollaboration, **O**bserving, Listening (spelled with an **O** in our language), Stories (spelled with an **H**), **E**xperience and **R**eflection. The word 'acolher' has no direct translation into English, but its meaning is close to embrace.

3. Translated from the original: "uma constelação de circunstâncias, dinâmicas, emoções e relações vividas em um meio específico de interações... a qual, ao ser narrada perde sua aleatoriedade".

4. We use the term 'agency' in this paper according to Ahearn's definition: as a "[sociocultural] mediated capacity to act" (AHEARN, 2001, p. 112).

5. The choice for the word milieu comes from its holistic cultural meaning that may refer to physical, social conditions and temporal elements, events. We will discuss this further.

6. Translated form the original: "Eu gostaria de poder falar mais em sala. Quando aprendi o presente perfeito, que agora eu já sei como e quando usar e que é mais usado que os outros tempos, eu fico querendo usá-lo mais. Então, eu fico querendo falar mais, mas o tempo é pouco. Gostaria muito de ter mais oportunidades de falar e de melhorar".

7. FLA is the mainstream acronym. Though we prefer foreign language development as more descriptive of the actual process, we have used FLA to refer to the way the literature addresses the process that involves teaching and learning.

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