

OBSERVING EFL CLASSROOMS IN PRIMARY OR SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A RESEARCH TASK IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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Abstract

In this paper, based on principles of systemic-functional grammar and critical discourse analysis, as well as on my experience as a teacher of Applied Linguistics, I discuss issues related to the observation of EFL classes. The analysis (qualitative, ethnographically-based) arises from discussions in my Applied Linguistics course and students' reports on the classes they observed. The study aims at contributing to an awareness of the relevance of an educational practice that goes beyond the mere listing of personal pronouns with the corresponding forms of the verb *to be*, for instance, and suggests a discussion of topics which could somehow integrate sociocultural perspectives into EFL teacher education.

Key-words: Critical discourse analysis; classroom observation; teacher education

Resumo

Neste trabalho, com base em princípios da gramática funcional de Halliday e de análise crítica do discurso, bem como minha experiência em Lingüística Aplicada, discuto questões relacionadas à observação de aulas de inglês como língua estrangeira. A análise (de cunho etnográfico) surge de discussões nas minhas aulas de Lingüística Aplicada e de relatos de alunos sobre as aulas

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observadas. O estudo visa contribuir para uma conscientização da relevância de uma prática educacional que vai além de, por exemplo, mera listagem de pronomes pessoais com as formas do verbo *to be*, para uma discussão de tópicos que possam, de alguma forma, integrar perspectivas socioculturais na educação de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira.

Palavras-chave: análise crítica do discurso; observação de sala de aula; formação de professores.

1. Introduction

Ultimately, learning to teach can be conceptualized as a long-term, complex developmental process that is the result of participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching. (Johnson & Freeman, 2001, p. 56)

In many fields of investigation, there has been an understanding of the inextricable link between language use and its social context, in the process of creating meaning, of representing and building human experience, as proposed, for example, by Halliday (1978, 1994) and Fairclough (1992a; 1995). Likewise, within many educational settings, the teaching of English as a foreign language has attempted to 'redraw the boundaries of foreign language study' (Kramsch, 1993, p. 13), that is, has expanded its borders of lexical and grammatical aspects so as to include broader sociocultural issues such as teacher reflexivity, teacher and students' identities, power and inequality, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, cultural awareness, genre knowledge, among others (Heberle & Meurer, 2001; Pennycook, 1999; Johnson & Freeman, 2001; Moita Lopes, 2002; Meurer & Motta-Roth, 2002). Likewise, there seems to be an interest in these issues in the new Brazilian curriculum parameters (PCNs: Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais), revealed in the crossdisciplinary themes: ethics, health, environment, sexual orientation, cultural plurality, work and consumerism.

In this paper I intend to share some of the foundations and suggestions for classroom observation. I have divided my work into

three parts: First, I present the theoretical perspectives for the study. Then, I discuss a questionnaire devised by my students as an initial step for classroom observations. Finally, I analyze the data I have gathered from my students' observations of classes they have attended, not for the Practicum¹, but in the Applied Linguistics course, as part of their pre-service teacher education.

2.Theoretical Perspectives: A Discourse Analysis View of FL Teaching

EFL teaching has incorporated insights from different areas of research, such as discourse analysis, teacher education, systemic-functional linguistics (e.g., Christie, 1989; 1999; Lemke, 1989), and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 1992b; Wallace, 1992, 1995; Chouliaraki, 1998; Reichmann, 2001, Meurer, 2001). In this section, I briefly outline principles from these areas which have grounded the present study.

Discourse analysis has become important for EFL teachers, as can be seen through studies carried out, for instance, by Hatch (1992), Cook (1989), McCarthy (1991), McCarthy and Carter (1994), Carter and McCarthy (1997) and Rigggenbach (1999). Topics such as cohesion and coherence, turn-taking, genres, qualitative research, text structure, integration of lexis, grammar and pronunciation in context, and talk as a social activity have been incorporated and made available for EFL professionals. McCarthy and Carter (1994) explain:

A discourse-based view of language involves us in looking not just at isolated, decontextualized bits of language. It involves examining how bits of language contribute to the making of complete texts. It involves exploring the relationship between the linguistic patterns of complete texts and the social contexts in which they function. It involves considering the higher-order operations of language at the

interface of cultural and ideological meanings and returning to the lower-order forms of language which are often crucial to the patterning of such meanings. A discourse-based view of language also prioritizes an interactive approach to analysis of texts which takes proper account of the dynamism inherent in linguistic contexts. Language learning is also a dynamic process in which learning how to produce and understand texts and their variation is crucial. (p. 38)

Looking into language as discourse-based, in opposition to sentence-based, has brought new perspectives to language teaching. McCarthy (1991) tells us:

With a more accurate picture of natural discourse, we are in a better position to evaluate the descriptions upon which we base our teaching, the teaching materials, what goes on in the classroom, and the end products of our teaching, whether in the form of spoken or written output. (p. 12)

Research on teacher education, more specifically second language teacher education and classroom studies, has advanced considerably. Richards (1998), for example, presents six domains of content 'as forming the core knowledge base of second language teacher education' (p. 29): theories of teaching (including explicit theories as well as teachers' principles and beliefs), teaching skills (such as questioning skills, lesson planning, classroom management), communication skills and language proficiency, subject matter knowledge; pedagogical reasoning skills and decision-making (for example, to be able to deal with pedagogical problems and find adequate strategies), and contextual knowledge.

As another viable framework for the knowledge-base of language teacher education, Johnson and Freeman (2001) argue for a socially-situated perspective and propose three domains: 'the teacher as a learner

of teaching, the contexts of schools and schooling, and the activity of teaching and learning' (p. 58). These authors explain that participation is crucial and that future teachers should be seen as learners of teaching. They say, 'there is a need for grounded research which examines the activity of teaching as it is experienced by teachers and students in classrooms' (pp. 59-60).

Systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), as proposed by Halliday and his followers, views language as social semiotics, as a form of social action; i.e., as one of the possible systems of meaning that constitute human culture. Language use and social context are inextricably involved in the process of creating meaning, of organizing and building human experience. As Hasan (1996) explains, 'There is no essential discontinuity between what humans do, which includes what they say (Halliday, 1973; 1978), and the social structure in which they have a *locus*' (pp. 143-4). Regarding the importance of SFL for pedagogy, Christie (1999) explains,

In that it investigates the social construction of experience, SF theory is also a theory of social action: It aims to explain the role of language in the way things are so that it may act upon such ways for the potential good of many. In particular purposes, the theory proposes that a knowledge of how language works to build the genres associated with school success will enable teachers to guide their students (both in L1 and L2) in learning them. (pp. 761-2)

Thus, SFL also emphasizes the importance of investigating discourse in relation to social life, including, of course, classroom practices, where a teacher and his/her pupils interact and negotiate meanings. The lexico-grammatical forms of language, that is, the linguistic choices used in a given social activity, are studied in relation to their use to achieve social goals (Halliday & Hasan 1989; Halliday, 1994). According to Hasan (1996, p. 143), '...while language is not the

only means for (re)producing the values attached to human action, it is, none the less, one of the most powerful instruments for the purpose’.

Regarding SFL and classroom studies, Lemke observes:

In classrooms, teachers and students use language to construct recognized patterns of activity, exercising choices within those patterns to control each other’s behavior. They use language to develop, in both monologue and dialogue, the meaning relations and special ways of speaking and writing of particular school subjects. (Lemke, 1989, p.1).

Focusing on the bidirectional link between language and society, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has emerged as an alternative view to analyze discourse, ‘bringing a variety of theories into dialogue, especially social theories on the one hand and linguistic theories on the other’ (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 16) and taking into account sociopolitical and cultural aspects of discourse. In analyzing a discursive event, that is, a specific use of language in a situation, (such as communicative events in an EFL classroom, for example), CDA theorists describe the explicit linguistic elements of the event, and integrate this analysis with other forms of social practice.

Within the perspective of CDA, and closely associated with SFL, language is seen as social practice, with emphasis given to the connections between linguistic realizations and different aspects of the social context, that is, linguistic phenomena are closely linked to social phenomena (Meurer, 2002). The term ‘critical’ in CDA

does not mean detecting only the negative sides of social interaction and processes and painting a black and white picture of societies. Quite the contrary: *Critical* means distinguishing complexity and denying easy, dichotomous explanations. It means making contradictions transparent. Moreover, *critical* implies that a researcher is self-reflective

while doing research about social problems. (Wodak, 1999, p.186)

In education, studies in CDA consider textual and contextual features of texts, paying close attention to multilingual and multicultural issues (Fairclough, 1992b). Critical reading seen under CDA, for instance, takes into account the analysis of language forms in relation to the socio-historical-political context (Heberle, 2000). Two other studies are those by Chouliaraki (1998), who investigates pedagogic knowledge in individualized teacher-pupil talk, based on Bernstein (1990) and Fairclough (1995), and Bergvall & Remlinger (1996), who analyze conversational practices in academic discourse, in relation to reproduction, resistance and gender.

Based on the theoretical perspectives very briefly outlined above, this paper presents the questions devised for observation and my students' classroom reports as part of their pre-service education.

3. Classroom research: Questions for observation of EFL classes

Since 1995, I have been responsible for the course *Applied Linguistics*, which is offered in the 6th semester of our university course in EFL teaching². One of the activities I have been proposing concerns short ethnographically-based research, where part of the students' work is to observe EFL classes in elementary or secondary classes in public (state) schools.

Direct observation in a real context of learning constitutes a research method used to collect, describe and interpret data. Regarding direct, naturalistic observation, (as is our case), McDonough and McDonough (1997) explain that 'it refers to a concern with the understanding of natural settings and the representation of the meanings of the actors within that setting' (p. 114). The task proposed here, then, can be seen as initiation into contextualized teacher

education, as a kind of exploratory and qualitative research, looking into the classroom as 'a site of constant investigation instead of the place of certainties or dogmas' (Moita Lopes & Freire, 1998, p. 149). As also pointed out by Johnson and Freeman (2001), 'there is a need for grounded research which examines the activity of teaching as it is experienced by teachers and students in classrooms' (pp. 59-60).

For many of my students the activity of observation I proposed was their first experience in EFL classes as part of their professional growth. They were, as some of them said, "lost", without knowing exactly what to observe. Thus, my students and I decided to prepare a questionnaire, as a helping tool to student-teachers. As pointed out by Heberle and Meurer (2001), the students had to at least think of the possibilities of what to observe in their classmates' or their own classes.

The questions, which were jointly suggested by three groups of students and me in three consecutive terms, are handed in before class observation takes place and they may serve as a mechanism of reflexivity about EFL teaching (Richards, 1998; Magalhães, 1998; Fairclough, 1995). They are not a strict, formal questionnaire to be followed, but suggestions for the student-researchers to initiate their investigation into classroom ethnography, to foster discussions and possibilities of activities related to EFL teaching. The questions are grouped into four main parts concerning 1) the school environment and the status of EFL there, referring to the context where teaching and learning take place; 2) interaction regarding the discursive practices, the negotiation of meanings between teachers and students; 3) technical/pedagogical issues referring to EFL methodology and teaching; and 4) reflexivity, an aspect of how teachers and students (as the discourse participants involved) see themselves and EFL teaching.

The students are asked to select only some of the questions, those which are more closely related to "what is going on" in the classroom observed. Based on their observation, their field notes, the students produce a research report. Some students suggested that the questions could be used for self-reflection, or for critical awareness in relation to

one's own pedagogy. The questions, thus, intend to make future teachers aware of classroom interaction, how the use of language contributes to the educational process, how the teacher teaches and how students learn (Cavalcanti & Moita Lopes, 1991, p. 136).

Here is the first set of questions:

I Questions concerning the school environment (based on Heberle, Motta-Roth and Vasconcellos, 1993; Heberle, 2000; Richards, 1998; Cavalcanti & Moita Lopes, 1991; Heberle & Meurer, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Pennycook, 1999)

1. What kind of school is it (private/public/language institute?) What sort of overall social structures are students inserted in and how do they see this? Check also other sociocultural factors as well as conditions of learning, instructional resources and materials. How do the local community and the school staff see the teaching of English?
2. What are the general guidelines for the teaching of English or other foreign languages? How many students are there per class? How often do students have English classes? Check syllabus, lesson plans, homework assignments, and other documents
3. Is there any library with books in foreign languages? Do teachers have access to the internet, technical/professional books, dictionaries, videos, CDs and other didactic technological resources?

Regarding these questions, students are asked to investigate the context where EFL teaching takes place, or to engage in describing the settings for this micro-ethnographic approach. Based on Fairclough's sociocultural practice level of analysis, questions such as the ones suggested may help future teachers to become aware of the conditions for teaching and the social milieu of the specific classroom observed.

The second set of questions is as follows:

II Questions about teacher/student and student/student interaction

1. What opportunities are offered for students' participation, autonomy and critical awareness?
2. Are there moments where students' background knowledge and experiences are considered for the construction of meaning?
3. Is there a dialogue between the teacher and his/her students, that is, do students and the teacher interact? When?
4. Do the students participate actively in the construction of knowledge?
5. Is there 'a supportive and positive working atmosphere' (Chouliaraki, 1998, p.14)?
6. What are some verbal and nonverbal signs of communicative engagement (Lemke, 1989)?

This set of questions aims at unveiling the kind of interaction between the discourse participants, namely the teacher and her/his students. Lemke (1989) explains:

Language, in classrooms and elsewhere in social life, is not used just to communicate information. Two of its most important functions are (1) its use to perform specific kinds of action, and (2) its use in creating situations in which those actions take their meanings from the contexts we build around them. (p. 5)

As Lemke (1989) also observes, in classrooms teachers and students share and negotiate ways of talking and doing. This part was also

designed so that future teachers may see in what ways the teacher and her/his students interact or negotiate meanings.

The third set refers to questions of methodology and techniques used in the classroom:

III Technical/pedagogical questions

1. How does the teacher introduce and develop a topic?
2. How does correction take place: what pedagogical procedures are used? What kind of mistakes or errors are corrected? What is more emphasized: students' performance or their mistakes and/or errors?
3. How is grammar taught? Are there opportunities for contextualization and use of grammatical forms or is there an emphasis on grammatical terminology?
4. What kind of questions does the teacher ask? Do they seem to help learners or are they used only to evaluate students' performance?
5. What role does the teacher play in the reading class? Are there opportunities for the students to reflect on the text? Are the texts varied and interesting for the students? Is there an attempt by the teacher and students to place texts in a broader social context? (Heberle, 2000; Meurer, 1999; 2002)
6. Does the teacher seem to know about new trends in EFL regarding the four skills and/or in Applied Linguistics?
7. What is the role of the textbook in class? Are the activities in the book communicative, varied and culturally appropriate? Is the organization of the content, the proficiency level and the sociocultural context adequate?
8. Which skills are emphasized in class?

9. Is the language practice contextualized or decontextualized? Are the students given opportunities to read and practice different genres (or text types) used in different social contexts (Meurer, 2000) such as horoscopes, interviews, letters, news reports, songs, recipes, poems, or do they receive only ready-made decontextualized or abstract sentences not related to their social milieu?

These questions generally accepted as belonging to teacher performance and pedagogical tasks are related to teacher education, methodology and materials, to subject matter knowledge, communication skills and theories of learning and teaching (Heberle, Motta-Roth & Vasconcellos, 1993; Richards, 1998).

The last set of questions suggests the following proposal for reflexive activities:

IV Reflections: Interview students and the teacher to know what they think in terms of EFL teaching in schools. Make field notes and if possible audio or videotape the classes for a better analysis. From the interview or talks with the teacher, what are some of his/her beliefs? Ask the teacher and students to write about their experience in EFL learning/teaching.

These questions constitute an important tool for triangulation of data, that is, to cross-check the findings obtained in the other sections, to obtain another perspective for data analysis, from the point of view of those involved in the study (Alwright & Bailey, 1991). The evidence from the resulting documents may help to enhance the corpus, to better link the findings of the micro and macro levels, to link the social and discursive practices with the text analysis itself (Fairclough, 1992a), in our case, to link the classroom activities being described with the wider school community and perhaps with more general educational issues.

As there are so many aspects in the questionnaire, the teacher-learners themselves select the questions they feel are the most relevant or add different ones in order to make a report on the classes observed. Together with other activities being gradually introduced in our university, and with the other subjects such as Methodology, Teaching Practice and Educational Psychology, the proposed activity may hopefully contribute to a more effective Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE), regarding familiarization with real classrooms, and thus better preparation for language teachers.

4. Students' reports

In this section, following the sequence of the sets of questions previously proposed, I succinctly discuss aspects of my students' reports of the classes they attended. Regarding the physical, geographical location of the schools and conditions of learning, several students found that the public schools lack resources which could benefit both the teacher and the students. In some cases there are serious social problems, as can be exemplified by Maria Rosa (3)'s report:

Based on what I observed and on what the teacher has told me, the school does not provide enough material that could be helpful to increase the second language learning process, such as VCRs, TV sets, books, and so on. I have been told that the school offers only one sound system for the entire school and only one computer...

In an interview with the pedagogical coordinator, I was informed that there are some students involved with drugs, some drug dealers and some students with serious health problems. Pregnancy among teenagers is a great problem as well.

Other students also presented similar reports regarding the resources available:

The didactic and financial resources are minimal; the classroom used no audio or visual tools (TV sets or stereos). (Tamara Pontes' report)

And,

The school and the classroom were not well preserved; the classroom had small windows, and it was very hot. (Tereza da Silva's report)

And even still,

... the institution could not be considered exactly an example of organization and there are no facilities such as a gym or a library. The resources are few... (Ana Silva's report)

The physical and logistic support for students and teachers represents an important asset for the teaching and learning of any school subject, and awareness of the sociocultural context should, therefore, be part of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE).

Due to space constraints, Parts II and III of the questionnaire (concerning both interaction and pedagogical aspects) will be jointly discussed. Several students reported the lack of comprehensible input in English given to students, too much noise in class, other discipline problems, and teachers' authoritative attitudes towards students. For example:

The classes were basically this: the teacher wrote a text on the board with spaces for the students to complete with the correct form of the verb in parentheses. While they were copying, he made the roll call. (Maria Carolina Martins' report)

Concerning the teaching activities, Lúzia Retzel reported:

The teacher asked the students to take their notebooks. Some of them complained about having to write, but the teacher started writing on the board anyway. She wrote:

Change the sentences to the negative and interrogative forms

- a) She plays the piano very well.
- b) I study English on Mondays.
- c) Billy likes to sing rock music.
- d) They always go to the shopping (sic)
- e) We swim on the lake on Sundays (sic)

This suggests a view of language as knowledge transmission, while the interactive aspect remains almost non-existent, or only in reference to the grammatical content. An example of the interaction between this teacher and students concerning the above-mentioned exercise was this:

Paulo: Teacher, Esse aí é para colocar o does e o doesn't?

Teacher: É, esse é para passar para negativa com o doesn't e para interrogativa com o does na frente, lembra? E não esqueçam de tirar o "s" do verbo. (Lúzia Retzel's report)
(My translation: Teacher, this one you have to put does and doesn't?

Yes, this one you change to the negative with doesn't and to the interrogative with does before, remember? And don't forget to remove the 's' from the verb.)

In relation to grammar, Miriam Lutz reported:

... the grammar is usually taught out of any context; sentences are put on the board and students have to fill in the blanks.

Besides that, the examples given by the teacher are not related to the students' context; they are not able to make connections with their lives.

Here is an example of the authoritative stance taken by the teacher:

Quem acabar de copiar pode sair para o lanche (Those who have finished copying may leave) (Lúzia Retzel's report)

Concerning class management and how the teacher and her/his students interact, Tamara Pontes tells us:

The teacher had many problems presenting the activity. She explained the instructions but the students did not understand them easily, as we can see in... She clearly loses her temper and the control of the class. She probably would have obtained better results if she had given some examples first, for instance, writing on the board the questions she wanted students to answer and rehearsing with some students for all the class to see.

Fortunately, some teachers-to-be had a very good experience, as Ana Maria Boccadoro reported,

Maria, the teacher, believes in the importance of teacher talk for classroom language development. So she speaks most of the time in English and uses Portuguese only when necessary to clarify something the students did not understand. The use of the mother-tongue is restricted to giving instructions and to maintaining discipline.

This exemplifies that, in spite of shortcomings such as the ones already discussed, teaching English in a public school can be a

rewarding experience, with the teacher and students developing interesting activities.

As to correction of students' mistakes, Marina Tomasello remarked:

Concerning the correction of errors, I must sadly admit that, when it happened, which was not very frequent, it was performed in such a way that the students were visibly uncomfortable. The teacher would repeat the students' mistakes out loud and ask the other students to correct them. Needless to say, the students were embarrassed and did not participate much in class.

The interaction between the teacher and the students was very poor. The teacher did not care whether the students were participating or not, while the students did not show any interest in participating in class.

Concerning the use of English in class, most students observed that very little English is used in class, amounting to isolated, detailed information as the object of study, as, for instance:

Besides being strongly based on translation, the 'lessons' (if we can call them so) are completely out of context. ... In each class I attended, the teacher introduced a set of words (3 or 4 per class) such as: *from*, *by*, *this*, and *of*. The students then worked with fragments of sentences to exemplify the words learned. Take this fragment as an example: "This beautiful and important lady" (here, students were supposed to learn *this* the focus was not on how to use the pronoun but on its translation), or still " A box with oranges and lemons" (to introduce *with*). It seemed to me that the aim of the teacher was merely to explore grammatical content to the students, regardless of the contexts of situation. (Mara Rocha's report)

Ana Silva reported on her experience:

... the teacher brought up interesting activities...: the teacher, by suggestion of some of the students, worked with a new version of the song *Endless Love*, performed by two young Brazilian singers Sandy and Junior. The activity managed to raise the interest of the students considerably, but all they did was copy the lyrics of the song in their notebooks, which the teacher herself reproduced on the board.

Ana points out, however, that with the lyrics of the song, students were able to see grammar in context with the sentences *You will always be my first love* and *What will you be in the future?*, as examples of simple future tense.

Another important aspect analyzed through the class observation is the use of L1:

In this class, there is no use of the foreign language. They only speak Portuguese. (Maralise Cabral's report)

Regarding Part II and III of the questionnaire, students paid special attention to what was going on in the classroom. And, generally speaking, they did not like what they saw.

The last set of questions, concerning reflection, can be illustrated by the following excerpts:

... the learning is instructional (formal), the opportunities of language use by the students are minimal, but they are aware of the importance of learning English (as some students said when interviewed). (Tamara Ponte's report)

Teachers who were interviewed talked about their difficult working days, with a great number of classes to teach, with no

opportunities for workshops. One teacher suggested that EFL teachers should have more support from the universities, as was reported by Miriam Lutz, for instance. Some students showed indignation at what they experienced, as Maria Carolina Martins says,

How can a teenager that works all day and is very tired when he/she goes to class, understand how important it is to study English? The students could be more motivated, but the environment seems to work against them...Observing the classes made me think: Can I be a better professional than this? Can I change this situation? It made me feel sorry for those students, who are there doing something that is not relevant for them: filling blanks with the verb 'to be'.

Maria Carolina explains that the title of her report, 'Ai, esse verbo to be de novo, professor' (Gee, this verb 'to be' again, teacher!), was actually said by one of the students when she saw that they had to fill in the blanks with the verb. And she continues, 'These teenagers need something motivating for them to learn something'.

Another student of mine, Silvia Sand, interviewed students. One of the questions was whether they thought they could learn English at school. One student provided a somehow contradictory response:

Really, since I started studying English at school they have told me that this English leads nowhere, and to some extent, I disagree, because I have been studying the verb TO BE from the 5th grade up to the first year of secondary school. It seems there is nothing in English beyond this. I think that to come out of school with a good knowledge of English, the student has to have personal initiative...

Miriam Lutz also interviewed students. Here is an excerpt:

Miriam: Você vê uma ligação entre o que você aprende nas aulas de inglês e o seu dia-a-dia?

Student: Não, nada a ver

(Do you see any connection between what you learn in the English classes and your daily life? No, nothing whatsoever.)

Each one of these reports for the mini-project could lead to several issues to be further developed. Nevertheless, the observation task was intended to be a small step in the development of my students' teacher education. There are problematic issues to be solved, specially regarding the small number of classes attended, the little feedback on the participants' views of what they were co-constructing and the consequent generalizations which were sometimes made without enough evidence provided about the reality experienced.

Another problem concerns the observed teachers' involvement in our project. This semester my students and I are planning to ask those teachers whose classes were observed to participate in meetings with us, so that we can all further engage in a shared community of practice and discuss issues which are seen as unresolved or difficult.

5. Concluding remarks

Observation of classroom activities was most often carried out by one student, but also occasionally experienced by two students observing the same classroom. The students wrote a detailed description of what they saw, based on the questions suggested, examined the most salient events and then wrote their reports. On the whole, the project was evaluated as very meaningful to my students. As Ana Maria Boccadoro explains:

Through classroom observation, I could get acquainted with the nature of second language classrooms, since I have no teaching experience. It was an opportunity for critical reflection on how the teaching/learning processes develop.

An important concern for future EFL professionals should be reflecting on their own conceptions and 'tacit images' of teaching, to reflect on their experience as learners, to 'recall and explore their personal images of teaching', to examine their 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975, in Roberts, 1998, pp. 66-67). Different reflective tasks may be carried out with student-teachers such as diary journals, video-biographies, classroom self-assessment reports, open-ended questionnaires and interviews, workshops, action research and group discussions, among others.

Another issue which deserved attention concerns the teaching of grammar, which for many teachers in the classes observed still refers to decontextualized, explicit grammar terminology, or to what is usually known as 'focus on FormS': 'a deliberate discussion of grammar without reference to meaning' (Cook, 2001, p. 39), and not to a discourse-based view (McCarthy & Carter, 1994), as explained in section 1. Future teachers, thus, may need to understand that grammar should be taught and practiced in context, with focus on form as a way to help learners to communicate and interact in the foreign language.

What several studies emphasize is that research into the EFL classroom can contribute to the development of critical awareness and it may offer a sound bridge between theory and practice. Taking into account broader social or political issues, most of my students were very critical of the educational situation in our country.

To conclude, I refer to Norton (2001), who reported on his research as part of the Youth Millennium Project in Pakistan, and explained that 'the students engaged in learning by exploring, observing, recording, constructing, problem-solving, sharing, discussing, hypothesizing, predicting, co-operating and understanding' (p. 8). These educational and socioculturally-based activities could surely be implemented not only in our EFL classes in elementary and secondary schools, but in our university courses as well, so that our students and future teachers may see the relevance of their work as educators in the 21st century, engaged with lexical and grammatical aspects in meaningful situations but also linked to either local or global social issues.

Notes

- 1 The Practicum in Brazilian public universities, in general, is offered by the School of Education, not by the English language departments.
- 2 From 1995 to 2000, I was the only teacher responsible for the course in our Foreign Language Department. The classes were given in Portuguese since it included students of the five foreign languages offered by our department: French, German, Italian, Spanish and English. From 2000 on, as the number of students taking the course increased, groups were subdivided and now my course is given in English, only to EFL student-teachers. The questionnaire referred to here is the product of classroom discussions throughout these years. I would like to thank all my Applied Linguistics students for their helpful suggestions and comments.
- 3 Pseudonyms have been used for ethical reasons.

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