

INDIVIDUAL CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES:
A SOCIOCULTURAL COMPARISON FOR
UNDERSTANDING EFL CLASSROOM LANGUAGE
LEARNING

Laura Miccoli

Abstract

This paper compares the *classroom experiences (CEs)* of two university students in their process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The CEs emerged from individual interviews, where classroom videos promoted reflection. The analysis revealed that cognitive, social and affective experiences directly influence the learning process and that those which refer to setting, learner's personal background, beliefs and goal influence the learning process indirectly. The analysis also revealed the singularity of some of these CEs that led to their categorization as *individual CEs (ICEs)*. When comparing the ICEs of the two participants, the importance of a sociocultural analysis of the classroom learning process becomes evident. We conclude with an analysis of the value of sociocultural theory in the study of classroom EFL learning and with the implications of this study for teachers and researchers.

Keywords: classroom experiences; English learning; socio-cultural theory.

Resumo

Este trabalho compara as *experiências de sala de aula (ESA)* de duas universitárias na aprendizagem de língua inglesa. As ESA emergiram de entrevistas individuais, onde vídeos das aulas promoveram a reflexão. A

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análise revelou que experiências de natureza cognitiva, social ou afetiva influem diretamente no processo de aprendizagem e as que se referem ao contexto, à história, crenças e metas dos alunos influem indiretamente no mesmo. A singularidade de algumas experiências levou à sua categorização como *ESA individuais (ESAI)*. Ao comparar as ESAI de duas informantes, a importância da análise sociocultural do processo de aprendizagem de sala de aula fica evidente. Concluiremos com uma defesa do valor da teoria sociocultural no estudo da aprendizagem de língua estrangeira em sala de aula e com a apresentação das implicações deste estudo para pesquisadores e professores.

Palavras-chave: experiências de sala de aula, aprendizagem de inglês; teoria sócio-cultural.

Introduction

Understanding what happens inside classrooms is the goal of classroom language learning research. The information that surfaces from this kind of investigation interests both researchers and those involved in the teaching and learning process. Researchers welcome studies that reveal issues involved in the teaching and learning of a language, for they provide them with data to refine theories of teaching and learning. Encouraged by research results, teachers have become investigators of their own classrooms, for this allows them to promote change from a deeper understanding of their teaching situation and their students. Learners themselves take a more active role in the learning process since classroom language research has recognized their contributions to the learning process. It is this interest in the classroom as a place where different experiences take place in the process of teaching and learning a language that motivates the investigation here reported.

The Study

This paper reports part of the results of a larger ethnographic study that investigated collective and individual classroom experiences (CE) related to second language (L2) learning from a learner point of view

(Miccoli, 1997). It examines the individual CE's reported by two of the six English-major undergraduate students who took part in the semester long study at a Brazilian public university.

This investigation is framed by theoretical and empirical studies (Allwright, 1991; Brown, 1994; Ellis, 1994; Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Nunan, 1999) in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA), especially those which view the classroom as a culture (Van Lier, 1988; Holliday, 1994), i.e., a context whose characteristics imprint a singular dynamics to the learning process and those framed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (Donato & McCormick, 1995; Gillete, 1994; Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

Theoretical Framework

For Vygotsky, the social environment is crucial in its importance for cognitive growth. He understood the sociocultural setting as being the primary determining factor in the development of higher forms of mental activities such as logical memory, attention, conceptual thought, planning, perception, problem solving, voluntary inhibition and disinhibitory faculties. Sociocultural theory rests on three basic tenets. First, language is the tool by which humans organize and reorganize their world; i.e., language is the tool for mediating behavior and for the development of consciousness as a consequence of one's interaction with reality. One way in which humans interact with reality is through work, mediated by the tools that stand between the individual and the object of an activity. Thus, through work man transcends nature, transforming it. On the other hand, signs, such as those found in human languages, are internally oriented towards the subject of the activity, acting on an individual's psychology, bringing change in the behavior of the individual or of others. Second, it is through scaffolded interaction with others that individuals become independent experts within a domain called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the area of knowledge where learners who are not able to perform

independently can do so with appropriate help. Scaffolding is an important concept in sociocultural theory in that it brings evidence to knowledge as being first socially constructed to be later internalized by the individual. This process of internalizing knowledge also explains private and inner speech. Third, human activity is goal directed and dynamically dependent on context. This means that once an individual determines a goal, s/he will decide on an appropriate course of action, depending on the situation, objectives, and the goal. The importance of the concept of activity in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory led to the development of activity theory.

Briefly, activity theory is composed of three dimensions - those related to (1) context, (2) the intention and the circumstances of the activity, that is, its motive or purpose and (3) the goal or the object towards which an activity is directed. Thus, according to activity theory, an activity requires a motive, for without a motive there is no activity. Likewise, an activity without a goal lacks sense. Both motive and goal establish the objective and the effort an individual will invest in performing the activity. The realization of an activity is accomplished through specific circumstances and conditions, physical or mental, at the level of operations. Thus, "motives refer to why something is done; goals refer to the object of what is done, and operations refer to how something is done" (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 21).

Applying this theoretical framework to the classroom, the L2 learning process can be understood as an activity that involves participants who use tools - books and other instructional material - and signs - language - motivated by the need or desire to learn to communicate in the L2. Students' motives may imply different goals and distinct operations to achieve these goals.

Participants

The fictitious names of the two students who volunteered to participate in the study here presented are Ana Esther and Paula. They were half way into their course of studies, taking English IV.

Ana Esther, the younger was 21 years old. She was lively and energetic. She had no problems talking about herself, providing detailed descriptions of personal and scholastic experiences. Always willing to clarify interpretations, she often invited me to ask her more questions. She was passionate and enthusiastic about being a university student.

Paula was 22 years old. She was soft spoken, revealing a quietness about herself, her perceptions and reactions. She was cooperative, providing detailed descriptions of her experiences, yet frequently having problems to elaborate on specific questions about those experiences. She defined herself as being reserved, silent and preferring to keep to herself.

Research Instruments and Procedures

Document collection included: (1) videotapes of learners involved in classroom activities, which had a double function: they served as a guideline for the content of the interviews and functioned as a tool to promote reflection; (2) written field notes; (3) individual audio recorded interviews in Portuguese with research participants, who answered the following questions:

- a. What do you think was the objective of that activity?
- b. How did you do in it?
- c. What affected you either positively or negatively?
- d. What other things do you remember about this activity?

Methodology for Data Analysis

Learners' interviews were transcribed and divided into meaningful segments that generated the coding scheme. This was done following Donato and McCormick (1995). The categorization of CE led to seven categories, each divided into subcategories. The first three - *Cognitive Experiences*, *Social Experiences* and *Affective Experiences* - refer to those experiences that originate in the classroom. The other

four categories - *Personal Background, Setting, Beliefs and Goals* - represent issues or experiences which affect learners; i.e., they do not originate in the classroom, but influence learners' perceptions or explain behavior related to their CE's. Each of these was divided into subcategories that represent the specific issues learners referred to (See Appendix A for a full version of the coding scheme). Segments per category and subcategory were counted and later transformed into percentages.

Findings

Findings will be presented in the following order: first, the results that bring an insight into the nature of classroom L2 learning; second, results, focusing on the individual nature of Ana Esther and Paula's CEs with excerpts from their accounts. Next, the results will be analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. Finally, in the conclusion, sociocultural theory will be used to support the integration of the findings into the dual view of the nature of classroom language learning that will be presented.

Nature of L2 Classroom Learning

The comparison of the two learners' reports leads to the identification of similarities and differences in the learners' accounts of their CE. Similar experiences pointed towards shared experiences among learners, confirming the social nature of classroom L2 learning, whereas different experiences indicated the personal dimension of the learning process as well. Those experiences shared by learners were called *Collective Experiences* (Miccoli, 2000). Those that were specific to learners were called *Individual Experiences*. These can be conceived as either *Direct* experiences, i.e., classroom-originated experiences related to cognitive, social or affective issues, or *Indirect* experiences, i.e. experiences originated outside the classroom related to personal

background, setting, beliefs or goals. The figure below graphically represents the different types of CE identified.

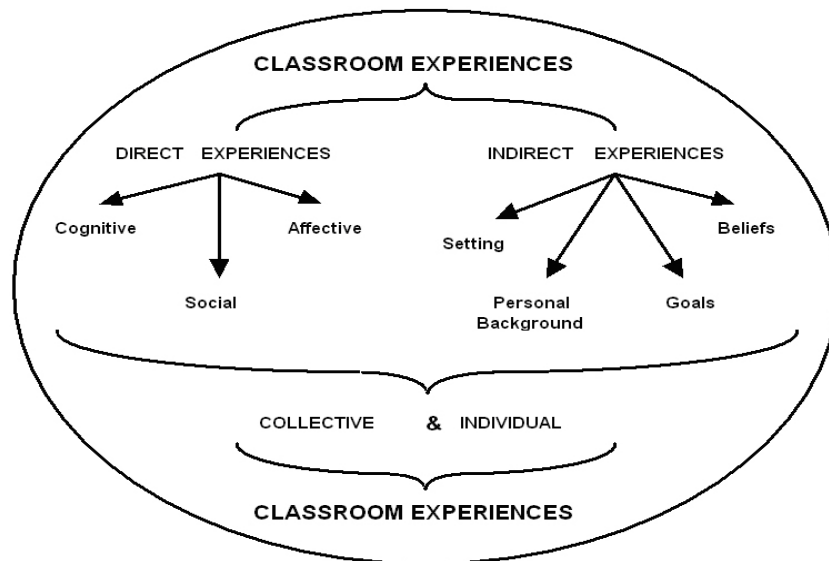


Figure 2: A Framework for Various Types of Classroom Experiences

The figure above indicates that CEs are categorized not only as direct or indirect, but also as collective and individual. Regardless of the broad categorization, CEs refer to cognitive, social and affective issues as well as issues related to the setting and learners' personal background, beliefs and goals.

Learners' accounts of these CEs bring out the complexity of the learning process. However, it is the social nature of classroom language learning that emerges with the identification of collective and individual experiences. The collective experiences are evidence of shared patterns of behavior that confirm the classroom as a culture. However, each learner has a singular experience that also reinforces the individual nature of the learning process. In the following section, Ana Esther's

and Paula's reports illustrate the findings that point to the individual nature of the learning process.

Individual Experiences

As already mentioned, this paper focuses on the individual experiences of two of six undergraduate students who participated in a larger study which investigated classroom language learning from learners' point of view. Data analysis indicated that differences among research participants ultimately affect their perception of the learning process. The description of Ana Esther and Paula's individual experiences summarizes their personal and learning histories as well as their trajectory through English IV. They are complemented with excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate the relationship between personal histories and learning experiences.

Ana Esther's Experience

Ana came from a middle class background. Her father, a retired business administrator, worked as a saxophone and piano player. Her mother, a homemaker, did not finish school because "she came from a small country town".

English was part of Ana Esther's life since she was a little girl. Her father, who had frequent contact with Americans, studied English and, being a musician, played foreign songs. Therefore, she always liked English. As a teenager, Ana Esther had German friends who spoke English to her. Her family hosted two American exchange students and an ex-boyfriend had lived in New York for three years. These different episodes in Ana Esther's life may explain her dreams: to travel abroad to study, to improve her English and to be on her own - "even if only for a short time".

Ana Esther's formal contact with English started when she was 7 years old in first grade. She studied in a private school that taught

students English from an early age. When she went into secondary school, she chose a professional high school that gave her a primary teaching credential. Ana Esther recalled that throughout primary and secondary school English was taught the “traditional” way - books, readings, translations, writing and “no song or speaking”.

After getting her teaching degree, she decided to take Letras¹. Ana was the only informant who took the Vestibular² because she wanted to become an English teacher. She also intended to graduate in Spanish.

The communicative approach to teaching English she found at FALE³ surprised her. Since all English classes were taught in English she took private classes with a native speaker. Moreover, she also took classes at a language institute. At the time of our interviews Ana Esther was complementing her studies by studying with a friend who taught at a language institute. As a learner, she described herself as an interested student who took learning seriously.

Ana Esther was the most enthusiastic research participant, expanding the most on the issues discussed during our interviews. Her trajectory through English IV was not marked by any serious event. She always saw a learning opportunity in the class tasks structured by the professor. If she did not understand, she would call the teacher for further explanation. In addition, many times, when she did not believe tasks offered what she wanted, she attempted to make them more interesting by complementing them with humor or making them more challenging. This was a learning strategy she used quite frequently. The excerpts below illustrate this strategy:

Ana Est.: I’d really like to be able to talk more in class. When I learned the present perfect, that now I know how to use and that it is more used than other tenses, I feel like using it. So, I really feel like talking but the time is too short for that. I’d really like to have more opportunity to talk and to develop myself. (Int. 2)⁴

Researcher: And what did you do in this case? You said the book was restricted and it didn't get to the point you wanted...

Ana Est.: We used creativity. In certain parts we had to use Portuguese because the vocabulary we wanted was not in the book. Then, we looked the words up in the dictionary and we tried to include our ideas, right? (Int. 2)

Ana Esther's enthusiasm and commitment to make the most of her learning process are apparent throughout the interviews.

Like some of the other informants, she started to have problems at mid-term because of the teacher's fast pace to cover the curriculum before the end of the term. She felt her motivation decrease and her frustrations increase, as she could not keep up with the pace. However, she reacted differently than the others. After feeling helpless for some time, Ana Esther decided to react by leaving her feelings of frustration and anxiety aside for a while. She consciously decided she had to participate actively in classes again to take the most out of the course, as the excerpt below illustrates:

Ana Est.: I have been very unattentive lately, not really interested [because of all that has been happening] and angry, but I found this topic interesting and told myself: "you should participate, you should say something, talk..."

Laura: Why do you think you had this attitude of telling yourself to do something when things are not going well?

Ana Est.: Because I managed to separate this thing of us being upset, well not completely, but some. I put it aside for a while. I told myself: "you should dedicate yourself to reason things out, forget this emotional thing" (Int. 7)

Ana Esther demonstrated a greater concern with foreign language issues than other participants. She worried about not getting the fluency she would like to have, expressing concern over the possibility of having to teach in the opportunities in the foreign language environment.

Ana Est.: So, I believe there's an financial difference which plays a role, specially in the learning of English. Some times I find English an elitist language. I see that those who have a better economic status have already lived abroad and they are very fluent... So, I wonder if those who can't afford a trip abroad are going to make it... or are they gonna graduate and end up teaching in distant public schools? What's going to happen to me? Will I get a job? Will I graduate speaking fluently and well? These things worry me... (Int. 4)

Complementing her worries with the reality of learning and teaching English in Brazil, Ana Esther shows awareness of the demands of her own learning process in the context she is in.

Ana Est.: But, this is how I see it: you have to strive... I know I'm putting effort in everything I do. At home, every day. Sometimes, I start to speak English alone, by myself. I read in English at home. I study. I see it as a process that is not restricted to the classroom, but outside as well. I see that I have to work on my own. Because in class everything goes so fast. And we can't talk and practice, right? So, this is what I see, I have to strive to speak, to develop, to go forward. (Int. 6)

Ana Esther knows what she needs to achieve her goals. Being the only research participant who entered the university to become a teacher, she has a motive or a purpose that differentiates her experience from the others. She already knows what she wants as seen here:

Ana Est.: So, when I notice people referring to cultural issues, I pay lots of attention, I want to know more about that because you may find yourself in a classroom one day and a student may ask you: "do they do this? What do they do?" So, I feel this eagerness to learn and discuss these things more. (Int. 4)

Ana Esther's understanding of her context and learning needs are matched to the strategies or, in sociocultural terms, operations for achieving her objectives and goal. Ana Esther's skills as a learner are also noticeable in her use of social and affective strategies. Since she knew classmates might criticize her if she volunteered too much, she encouraged those around her to volunteer. To avoid feeling discouraged by the lack of motivation in others, she encouraged classmates to work.

Ana Est.: So, sometimes I feel frustrated because I can't talk, I can't show people that I know, understand? I can't say - "I know this"... What I've been trying to do is to encourage those who are not answering to talk. Another day, in our group, I told C "You're going to say that", "You say this" and she didn't want to. So I told her: "No, you have to talk to learn". So, this is what I've been trying to do - to those that are near me. (Int. 4)

Towards the end of term, when she felt the teacher was going too fast, she was depressed and anxious for a week. However, she was able to recover by recognizing that she would lose more if she continued to feel depressed. Therefore, despite the social, affective and cognitive demands, and the indirect experiences, which affect her the most, Ana Esther, finished English IV with a sense of accomplishment.

Ana Esther's success with English can be explained by her clear identification of a motive for language learning. In her words, "English is my passion". Here she describes herself as a student who takes learning seriously:

Ana Esther: "I force myself to study. I write sentences, forcing myself to learn them. I pay attention in class, ask questions if I have doubts. I try to do everything the teacher requests. Once I even memorized a long list of verbs in the present, past and participle forms because I've always wanted to do well in English". (Int. 1)

Moreover, as a student at FALE, she learned that if she wanted to develop the fluency she wishes for herself, she would have to do her part. In her words,

"If you want something, you have to search for it. You may even learn a lot in the university, but you will not learn everything. If you want to be a good English teacher, I have to invest in myself". (Int.1)

A clear motive and operations translated into hard work explain Ana Esther's success. Her experience reflects that being clear about why she is in the university and her interpretation of what happens in class have a significant influence on the way she goes about her learning process, getting her closer to her goal - becoming an English teacher.

Paula's Experience

Paula came from a lower middle class background. She always had an interest in English, but financial conditions prevented her from studying English early in her life. She did not speak any other language and never had contact with other languages.

Her parents had different attitudes towards the importance of education. On the one hand, Paula's mother was supportive of her daughter's choice of entering the university. Her father, on the other hand, did not believe in the value of education. He would rather see Paula working. Paula did not work when our interviews started, but halfway into the semester she took a part time job.

Paula was 15 when she entered a technical high school. She went there to complete a technical degree in sanitation. At the age of 17 she completed her apprenticeship, but never took a job in that area.

Her memories of learning English start at 15. In her second year of high school, Paula transferred to another public technical high school. She considered the kind of English teaching she received there better because,

“the book they used was very demanding, it demanded more... basically, it was the study of grammar structures, exercises and tests; no conversation. There it was only writing.” (Int.1)

Entering the university as a Letras student came from the realization that she “needed to learn English well”. However, Letras was not her first choice for the Vestibular. She wanted to take journalism, but she did not pass.

As a learner, Paula never had much trouble learning English until she entered the University. Comparing her previous experiences, Paula saw a significant difference – the learner has to search for learning too. In her words, “you learn by yourself”. As for herself in the classroom, she said,

“I’ve always been shy, thus when I began to study English here, I used to feel a bit out of place. Honestly, I did not know what to do. Nowadays, it’s different. I’m improving. I still feel shy, but less than before”. (Int. 1)

Paula had a singular experience of English IV when compared to the others. In her interviews she referred more to affective issues than to social ones. For all other participants reference to social issues were more frequent than affective issues (Miccoli 2000). In addition, she was the only research participant who ended the term feeling she had

learned almost nothing. In the paragraphs below, Paula's experience is described with excerpts which illustrate her behaviors, perceptions and interpretations.

Paula had a good perception of objectives and reported having learned from class tasks. However, despite identifying objectives well, Paula criticized most class tasks. Some times she pointed out the task was a review that did not add anything; at other moments, she found the materials⁵ not challenging enough. Paula repeatedly used the word 'tiring' to evaluate class activities, but also stated that when the task involved grammar, she paid more attention. The excerpts below illustrate Paula's perceptions of different class tasks.

"When it's a grammar exercise, I click in, understand? I pay a bit more attention. But, when it's a task I'm not too interested in... grammar, I really like, I did that in a second". (Int.2)
(About role-plays) "I believe they are a bit tiring. Not totally since I do believe it's a valid task. When I say tiring I mean that sometimes I hesitate talking, right? Role-plays that you have to come up with the dialogue, I find those nice, because they make you reason. But, when you have a ready-made dialogue and you have to complete it, it doesn't appeal as much, you don't get interested in that".(Int.2)

As the third sentence in the first excerpt indicates, Paula leaves it unfinished when she mentions uninteresting tasks. In this case, her usual behavior is to pay peripheral attention; i.e., she knows what is going on, but not in detail. In addition, she refers not to participate as much as she could.

"I may even the know the answer; have everything clear in my mind but, I say to myself, 'oh, I'm not going to answer".(Int.3)

In sum, Paula's experience of the cognitive domain was conflicting. On the one hand, she followed class tasks, paid more attention when tasks interested her, and she did not have major difficulties. On the other hand, she seemed not to profit much from class tasks, given the criticism often included in her statements and the partial attention she reported during tasks.

Paula's affective experiences also reveal clear differences when compared to her peers. She reported many more negative feelings and much less motivation, interest and effort. Her negative emotions range from finding class tasks tiring, to fear of public failure, nervousness, inhibition, frustration and feelings of isolation.

"I don't know what happens but when I have to go up front, the first that happens is that I start shaking. I told myself, I'm not going to present. But, the teacher forced me and I had to go. Up there I lost my breath; she asked me to speak up and I just couldn't. My voice seemed to get caught in my throat... I don't know, I just speak louder... It's not easy for me to speak in public... I find it really difficult..." (Int.3) "I believe I was... I don't know... very nervous. That's how I feel when I take tests like that, in a hurry. I didn't do well. I ended up not reviewing anything". (Int.4) "I don't answer and I believe inhibition is the problem. People feel inhibited to talk... being the first. Start up the conversation. At least, I believe this is what happens to me. I don't answer... For the uninhibited, speaking is not a problem, but those who are inhibited, they just can't do it". (Int.3)

All research participants reported negative feelings similar to these. However, for Paula they were not only more frequent, but also did not change over the term. In our second interview, Paula's first comment was that she had not paid too much attention because she did not feel integrated⁶. At the end of the term, she still reported feeling isolated.

"I continue feeling a certain isolation because... Not just an individual isolation, but an isolation from the group. I believe the type of tasks we do, for example, pair work, you end up not getting integrated with the rest of the class. I talk about this isolation which I feel due to the activities, due to what happens during the class. Understand? So, the isolation continues. (Int. 8)

Nor did Paula's frequent reports of feeling tired, discouraged, and lacking energy improve over the course of the term.

Researcher: What was causing this unwillingness to participate?

Paula: ((laughs)) I believe I was tired. I was very sleepy. I was on the verge of leaving, so tired I was. I had stayed up working on a literature paper. It was to be done in groups and I went to sleep worried about that. I woke up very early. So, I was very tired. (Int. 2)

Paula: I even wrote in my diary that I found the activity quite tiring. So, I didn't get much of it. But, I also wrote that when the reviews are not motivating, this also contributes... I wrote down I was not very encourage to do it, finding it tiring to do stuff from the book. Sometimes, the book helps you, but other times it doesn't. This habit of constantly looking into the book... you feel tied up. So, I didn't get much form this pair work. (Int. 2)

Paula: (in response to a question of why she believes she feels this way) Yes, I've been reflecting about everything. But, you know, sometimes I feel so discouraged, I don't feel like coming to class. I feel like staying home, not doing anything. Then, there are days I feel better. I don't know why. Maybe because

we're getting to the end of the term and papers and start to pile up; you end up getting tired... You feel tired and you want to take a rest. But, I believe there are days we feel like ((incomprehensible)). (Int. 6)

I even wrote down this observation. In this class I wasn't feeling too integrated, She (the teacher) even asked us to do this assignment and I wasn't tuned in. I wrote down that it was because I felt tired. I hadn't slept well and I wasn't tuned into the class. I was kind of distant, my mind was quite distant. (Int. 3)

Only once did Paula come to an interview and report having enjoyed the class unreservedly because of a pairwork activity where she worked with a classmate who gave her a push, i.e. asked her questions about the things she said, making her elaborate on her answers. However, her behavioral pattern was to complain. Regardless of my attempts to make her reflect on her typical dissatisfaction, Paula did not find an explanation that went beyond feeling tired through unstimulating tasks. Nor did she feel this was something she had to work on.

In the social domain, Paula stood out as the research participant who made no reference to friction in interpersonal relationships. In the second interview, she did report feeling isolated, but Paula was not new to this class, a possible explanation for her isolation. On the contrary, she had been accompanying the same group since English I. She systematically sat and worked with the same classmates, making them her circle of friends. She might exchange a few words with them, but not much more than that. Paula's avoidance of contact with other classmates is another singular social strategy she used. The following excerpts illustrate how Paula fully understood her isolation and the strategy she had developed to make sure the classmates in her circle stayed together:

“I was alone so the teacher asked me to move to another place and sit with those girls. I did not get to discuss with them because they had already finished the whole paragraph. So, I worked by myself. I just wrote. I did not discuss. Then V., who was by my side, asked me what I thought [about the task], but it didn’t go beyond that. I did everything by myself, writing and putting the paragraph together”. (Int. 2)
(About registering) “We always do that. Because if [we] don’t plan to come to registration on the same day, [we] may find ourselves in a class where we don’t know anybody. Then, you have to start all over again, right? New friendships... and that’s difficult. ... You have to find a way to keep the [circle of friends] you have because the institution does not care about that”. (Int. 7)

The reason for her distance from classmates outside her circle seemed to be that making new friends would not have provided the secure sense of continuity Paula seemed to need.

Paula’s report on institutional factors that affected her learning process was more noteworthy than that of the other participants. She found that course registration⁷, as it is done at the University, limited students’ possibilities to establish more solid friendships. She also commented that the number of classes per term was not enough to cover the curriculum. Finally, Paula reported on the influence that the end-of-the-term period and the attendance requirement had on her, as the excerpt below illustrates:

“Lately, I’ve felt this pressure to do things fast and to hand them in. That’s so difficult... These weeks I’ve been coming to class because I have to... (Int.8)

Some of the lack of motivation that affected Paula may be explained by her very frequent references to previous learning experiences. As

the excerpts below illustrate, Paula remembered seeing much of the material previously:

“By the way, this was an exercise I had previously done. Because last semester we had worked on this. I had even copied those pages because I wanted to practice more. I had asked for the book and copied the exercises on the present perfect . So, I had no difficulties”. (Int.5)

“I started to remember English III. We saw that a lot last semester”. (Int. 6)

“Look, to be very honest, I did not notice the difference. But, I remember what the difference is because this book, I don’t know if you’ve already noticed, but it reviews a lot of the things we saw in English III. So, I did not notice, but I know the difference because we saw a lot of that last semester”. (Int. 2)

It seemed clear that, despite her understanding of her own behavior in different aspects of the learning process, Paula gave more emphasis to its structural component. In the following excerpt when asked to describe learning, she focused on the grammar again.

“Oh, I believe learning is when you think. You stop, think, and reflect. And you say to yourself; ‘it’s this, this and this’. At least when I learn grammar or something new, I test myself mentally. Then, I believe it’s clear for me. I believe you’ve learned something when you can transmit it in your own words”. (Int. 2)

Paula ends up missing much from this perspective of learning. By focusing only on the structural component, she did not capture the communicative function of the language she was learning. Her final frustration with English IV may be explained by this belief of language learning as solely a matter of learning grammar.

Paula also seemed to believe learner responsibility involved doing assignments and coming to class, as these were the behavior she reported. However, there were other areas that demanded her attention and despite knowing that she alone was responsible for improving in these areas, they remained as intentions for future action.

(About working in pairs) I restrain myself a bit. I have to loosen up and these pair work activities, I believe they help to loosen up, but I restrain myself (Int. 3)

(About participation) No. Sometimes. I think about something to say, but I don't say it. Sometimes, I feel I have to be pushed ((laughs)) to do it... But, I can't. (Int. 3)

(About implementing action) I believe what's missing is getting rid of this inhibition. But, I know it's my problem. It has nothing to do with the teacher. I myself have to find a way to give myself a push... It has to come from me. (Int. 3)

(About lack of participation) I believe what's missing is a personal attitude. ... I know I have to get better. But, I know that's exactly because I haven't been able to say 'forget about it and just do it' that I haven't done anything. But, I will ((laughs))". (Int. 9)

Paula realized she should overcome her inhibition and find a more participatory place in the classroom. She knows this required her to confront her fears. She said she would, but this did not happen before the end of the term.

Paula attempted to pass the university entrance exam for journalism, but failed. She entered the Letras course knowing she would have difficulties; her experiences confirm the difficulties she expected. Her experience in English IV is conflicting throughout the whole term. Her interpretation of classroom events and her approach to dealing

with them show the relationship between her perceptions and her previous experiences.

Paula ended up passing to English V as she had predicted. She approached English IV the way she was used to learning. However, at her stage in the learning process, she needed to do more. As she put it, she needed a push. It seemed that Paula had expected the push to come from her teacher, but realized it had to come from her. Taking responsibility for the areas she had problems with was her greatest challenge. It may be that her most important learning from English IV was to realize that she would have to push herself in English V if she was to make it a better experience. She ended the term unhappy about what she was taking from English IV, and provided the best summary of her own experience with these comments:

“I’ve learned some, but not what I expected I was going to learn. Understand? I expected more. I believe it was not enough I mean...most of the structures we saw, we had already seen. So, the term was mostly a review... At least, that’s how I see English IV, as a review. With just a few new structures which came in the end. So, because of this review it does not add too much, right? It doesn’t add too your knowledge or to your learning. But, I believe that, being something we had already seen, we should have developed more. I don’t know, in these same structures, find ourselves better. I don’t see myself achieving that. I believe it was the same thing. I feel as if I were half way through English III. This is what I see... It didn’t add much. I believe I’m in the same level I was when I started. The same... ” (Int. 9)

Discussion

My interest in the classroom is aimed at making sense of what learners’ perceptions are of the experiences created by the lesson’s

learning opportunities and what these perceptions reveal of the learning process in the classroom. Moreover, I am particularly interested in how these perceptions are related to learners' histories and motives, as well as how these influence the learners' learning process.

In this discussion I review what I learned from the CE as recounted by Ana Esther and Paula. Thus, I will focus first on *perception of experiences, learning process, learning opportunities*, and second on *participants' histories and motives and learning process*.

Experiences and Classroom learning

From the participants' accounts, the language classroom is a place where more than just instruction takes place (Miccoli, 1997, 2000). Although the teaching and learning of an L2 is the main objective of those who meet there, their accounts of the process go beyond this main objective. The research participants' accounts unveiled a detailed view of classroom learning experiences.

From a sociocultural perspective, a classroom is a social environment where learning is constructed (Donato, 1994). Participants' accounts revealed that learning was constructed through interpersonal interactions amongst themselves, individually, with the teacher, mediated by class tasks, as well as by interactions with the subject matter, mediated by language. Through language Ana Esther and Paula organized and reorganized their CE. For example, when Ana Esther was frustrated around mid-term when the faster pace in class overwhelmed her, she spent sometime feeling helpless, but decided to react. This decision came as a consequence of reflecting about her experiences. This, a socially construed internalization, had implications in cognitive, social and affective domains of the learning process; i.e., she decided to leave her feelings aside for a while and carry on with her studies, engaging herself again in the interactions during lessons. Thus, reflecting on CE enabled Ana Esther to perceive and interact with her own internalized experiences and make meaning of them. In

this sense, reflecting about their experiences and talking about them, participants interpreted and understood their behaviors, feelings, and conceptions about classroom events. Thus, reflection not only mediated the internalization of her experiences and, ultimately, led her to promote change, but also served a meta-function; i.e., it enabled this participant to deal with the cognitive, social and affective aspects of the learning process. In Ana Esther's accounts, she mentioned that if activities did not offer what she expected, she would attempt to make them more challenging. This illustrates how she as a learner transcends, transforms her learning experiences, and through specific operations gets closer to her objective -making the tasks more challenging.

Opportunities, Participants' Histories, Motives and Learning Process

From analyzing participants' accounts of their CE, a discernible relationship between learning opportunities, participants' histories, motives and learning process can be established. The participants' construction of the learning process was affected by how they interpreted the learning opportunities available to them, this being indirectly influenced by their histories and motives.

Learning opportunities come in the form of classroom tasks. As Ana Esther and Paula interacted with others and with the tasks they were presented with, they perceived the objectives of them. These objectives were related to the interpretations they made of the tasks themselves. These interpretations, in turn, are related to participants' histories and motives. Histories comprise personal background, beliefs, goals, and their perception of the setting where the classroom context is found. Motives refer to what participants considered the purpose of an activity to be. The learning they eventually reported was also related to the relationship between learning opportunities, histories, and motives.

The experience of Ana Esther illustrates that relationship. Becoming a teacher is a motive that was clear for Ana Esther from

before she entered the university, unlike the other participants who took the Vestibular because it was easier to pass it for Letras than for other courses. For her the motive for being in the university was not only to learn a language, but also to develop a fluency that would make her a proficient English teacher. The fluency and the professional orientation she had motivated her to get the most out of the tasks she engaged in during classes. Unlike Paula, for example, Ana Esther found other motives along the way - she was taking Spanish in addition to English. This indicates her determination to making the most of being in the Letras course.

However, for Paula issues related to her personal history and context may explain her trajectory through English IV. Her previous experiences as a learner led her to develop a belief regarding the nature of learning that did not match the one in the context where she found herself. In addition to that, her motive for being in class seemed to be to finish the course she started. Paula's story is affected by the choice of taking the Vestibular for Letras just because it was easier - she lacked a clear motive. She seemed to be drifting in her course. She would come to class, do what she was asked to do, but she did not take an active role in the learning process. She expected a push. Paula needed a more meaningful purpose than the one she seemed to have in order to find meaning to what she did in class. The activity of being in class lacked sense for her. In addition to that observation, Paula had not found her place in the social dimension in the learning process. Her reports indicate that she saw learning as a matter of learning structures. Yet, she was in a foreign language classroom; i.e., English was only spoken inside the classroom. Since she isolated herself and voluntarily refrained from interactions, she did not realize that this other dimension of the learning process - the development of communication skills - is directly related to social interactions. As a consequence, although her reflections led her to internalize the need to change her behavior in class, she never actually implemented changes that would reflect her attempt to transform her beliefs and behavior. Socioculturally, she established an

objective - overcoming her inhibitions and interacting more in class and, according to the theory, she would need to decide on an appropriate course of action, an operation towards that objective. However, this is something Paula never did, at least not by the end of English IV.

Conclusion

The identification of collective experiences (Miccoli, 2000) and the individual experiences here presented reveal the dual nature of the learning process as a socially constructed event. The data analysis reveals that when learners recount their language learning process, collective and individual experiences emerge (Miccoli 1997). In this paper the individual experiences of Ana Esther and Paula were presented and analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. Through this analysis the application of activity theory revealed the importance of a clear motive in the process of being in a classroom to learn a language, since it is this motive that seems to be essential in defining the necessary operations to achieve the goals of the activity, in this case, becoming a teacher. Ana Esther's and Paula's experiences support that conclusion. Furthermore, for these learners the data indicate that their individual experiences influence their collective experiences.

Ana Esther's individual experience confirms the importance of a motive in activity. She presents herself as a learner who knows what she wants and who transformed the classroom experiences that did not meet her expectations by making them meet her objectives. She reported doing that when she made class tasks more interesting, when she motivated her classmates to communicate more since this would mean more interactions in class and more opportunities for her to express herself in English with her classmates, and when she decided to put her feelings aside because her frustration was interfering with her development. Since she knows what she wants, she can always redirect the course of events in order to continue with activities that get her closer to her goal.

Paula's individual experiences are different from Ana Esther's. The lack of a clear motive explains Paula's behavior. Although she is present in class, doing what she is asked to do, it is as if what she does in the classroom lacks sense. She is constantly tired through class tasks. Only once throughout the interviews she reported she had enjoyed the class. These experiences reveal that though she did her part, she was really not in charge of her learning process. Moreover, Paula's beliefs about language learning are historically explained. Her conception of learning a language as learning grammar is being revised. It is through reflection that Paula internalizes the need to implement change in her behavior. She realized that she has to move from her isolation to a more cooperative role in the language class. However, since others have always directed her behavior in class, she waits for a push. She realized at some point that this had to come from her own initiative, but that does not take place up until the end of English VI. She ends the term with a feeling of not having learned much, except for a few new grammar topics seen at the end of the semester.

The analysis of the individual experiences of these two learners allows us to understand the complexity of learning a language in a classroom and how these experiences affect learners' learning process. It also points to the benefits of the application of sociocultural theory to the understanding of classroom data. For example, we can understand different experiences as much more than as a result of individual differences such as personality or motivation. Sociocultural theory allows for an understanding of the importance of a motive in language learning that, if captured by learners, can contribute towards a more active role in the learning process. For Ana Esther the active role was translated into actions that led her to keep her goal in perspective regardless of the problems she faced. For Paula, however, this active role was nothing more than an awareness leading to intention for change rather than a course of action.

The implication of this study is that it is extremely important to understand learning motives. Learners like Ana Esther, who have a

clear motive, seem to be able to better deal with the challenges of the learning process. Those like Paula, who do not have a clear motive or a clear goal, may not be as efficient in dealing with setbacks. Thus, more studies investigating learners' individual experiences should allow for the confirmation of the role that motives and goals play in the learning of EFL in the classroom and for the broadening of our theory of classroom language learning.

Appendix A

Classroom Experiences

The complete version of the coding scheme is presented below, each category and subcategory refer to the range of experiences learners reported:

- I. Cognitive Experiences**
 - C.1. Perception of Class Activities
 - C.2. Identifying Objectives, Difficulties and Doubts
 - C.3. Participation and Performance
 - C.4. Perception of Learning
 - C.5. Perception of Teaching
 - C.6. Perception of Class Related Matters
 - C.7. Learning Strategies

- II. Social Experiences**
 - S.1. Interaction and Interpersonal Relationships
 - S.2. Friction in Interpersonal Relationships
 - S.3. Perception of Self as Learner
 - S.4. Perception of Teacher Role
 - S.5. Group and Group Dynamics
 - S.6. Classroom Behavior

S.7. Social Strategies

III. Affective Experiences

- A.1. Feelings
- A.2. Motivation, Interest and Effort
- A.3. Perception of Self
- A.4. Perception of Teacher
- A.5. Affective Strategies

IV. Setting Experiences

- Se.1. Institutional Factors
- Se.2. Foreign Language Issues
- Se.3. Research Repercussions
- Se.4. Time

V. Personal Background Experiences

- P.1. Institutional Factors
- P.2. Foreign Language Issues
- P.3. Research Repercussions
- P.4. Time

VI. Beliefs

- B.1. Institutional Factors
- B.2. Foreign Language Issues
- B.3. Research Repercussions
- B.4. Time

VII. Goals

- G.1. Intentions
- G.2. Wants
- G.3. Needs
- G.4. Wishes

Notes

- 1 Letras - a general name to refer to courses leading to teaching or bachelor degrees in modern languages.
- 2 Vestibular – the name given to university entrance exams.
- 3 The acronym used to refer to the Faculdade de Letras.
- 4 (Int. 2) refers to interview number 2.
- 5 Class materials included a textbook and audiotapes.
- 6 Paula participates in activities, but she does not feel she is part of the class. This is what she means when she says she does not feel integrated.
- 7 Students register by selecting courses from those offered. Thus, they do not have to follow the same course of studies; their choices define the curriculum, not the institution.

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