HOW DO WE KNOW WHETHER THERE HAS BEEN PROGRESS IN TEACHER AUTONOMY?[1]

(Como sabemos se houve progresso na autonomia do professor?)

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ABSTRACT: *This paper presents a case study to illustrate how activity theory (Leontiev 1978; Engeström 1987, 1999) and the expansive learning framework (Engeström 1987, 1999) were used to evaluate the development of teacher autonomy in an online course on preparing EFL classroom materials. It is assumed that the learning by expansion model is similar to conscientização (Freire 1980, 1982), a key element in the development of teacher autonomy, according to the perspective in the study.*

KEY-WORDS: *teacher autonomy; conscientização; activity theory; learning by expansion.*

RESUMO: *Este trabalho tem como objetivo apresentar um estudo de caso que ilustra como a teoria da atividade (Leontiev 1978; Engeström 1987, 1999) e o modelo de aprendizagem por expansão (Engeström 1987, 1999) foram usados para avaliar o desenvolvimento da autonomia de professores alunos em um curso on-line voltado para a preparação de materiais didáticos visando ao ensino-aprendizagem da língua inglesa. Parte-se do princípio de que o processo de aprendizagem por expansão assemelha-se à conscientização (Freire 1980, 1982), elemento considerado fundamental no processo de desenvolvimento da autonomia, conforme a perspectiva adotada no estudo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *autonomia do professor; conscientização; teoria da atividade; aprendizagem por expansão.*

1. Introduction

The issue of autonomy in language learning was first discussed in the 1970s and has been on the agenda of language teachers and researchers since then. Nowadays it is largely agreed that learner autonomy is an

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essential requirement for successful language learning. The concept of teacher autonomy, on the other hand, started receiving attention only in the last ten years (see Benson and Huang, this volume), but researchers in the area agree that there is a relationship between teacher and learner autonomy. Little (2007), for instance, points out the need to create contexts where teachers experience autonomous processes of learning so that they will be better prepared to foster autonomy among their students.

Several initiatives to meet this need have been taken by teacher educators bringing about enthusiasm but, at the same time, a lot of contradictions and difficulties. This is illustrated in Auerbach's (2007) conclusion, after analyzing initiatives of this kind, described in the volume she collaborates in:

> *Each of the chapters challenges the notion that working toward autonomy is a linear, predictable process. Each focuses on the dialectic between ideals or visions and the realities of practice {…} In discussing their journey toward enacting a pedagogy of autonomy within their specific contexts, many of the authors focus on paradoxes and conflicts that they have faced.* (Auerbach 2007: 84)

Considering that the concept of teacher autonomy is rather abstract and that the process the participants undergo in teacher development programs seems to be unpredictable, non-linear and replete with inconsistencies, it becomes very difficult to evaluate our efforts to foster the development of teacher autonomy. Therefore, two of the most interesting questions in the field have been: *How do we know whether there has been progress in teacher autonomy? What types of research tools can we rely on in order to assess the process?*

Flávia Vieira (2005) is one of the researchers who have been investigating these questions. She evaluated her experiment with teachers in a graduate program through her own journal as well as the teachers' reflective portfolios in order to understand the relationship between teachers' actions and thought, an important variable concerning the development of teacher autonomy. She observed that *the narratives constitute a unique situated process-product revealing one's self in its relationship with "the other" and with the context where both (inter)act* (:118).[2] She perceived the potential of

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[2] My translation.

those tools in the process of professional development and as relevant access to teachers' rationality:

> *I learned of their potential as professional development texts and as a form of access to teacher's rationality, a reflective multidimensional rationality replete with dilemmas which presupposes a dialectic relationship between what is thought of and what is done.* (:118).[3]

Vieira presents three examples of the relationship between theory and practice collected in her data and, according to her, each of them reveals in(consistencies) between theories and between those theories and professional discourse or practice.

In an excerpt of her diary she explains how she deals with the inconsistencies:

> *What is amazing is that I, the teacher, give more attention to those moments of ambiguity, of questioning, of going back to what was said or thought of. It is because of these 'obscure', 'halting' moments in knowledge construction that, in my view, there is more 'light': ideas are (re)constructed, opinions and attitudes become explicit, perspectives are confronted…* (Journal, 06.05.03) (Vieira (2005: 131).

It is interesting to point out that the author deals with inconsistencies that are present in her own educational proposal, one of them being the fact that teacher empowerment depends primarily on the teacher educator power. In her discussion she argues that teachers [or teacher educators] can use power on behalf of the students' [or the teacher students'] interest. Inspired by Gore (2003) and by her own experience, she states that: *Empowerment can thus be seen as a relational phenomenon, rather than some good that an 'empowered agent' can do for a 'disempowered other'* (:27)

Finally Vieira (2007) assumes that three interrelated outcomes emerged from her evaluation: (inter)personal empowerment, pedagogical innovation towards greater learner autonomy, and the democratization of the construction of knowledge within the course (:17).

Bearing in mind the development of studies in teacher autonomy, as briefly outlined above, in this paper I present a case study aimed at

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[3] My translation.

investigating the development of teacher autonomy in an online course on preparing EFL classroom materials[4]. Besides the teacher students' reflective journals, data include syllabi and lesson plans prepared by the course participants, posts from discussion forums, email communication and chat logs. Data analysis relies on activity theory (Leontiev 1978; Engeström 1987, 1999) and, based on it, gives priority to contradictions and the processes the participants went through in order to transform these contradictions. The expansive learning framework, as proposed by Engeström (1987, 1999), is used as a resource, in this data analysis, to identify evidence of development in teacher autonomy. It is expected that the paper represents a contribution in the discussion of the two questions that, in my view, have started being investigated but are still unanswered: *How do we know whether there has been progress in teacher autonomy?* and *What types of research tools can we rely on in order to assess the progress?*

A possible way of investigating the development of teacher autonomy

The concept of teacher autonomy adopted in the study draws on theoretical and practical research in the field of language learner and teacher autonomy (Dam 2000; Vieira 2005, 2007; McGrath 2000; Benson 2000; 2001; Lamb 2000; Little 2007) as well as on critical pedagogy (Freire 1980, 1982, 1996) and on reflective teacher education (Celani 2003). It refers to teacher's capacity and willingness to make conscious decisions about his or her pedagogical practice. Making conscious decisions means that he or she situates the pedagogical tasks in their immediate and wider contexts, perceives and reflects critically about the different aspects involved in their design and implementation. It also means that the teacher is aware of his or her possibilities to change the cultural, social and political context and also of the learners' possibility to do the same.

As it can be inferred from the definition above, the concept of consciousness plays a relevant role in this research context and, based on Freire (1980, 1982), it is assumed that the development of higher levels of consciousness requires a process of *conscientização*.

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[4] This is part of a more comprehensive study, presented as my doctoral thesis in Sprenger (2004).

Consciousness is understood as a process that originates in human action and, at the same time, originates such actions (Vygotsky 1991). Therefore, to understand consciousness the basic unit of analysis should be human action, which is culturally mediated through tools. And following Leontiev (1978), human action can only be understood as part of a collective system of activity. The framework that represents the structure of human activity proposed by Engeström (1987) is an important theoretical resource (Figure 1). This framework shows that the collective system of activity is motivated by an object and that, in his or her search for that object, the subject relies on cultural tools or artifacts (which include external implements and internal representations) and produces certain outcomes. The subject's actions, directed at the object mentioned above, are always embedded in a community, which has rules and a division of labor. All the subjects and elements in this structure are constantly changing and interacting; therefore, the process they are involved in is not individual nor harmonious. According to Engeström (1999), *it is a collaborative and dialogical process where different perspectives* (Holland & Reeves, 1996) *and voices* (Engeström, 1995) *meet, collide and merge* (:382). Therefore, the process is permeated with contradictions and, as the author puts it, these contradictions represent the springs that initiate transformation.
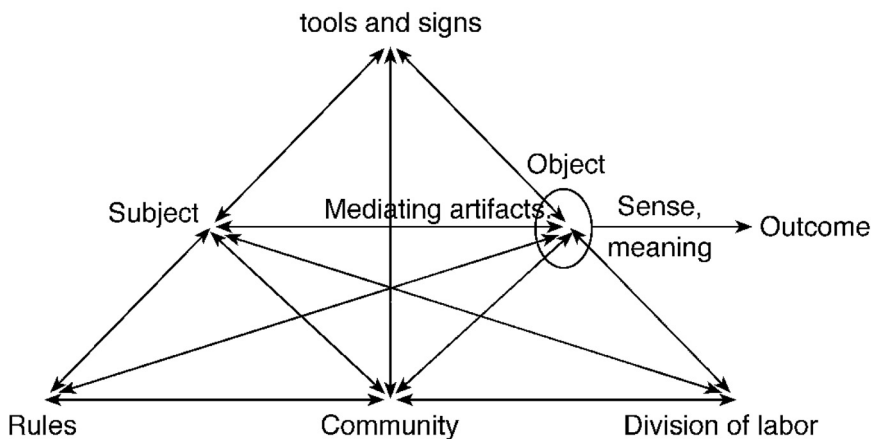

Figure 1: The Structure of a Human Activity System (Engeström 1987:78).

To be creative and to transform the cultural, social and political environment the individual must reflect on the relationships between the aim(s) of the individual actions and the object(s) of the collective system of activity (Engeström 1987). Such reflection would allow him or her to perceive contradictions and to engage in other actions aiming at transforming these contradictions.

Based on the ideas above, Engeström proposes the theory of expansive learning to explain the complex and dialectical process of *ascending from the abstract to the concrete*. Abstract, in his framework, means partial, separated from the concrete whole. It refers to a simplified view that ignores the conflicting relations among all the elements of a collective activity system. According to him, expansive learning should be understood as *construction and resolution of successively evolving tensions or contradictions in a complex system that includes the 'object' or 'objects', the mediating 'artifacts', and the perspectives of the participants* (:384).

In my view, this idea of expanding from the abstract to the concrete is very similar to the process of *conscientização* (Freire 1980, 1982), fundamental in the development of teacher autonomy, as argued above. For Freire, human beings are incomplete and conditioned by society but, through *conscientização*, they may develop higher levels of consciousness. This human nature and potential allow individuals to play a less passive role in the world and, on the other hand, hold them responsible for all their actions and consequences.

As I see it, the abstract view, in Engeström's theory, may be compared to Freire's lower levels of consciousness, where meanings that are present in society start making sense in the individual's lives. On that level, he or she carries out his or her tasks, solves individual problems and adapts to society. The concrete view, in Engeström's model, could be compared to the level of critical consciousness, in Freire's theory. On that level, the individual develops a comprehensive understanding of the world and becomes able to see beyond his individual circle of living. That way he or she can perceive and expose social and political contradictions, and that allows him or her to take action against oppression and to cause change.

Therefore, I would say the framework developed by Engeström to represent the expansive cycle of learning (Figure 2) constitutes a useful resource in the investigation of teacher education, more specifically, the

development of teacher autonomy. Being engaged in the learning actions that compose the framework would be considered as evidence of autonomous behavior.
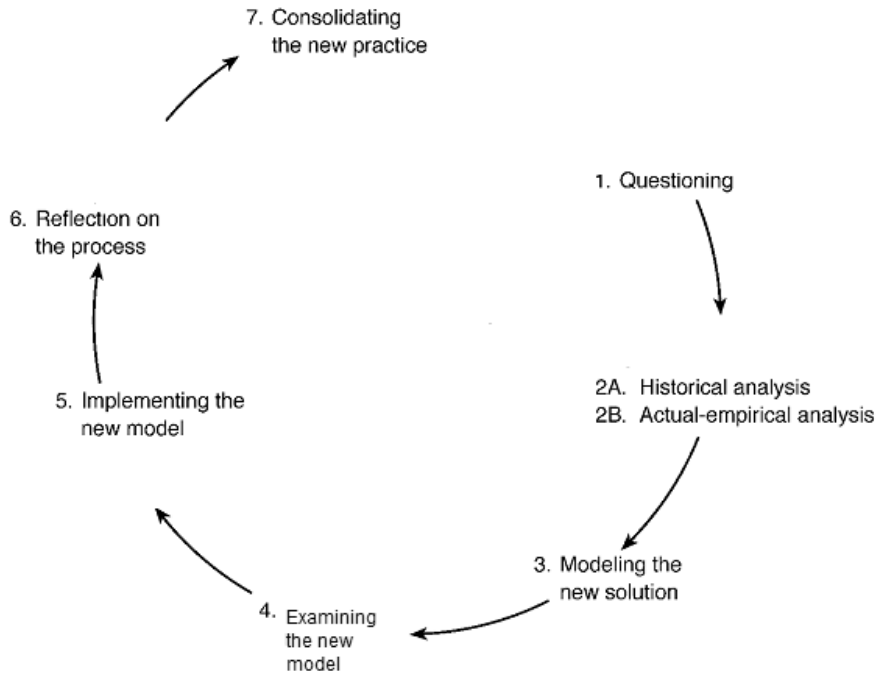

Figure 2: Sequence of Epistemic Actions in an Expansive Learning Cycle (Engeström, 1999:384).

As it can be observed in Figure 2, the expansive learning cycle is made up of seven basic actions. *Questioning*, the first action, takes place when the learner perceives contradictions and questions, criticizes or rejects some aspects of the accepted practice and wisdom. *Analyzing* takes place when he or she raises questions and investigates in order to find causes or explanatory principles. *Modeling* refers to the action through which the learner constructs an explicit model of the idea that explains and offers a solution to the problematic situation. *Examining the model* means trying out the model in order to understand its dynamics, potential and limitations.

Implementing the model refers to practical applications, enrichments and conceptual extensions. The actions that follow are *Reflecting on the process* and *Consolidating its outcomes*.

In the sections below I illustrate how the theoretical tools from activity theory (Leontiev 1978; Engeström 1987, 1999) and Engeström's expansive learning framework (Engeström 1987, 1999) were used to analyze data collected in an online teacher development program.

2. Developing autonomy for materials preparation

The online course

Developing autonomy for materials preparation, an on-line teacher development course, is the collective system of activity analyzed in this study. It originated from the expectations of a group of state school teachers of English who wanted to acquire new ideas and materials for classroom activities. As it can be observed from its title, this course did not aim to meet these expectations as they had originally been formulated but to help those teachers become more autonomous in order to develop their own ideas and materials. It also intended to help the participants perceive the importance of fostering the development of learner autonomy. This online course established relevant relationships with the participants' activities in their school environments, but since it was a distance course, teachers' actions in those contexts were only observed through their narratives.

In the framework proposed by Engeström, classroom materials constitute the object of the activity. The teachers' new or revised representations concerning the different aspects related to classroom materials may be considered as objects of the activity, too, but they represent artifacts as well since they situate and give shape to those materials. All the digital tools used in the online course such as the discussion forum, the chat room and the email also function as tools or artifacts of the activity system.

According to the socio-constructivist approach to learning (Jonassen et alii 1993; Spiro et alii, 1995; Wilson 1997), knowledge is constructed through interactions in a social context. Therefore, the course was meant

to encourage the creation of a collaborative teacher community where the participants could interact, exercise and develop their autonomy. [5]The rules and the division of work should be coherent with these ideas and they were made explicit through the tasks that were proposed in the different units. Participants were invited to reflect on their practice, share their experiences, give suggestions and opinions, raise questions, collaborate with each other while designing or assessing materials, evaluate the online course they were enrolled in and evaluate its participants, including themselves. They were also expected to write an online reflective journal which was different from traditional journals since it was available for everyone to read[6].

The community

The community involved directly in the system of activity analyzed in this study is made up of a group of nine teacher students, an assistant teacher, some invited teachers, myself (the designer and teacher of the course), my supervisor and a technical advisor. In this paper the focus participant is one of the teacher students I refer to as Julia.

Julia graduated in Languages and when she joined the online course focused here she had worked in a state school for twenty months. She was a high school teacher of English and worked twenty hours a week. According to her, she used the school handouts and also prepared her own materials. At the beginning of our online course, as required, Julia sent me a syllabus she had designed for one of her classes. Besides her work in the state school, she taught in a language school for eight hours a week, and there she used the book adopted by the institution. Before enrolling in this online course, she had already taken six modules of another online teacher development

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[5] It is important to refer again to the remarks made by Vieira (2005) concerning the contradictory nature of this situation. The course was meant to foster autonomy and the participants were allowed to make decisions concerning the materials to be prepared, to give opinions and suggestions. However, in spite of those features and the fact that the syllabus was rather flexible, most decisions concerning the online course were made by the teacher and designer. In agreement with Vieira, I do believe that the teacher can use his or her power to empower as long as he or she assumes empowerment is *a relational phenomenon, rather than some good that an 'empowered agent' can do for a 'disempowered other' (:27).*

[6] As a teacher, I insisted on talking to the teacher students about the nature of this instrument so that they would make sure they wrote down only the things they wanted to share.

course aimed at improving the four skills in English and discussing relevant questions concerning the teaching-learning process.

The course that this study focuses on lasted five months and during that period, Julia posted 68 messages in the discussion forum; participated in 14 chat sessions, and sent me 19 email messages.

The data

In this paper, I present some of the most frequent conversation topics (1. language teaching and learning; 2. teacher's roles; 3. learner autonomy) identified in the online course, some contradictions related to them and the data showing how these contradictions were resolved during the five months of the course. Based on the expansive learning framework (Engeström 1987, 1999), I show developments in teacher autonomy that became evident during the process.

I include messages posted by several participants, but the focus is on Julia's interventions since she was most directly involved in the issues discussed here and she was the participant who engaged more frequently and more explicitly in learning actions. Data include forum messages, email communication, chat logs, the participants' syllabi and lesson plans as well as their reflective journals. It is important to point out that the process of identifying and transforming inconsistencies is not linear and this will be illustrated in the order the data is presented. The same contradiction may appear several times during the process and only a careful analysis will show that there has been transformation.

In the next sections I explain how contradictions were identified and resolved during the course and how the expansive learning framework (Engeström 1987, 1999) was used to identify developments in teacher autonomy.

3. Identifying contradictions

In one of the first chat sessions of the course, aiming at helping the participants to get to know each other and to get familiar with the online environment and resources, Julia expressed her concern about the decision

of the state department of education to adopt a system where students are promoted automatically from one grade to the next, regardless of their levels of proficiency[7]:

> *It means you can't fail students, they will succeed anyway. They know that and they don't respect you. It makes teachers "impotentes". I know that there is another point there. We shouldn't fail students, just to be bad. It is a kind of limits. In the classroom, you have not "power", no argument to keep the student attention to your class. Again, I may say they we must be motivating and I particularly don't mind if they don't want to do anything I give them. But there are students that don't respect anybody. This can be bad for our "image", because they can think "what are you doing here?" They may not realize they will need something we can teach them in the future.*
> (Code number 41038, 05/10/2001, chat, Júlia)

According to Julia's comment, we should not fail our students just to be strict with them; on the other hand, without the possibility of failing, we do not have arguments to convince students to pay attention to our classes and to respect us. What is taught in class will be helpful in the future, but students do not realize that.

These arguments reveal representations according to which learning is not associated to a feeling of enjoyment, to natural curiosity or the relevance of the contents and tasks in relation to students' lives. On the contrary, it is related to punishment and to a promise that it will be helpful in the future.

In a message posted in the discussion forum some days later, Julia confirms her point of view about teaching contents for the future. For her, students must learn grammar at school and this will allow them to use the language in authentic situations in the future:

> *{...} As soon as they understand some of the basic structures, later, alone at home, they will be able to understand or translate - as they like - a song, for instance. By saying that or giving some activities, I guess I can make them work by themselves in the future.*
> (Code number 50049, 15/10/2001, fórum, Júlia)

It is important to point out that Julia attempted to design and implement motivating activities. However, these activities originated from

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[7] The teacher students' texts were included in this paper as they were originally written, without any type of review. As it will be observed, grammar and lexical mistakes appear quite often.

pre-established grammar topics and not from the use of language in social situations that are or could be relevant to the students. This can be observed through a dialog   in a chat session that took place about a month later:

> *But then, I try to bring different kinds of exercises so that they can practice that structure in different ways, like speaking a little or listening to a song.*
> (Code number 40867, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)
> *I think you are right, Júlia. But how do you choose the grammar points you're going to teach?*
> (Code number 44510, 05/11/2001, chat, Terezinha)
> *Tere, I usually follow the syllabus and adapt the exercises.*
> (Code number 40846, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)

One of the objectives of the course was to discuss the concept of learner autonomy and how it could be fostered in the classroom. Julia's message in the discussion forum concerning that topic, also at the beginning of the course, suggested once more that her course featured grammar:

> *When we talk about our students I think that is very important to show them that they can "walk on their own feet". They must be aware that it is necessary to know who or where to look up for some specific piece of information. When I teach them a part of grammar for example, I always call my students' attention to the fact that that point is important, because they will not find it in a dictionary (as they may do with words while trying to understand a song), so they need to try to get the structure there in the school.*
> (Code number 502, 15/10/2001, forum, Júlia)

This message also expressed an inconsistency concerning learner autonomy: students should learn to walk on their own feet, but grammar should be learned at school. That prompted me to question her:

> *{…} Concerning our attitude in class, I agree with you it is very important to help our students see they can stand on their own feet!!! {…} I didn't understand very well what you said concerning grammar rules. Can't the students find basic grammar rules by themselves, in grammar books at home or in libraries?*
> (Code number 506, 24/10/2001, forum, Terezinha)

Her reply, included below, showed that teaching grammar seemed to be her most important role. If the students studied Grammar by themselves why would she be in the classroom?

> *Well, Terezinha, when I said about grammar rules I was thinking of my role in the classroom. I'm there to teach them something during the class time and I am able to give them some topics*

to "make their lives easier". While they are there they can learn how to use some structures. Otherwise why would we be there? {...}
(Code number 508, 25/10/2001, forum, Júlia)

Julia's focus on grammar and the inconsistencies concerning learner's motivation and autonomy prompted me to organize a chat discussion on Teacher's Roles. In this discussion, all participants agreed that teachers had other roles besides teaching grammar, but it was not so clear what these other roles were and how they could be enacted.

With some exceptions, the same emphasis on grammar could be noted in most of the syllabi sent to me by the teacher students at the beginning of the course and in some of the lesson plans they had prepared in the course so far. They did include as aims items such as the development of citizenship and awareness concerning cultural differences and values. Nevertheless, it was impossible to understand how they intended to meet those aims since their lists of contents consisted of items such as personal pronouns, verb to be, simple present tense of the verbs.

These observations allowed me to conclude that the psychological perspective of language (Halliday 1989) still guided most of these student teachers' decisions. They all believed that the only way to learn a language is to study language rules and to apply them in authentic situations in the future.

Going back to Engeström's expansive learning framework, we can say that the data shown above give evidence that the course participants were involved in two learning actions: questioning and analyzing.

In the next section I present how the inconsistencies related to *language teaching and learning, teacher's roles and learner autonomy* were dealt with throughout the online course, especially by Julia.

4. Transforming contradictions

Julia's message concerning grammar teaching and teacher's roles prompted Alice, the assistant teacher, to post a reply, two days later, with some questions about the meaning of grammar rules in students' lives and how we can evaluate whether they have actually learned:

{...}After reading your response to Tere, I had some questions that I began to ask myself. Maybe we can think about them together.
Do rules "make their lives easier"? OR Does "learn{ing} how to USE {and chose} some structures" {in context} "make their lives easier"?
Are students in the class to learn rules?
What is it to understand rules? How do we show that we ´understand?´
(Code number 509, 27/10/2001, forum, Alice)

Interestingly, as it can be observed below, these questions were not answered by Julia until ten days later, after we had a chat session on the same issue.

I started the chat session[8] by asking whether everybody agreed that teaching grammar was one of the teachers' roles:

Well, we said in the forum that one of our roles as English teacher's is to teach grammar rules. What do you think? Do you agree?
(Code number 44410, 05/11/2001, chat, Terezinha)

Julia agreed, but added that it was not the only thing to be taught:

Although it is not the only thing to be taught I agree that we should teach them grammar rules.
(Code number 40864, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)

Olivia also agreed, but emphasized grammar was not the priority:

No, if the teacher´s role is to teach Grammar, I can give up everything. you can teach Grammar and others things.
(Code number 41870, 05/11/2001, chat, Olívia)

When questioned about other aims of the teaching/learning process, Olívia was rather vague:

No, the objective of learning process isn´t to learn grammar but everything.
(Code number 50093, 05/11/2001, chat, Olívia)

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8 Four people participated in this chat session: the teacher assistant Alice, the teacher students Julia and Olivia and myself.

Alice also agreed with my statement, but she asked the teacher students how they taught Grammar and they talked about their practice:

> *How do we teach Grammar? I love teaching Grammar and I teach with some games, I warm-up the students first, and the class go on...*
> (Code number 41867, 05/11/2001, chat, Olívia)
> *{…} I give some structural exercises, because I think they are important... Ther repetition in learning a language is essential.*
> (Code number 40866, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)
> *But then, I try to bring different kinds of exercises so that they can practice that structure in different ways, like speaking a little or listening to a song.*
> (Code number 40867, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)

Their descriptions confirmed they created different situations in order to provide practice concerning specific grammar topics. So, I asked them why the students needed to know those grammar topics, but their answers did not refer to the students' lives:

> *I teach them because it will be necessary for them to differ, for example, the present form from the past...*
> (Code number 40860, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)
> *We teach Grammar to show the students that there is a formal way to put the words in order in a sentence, for instance. {...}*
> (Code number 42019, 05/11/2001, chat, Olívia)

So, I asked the question in another way, trying to establish a relationship with the use of the language:

> *What will students do with grammar??*
> (Code number 44396, 05/11/2001, chat, Terezinha)

Julia's reply confirmed once more that she believed the students would transfer what they learned at school to real situations where the language is used:

> *They will apply it to a situation they may face. (I'm thinking very much the way I learn and what I do when I see a text, for example)*
> (Code number 40834, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)

Her comments also motivated a discussion on the reading process with the participants mentioning different possibilities such as the study

of Grammar points, the use of the dictionary and reading strategies.   It is interesting to note that Julia insisted on her point that teaching grammar topics was essential:

> *When I see a text, I try to see it like an astronaut . . . you know, get the whole meaning. If I don´t understand something, then I look at the grammar and the detailed relationship or look up a word in the dictionary. {...}*
> (Code number 43620, 05/11/2001, chat, Alice)
> *I suppose that if you don't teach them some rules, they have the tendency to translate word by word and they probably would look for "do" in the dictionary if they see it in a question :"do you like potatoes?"*
> (Code number 40849, 05/11/2001, chat, Júlia)
> *But you don´t need necessarily to know grammar to understand a text. You can understand a text using other strategies.*
> (Code number 41979, 05/11/2001, chat, Olívia)

Since Grammar was essential to understand a text, it would be reasonable to select the Grammar topics to be taught according to the texts, but that was not what she did. When asked about how she chose her teaching points, as mentioned in the previous section (code numbers 44510 and 40846), she said she followed the syllabus and adapted the exercises.

Following, in the discussion, I suggested the contents to be taught in our classes could originate from the use of the language and not from the need to teach grammar:

> *I would say we could start from that real context instead of starting from grammar. In what situation will our students need the foreign language?*
> (Code number 44519, 05/11/2001, chat, Terezinha)

From then on we talked about the situations where our students probably need to use English such as the college entrance examination. The participants emphasized the importance of helping our students to understand other cultures through their English classes.

As mentioned above, the day after we had this chat session, Julia decided to answer the assistant teacher's questions in the discussion forum. It seems that she was really determined to draw her own theory from the learning situations we were experiencing, but there was still no new artifact that could help solve the inconsistencies:

Alice, I agree that learning rules just to say that they are necessary doesn't help anything. It is essencial to make them recognize those rules in situations outside the classroom too. That's how we know that we have understood it. But, I still think that one of the roles of the teacher is to show this theorical part of the language.
(Code number 49799, 06/11/2001, forum, Júlia)

On the same day, Julia sent me an e-mail message which showed she was still reflecting on the issues we had been discussing and on her position concerning Grammar teaching. In this message she admitted she had been insistent concerning our need to teach Grammar, and she added she would write about an experience so that I would understand her point of view better:

{…}I don't know if I was a little stubborn last chat session in saying I agree we should teach grammar to our students...I'll send you one experience I had in preparing one activity, in the journal. I hope you understand it. {...}
(Code number 49443, 06/11/2001, e-mail, Júlia)

A first look at Julia's journal (below), published on the same day, may lead us to the conclusion that nothing had changed, since it revealed the same representations concerning the priority of grammar and contradictions concerning the development of learner autonomy. However, more careful observation shows that she was concerned about putting the idea of fostering learner autonomy into practice and she was involved in several learning actions which could be considered as evidence of autonomy development:

{...} In the second week, we worked on the term autonomy, describing it and giving examples on how important it could be to a teacher and students to become autonomous. In this part, we came out with some very nice ideas. We described "autonomy" as a process not necessarily related to learning in isolation; it can be an exchange of experience specially when thinking of teaching/learning process. For that we need to make students trust us and we need to listen to our students necessities. It is important for us, teachers, to be autonomous because only then we can make our classes more interesting first, by preparing different exercises from the book we are, many times, used to follow; secondly, by making students more active and thoughtful in our classes, once it is more important to stimulate them to question than give them all the ready information. Only this way, we are teaching them to be independent when they leave school or when they face a "problem" in their future life. I really thought a lot about all this, while teaching that week. Finally, in the third week, we compared our answers of the previous unit – about "autonomy"- to two texts containing Paulo Freire's ideas. Most of our ideas were in agreement with what he says about the role of a teacher and the importance of autonomy in class. Based on this, I tried, this week, to adapt one exercise, so that students could participate

more and be more autonomous. As I was teaching "conditional clauses" to a third year of high school, I had a quiz to give them. There were eight different situations where they had to say what they would do in each one. I didn't give them the words they didn't know, but put them in groups and gave them dictionaries. Each group was supposed to "decifrar" one situation. I was there to help them and make them see that the structure of conditional couldn't be found in a dictionary and that was a good idea for them to try to learn it in the classroom. The situations were not very long neither difficult. Later on, one member of the group went to the front of the classroom to explain his/her situation to the other classmates. It was quite stimulating because the situations were funny and very similar to their reality. I'm sure many students got involved and could understand how that topic of grammar appeared in a text, for example.
(Code number 49798 a/b/c, 06/11/2001, reflective journal, Júlia)

First of all, she analysed her educational context in the light of the theory that was discussed in the course and realized she could do something to change it (*questioning* and *analyzing*). After reflecting about this, she designed an activity to stimulate participation and to foster the development of autonomy (*modeling*). She tried out this activity with her students (*implementing the model*), registered the process in her reflective journal and brought it to discussion (*reflecting on the process*)[9].

Júlia still believed that the students should look up the new words in the dictionary by themselves, but the teacher had the control over grammar. Neverthless it is very clear in her notes that she was building and implementing new artifacts to transform her practice. According to her, the autonomous teacher prepares activities by him or herself, allows the students to have a more active role , stimulates thinking, contributes for the students to get familiar with the sources of information (in this case, she refers to the dictionary). The activity she prepared was coherent with these representations.

The artifacts (activities and representations) that Julia considered as new were not exactly what I expected. This point is important because when we do not observe the behavior we expected, when we are not sensitive to the stage of development and priorities of the course participants, we may halt the development process of teacher autonomy. In my feedback

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[9] It is important to point out that the online course did not require or suggest that the teacher students get engaged in any of these specific actions. The reflective journal was not something guided either; Julia chose what she wanted to register and how.

on her journal, I pointed out the aspects I considered positive and made a suggestion concerning the contradiction I observed:

> *I took a look at your journal and the activity you described and I was very pleased to know you are trying to put the ideas we've been discussing into practice. {...}You were trying to help your students become more autonomous by giving them an opportunity (and teaching them how) to use the dictionary and you were encoraging them to create, to share experiences, etc. In another activity I think you can bring grammar books and help them see they can also learn the rules by themselves, by consulting the grammar, or maybe go with them to the library. {...}*
> (Code number 49801, 08/11/2001, e-mail, Terezinha)

I also outlined how her decisions could be if she adopted a different perspective and I added that this would allow her to take communicative, educational and personal objectives into account:

> *{…} Maybe if you think of your aims and objectives, and then tasks that would help you achieve those aims and objectives, you would choose grammar structures and vocabulary that would help you get there. Your objectives and aims can be related to communicative purposes {…} but also to educational, personal and ethical purposes. What do you think? {...}*
> (Code number 49965, 8/11/2001, e-mail, Terezinha)

In my reply to Julia's email, I commented that our divergences sprang from different views about language and language learning:

> *{...} I agree with you teaching grammar is important. What I was trying to say is that knowing grammar is not the objective of the teaching and learning process. I teach a specific grammar structure when I believe it will help my student understand a specific text, participate in a specific dialog or perform a task. {...}*
> (Code number 49465, 07/11/2001, e-mail, Terezinha)

Julia replied to my email message on the same day, demonstrating how interested she was in the matter and how willing she was to review her representations. According to her, she might consider a different perspective where the objectives of a class would not be related to grammar topics. But it was not clear to her how a syllabus, in this perspective, could be organized:

> *{…} So, what for example, could be the objective of the syllabus? When we prepare it, we think about the grammar points to be taught and take some other objectives from that, for example the ability to identify sounds, to write small texts, to recognize the structure in texts... {…}*
> (Code number 49444, 7/11/2001, e-mail, Júlia)

The most important point here is that the teacher student was willing to solve the inconsistencies related to learner autonomy, teacher's roles, language and language learning, but she did not accept a new artifact (my representations) passively. She wanted to think about it and to see if it made sense in relation to what she already knew.

The reflective exchange outlined above indicated that the different views about language and language teaching/learning had to be clarified. The difficulties we had to solve the contradictions originated from the fact that two different traditions were trying to dialog as if they were only one. This way, Julia and her colleagues contributed to the construction of an artifact (a new unit) which would result in transformations in the course.

5. Final reflections

Let me first bring back to mind two important points made by Vieira (2005), quoted at the beginning of the paper. First, that reflective writing is a powerful tool to reveal inconsistencies. Second, that coming to understand such ambiguities promotes conditions for teacher development.

In fact, Auerbach's analysis of papers describing experiences aimed at the development of teacher autonomy (2007) also revealed the paradoxes that teachers and researchers had faced. Similarly to Vieira, she concluded with the authors that *the constraints, contradictions and resistances were not only necessary but productive* (:87).

In agreement with the ideas above, and based on activity theory, this paper focused on inconsistencies and how they were addressed and transformed within an online teacher development course. Teacher's reflective writing, in agreement with Vieira (2005, 2007), was considered as a relevant research tool and revealed important details about the participants' reasoning and development. In my online environment, I was able to count on other sources of data such as forum discussion, chat logs and email communication. They were used as research tools, together with the reflective journals, and this showed that the peculiarities of each information and communication resource contributed to make the contradictions explicit and to transform them.

The data presented gave evidence of teacher engagement in learning actions which, according to Engeström (1987, 1999), show development

from the abstract to the concrete view. This was considered as equivalent to being involved in a process of *conscientização* (Freire 1980, 1982), an important aspect in the development of teacher autonomy as described here.

In the research process, I also observed that my role in the identification of inconsistencies was essential. At the same time, the same concerns unfolded by Vieira about using power to empower were present all the time. Is it possible to help teachers identify and deal with inconsistencies without imposing our own points of view? Are we sensitive enough to notice that the course participants are modeling new tools in spite of the fact they are not exactly what we expected? To what extent do we allow teacher students to make decisions concerning the course they are enrolled in? These are some of the questions we still have to look carefully into.

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