COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES:

A DEEPER VIEW OF EFL LEARNING IN A BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY

Laura Stella Miccoli[1]

lmiccoli@dedalus.lcc.ufmg.br

INTRODUCTION

Understanding what happens inside classrooms is the goal of classroom language learning research. The information that surfaces from this kind of investigations 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 for 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 the main results of a larger ethnographic study that investigated collective and individual classroom experiences (CE) related to second language (L2) learning form a learner point of view ('author' 1997, 2000, 2002). Through the use of

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[1] Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais – UFMG.

quantitative and qualitative procedures for the analysis of the data, it examines the collective experiences of six English-major undergraduate students and focuses on the individual experiences of two of these participants. The study was carried out during one academic semester at a Brazilian public university.

This investigation is framed by theoretical and empirical studies (Allwright 1991, Brown 1994, Ellis 1997, Mitchell and Miles 1998, Brown 2001) 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 (Lantolf and Appel 1994, Donato and McCormick 1995, Gillete 1994).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ALLWRIGHT'S FRAMEWORK

Allwright (1991) focuses on the need to investigate the relationship between the events in the classroom and what learners bring and take away. His framework represents a personal version of the "standard conceptual framework for educational research" (p.4). It seems to derive from Dunkin and Biddle's (1974 opus cit. in Stern 1983) model. The reason for adopting Allwright's model comes from the lack of an agreement on which of the competing models for SLA reported in the literature (Ellis 1997) best describes the learning process of a second or foreign language. In fact, Ellis (ibid) states that a model for second language acquisition can only be conceived if we take a complementary view of the models reported in the literature.

The diagram of Allwright's (1991) conceptual framework for the understanding of classroom learning is presented below.

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│                                                               │
│   PRESAGE              PROCESS            PRODUCT             │
│                           │                                   │
│                           │                                   │
│                        LESSONS                                │
│                        ╱     ╲                                │
│                                                               │
│             What are            What is                       │
│             learning           classroom                      │
│       ?    opportunities   ?   interaction   ?               │
│               like?               like?                       │
│       ?                     ?                  ?             │
│                                                               │
│ What do   ?                 ?                ?   What do     │
│ people                                           people     │
│ bring                                            take away   │
│  to                                                from      │
│ lessons?                                         lessons?    │
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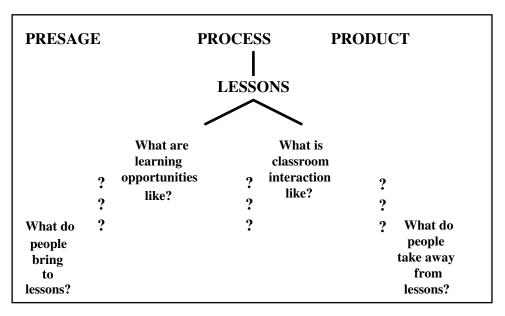
Figure 1: Allwright's Conceptual Framework for L2 Classroom Learning Research (1991)

Allwright (1991) believes that a description of classroom language learning depends on the answers to the questions in the figure. Besides those under presage, process, and product, relational questions complete the set. From left to right, the relational questions, illustrated in the figure as the question marks among the four columns, are:

. How is classroom interaction influenced by what people bring into the lesson?

. How are learning opportunities created and exploited through the processes of classroom interaction?

. How does what people take away relate to the learning opportunities that have been available to them in the lesson?

HOLLIDAY'S FRAMEWORK

Holliday (1994), like Allwright (1991), is interested in what happens in the process stage. However, he considers it insufficient to investigate only within the classroom. Holliday emphasizes looking within and around the classroom since most of what happens inside classrooms is influenced by contextual factors. He makes an important typological distinction for the investigation of classrooms. He distinguishes two levels of action within the classroom, calling them *surface* and *deep* levels of action. He explains these levels as,

"whereas surface action is plain to see, deep action phenomena are those which are opaque to outsiders and perhaps only tacitly understood by insiders in the culture" (ibid., p. 40).

VYGOSTKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

For Vygotsky (1978), the social environment is unique in its importance for cognitive growth. He understood the sociocultural setting as the primary determinant 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, man transcends nature, transforming it. Signs, on the other hand, 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 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 a learner determines a goal, s/he will decide on an appropriate course of action, depending on the situation, objectives, and the goal.

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 and Appel 1994:21).

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 study was carried out during one semester in a Brazilian public university. The fictitious names of the students who volunteered to participate in the study here presented are Ana Esther, Cristina, Fernanda, Isabel, Paula and Reginaldo. They were taking English IV, out of the seven English courses required in the curriculum. These participants whose ages ranged from 21 to 27, reported their experiences as students of English. From those, Ana Esther and Paula, whose individual experiences will be carefully analyzed in this paper, have been selected from the six participants to illustrate how different experiences can be explained in the light of the literature that frames this study. Thus, are presented in more detail below.

Ana Esther, the youngest, 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

In order to capture learners in action, trying to create meaning from the instruction that took place in their everyday classroom dynamics, the following research design was conceived. Our objective was to collect data over one academic term since classroom cultures, differently from other cultures, are short-term cultures (Holliday, 1994). Thus, classroom observation and video recording followed a regular calendar of observations - a week of classes (4 classes) every three weeks for 15 weeks – the length of an academic term in Brazil.

Data collection included: (1) videotapes of learners involved in classroom activities. Video 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 to collect information that might elucidate classroom events, such as personal comments from participants or teacher to the researcher in weeks where no videotaping or observation was being conducted; (3) individual audio recorded interviews in Portuguese with research participants to promote reflection leading to a view of the learning process from their individual point of view. The following questions were used to begin the interview as students saw themselves on tape, but the interview was conducted from an ethnographic perspective (Spradley, 199), i.e., aiming for an emic perspective of learner's classroom experiences:

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. 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 CE's with excerpts from their accounts. Next, the results will be discussed from an SLA and a sociocultural perspective. Finally, in the conclusion, sociocultural theory supports the integration of the findings into the dual view of the nature of classroom language learning.

NATURE OF L2 CLASSROOM LEARNING

The comparison of learners' reports leads to the identification of similarities and differences in 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. Shared experiences were called *Collective Experiences* ('author' 2000). Those that were particular were called *Individual Experiences* (2002). Experiences can be conceived as *Direct*, depending on whether they originate in the classroom *or Indirect* if they do not originate in the classroom. Below, we present findings from the quantitative and qualitative data analysis

The quantitative data analysis indicated that some categories of experiences predominated in the learners' reports. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Frequencies and Group Averages of Segments Coded per Category

Categories/Participant	A.E.	Cris.	Fern.	Isab.	Paul.	Regi.	Aver.
Cognitive Experiences	47%	48%	51%	53%	57%	57%	**52%**
Social Experiences	22%	22%	17%	22%	12%	18%	**19%**
Affective Experiences	11%	15%	15%	12%	16%	14%	**14%**
Personal Background	06%	05%	03%	02%	04%	03%	**04%**

Setting	06%	04%	04%	07%	02%	02%	**04%**
Beliefs	05%	01%	04%	03%	06%	03%	**04%**
Goals	03%	05%	06%	01%	03%	03%	**03%**

Table 1, which presents the group's average percentage, illustrates the predominance of experiences related to cognitive, social and affective events. These accounts predominate since, as mentioned earlier, they directly refer to learners' perceptions and interpretations of the events in the lesson.

Cognitive experiences led in the reports, with 52% of the segments coded in this category. This is followed by experiences dealing with social events, with an average of 19% of the coded segments. Next come affective experiences with an average of 14% of the segments coded in this category. Issues relating to personal background, setting and beliefs follow with the same average frequency of 4%, and in last place come segments referring to goals with an average frequency of 3%.

This data indicate that conceiving of L2 learning as mainly a cognitive process is supported by these learners' accounts. However, nearly the other half of their accounts deals with experiences of a different nature. As the qualitative data will show, the influence of these experiences on the cognitive aspect of L2 learning should not be underscored.

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The findings have revealed that CE can be of various types. The figure in the following page graphically represents the different types of classroom experiences identified.
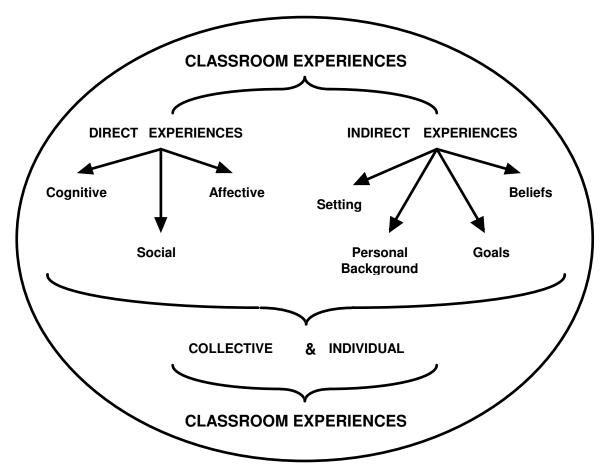
Figure 2: A Framework for Various Types of Classroom Experiences

The figure above indicates that CE are not only categorized as direct or indirect but also as collective and individual. Regardless of the broad categorization, CE 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 CE allowed for the identification of shared patterns of experience. Within Collective Cognitive Experiences, similarities were identified in four subcategories: *Identification of Objectives, Identification of Difficulties and Doubts, Perception of Learning and Perception of Participation and Performance.* Collective Social Experiences revealed shared patterns within three subcategories: *Interaction and Interpersonal Relationships, Group Interactions and Friction in Interpersonal Relationships*. As for Collective Affective Experiences, the shared pattern of behavior is found in *Negative Feelings.* In the following section, qualitative data on these subcategories will illustrate these findings.

COLLECTIVE COGNITIVE EXPERIENCES

The first shared behavior is attributing a variety of objectives to the same task in *Identification of Objectives*. The excerpts[1] below illustrate that participants' identification of objectives was based on their different understandings of the task's purpose.

Laura: What do you think is the teacher's objective in asking you questions?

Reginaldo: I believe her objective is to develop the class's (speaking) ability. To check if we can tell a joke or a story in English. (Int. 2)

Laura: This activity -- a discussion of stereotypes, what would you say was its objective?

Ana Est.:   I believe that in addition to speaking in class, the objective is to have us critically discuss in English; to question in English what is happening. And, for us to discuss how stereotypes are seen in different countries... nationalities. This issue was part of the objective of the discussion in English. (Int. 2)

Ana Esther and Reginaldo saw two different objectives in the same task. This behavior was consistent across the data, leading to identification of the following pattern: learners will identify an objective that meets their expectations of what should happen in a language class.

In the *Identification of Difficulties and Doubts*, the collective pattern of behavior was 'avoid expressing difficulties or doubts in class'. When in doubt, the expected behavior would be to ask the teacher a question. Instead of that, participants relied more on classmates to solve their problems than on the teacher. The following excerpts further illustrate this collective pattern:

Laura: Do you remember having any difficulties during the preparation time?

Reginaldo: On the role-play? Oh, I remember I had difficulty, but I believe it was in the directions. At the time, we didn't know what we had to do. But, it was this kind of doubt.

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[2] The excerpts here presented have been translated from their original in Portuguese.

Laura:	And you think this kind of doubt is irrelevant?
Reginaldo:	I think I do.
Laura:	Why?
Reginaldo:	Because you solve it yourself which, sometimes, I think is even better.
Laura:	And did you call the teacher to help you with the directions?
Reginaldo:	No, we didn't.
Laura:	And how did you solve the problem?
Reginaldo:	We asked one another, and one proposed a suggestion we agreed on and the work continued. (Int. 2)

Reginaldo illustrates the solution to avoid asking questions to the teacher by working out a solution with a partner instead. However, in many instances across the data, not asking the teacher left participants in doubt. Some of them even took the interviews as opportunities to clarify these doubts.

In the cognitive subcategory *Perception of Learning*, the collective pattern of behavior identified was 'learners will always identify something learned' as the two excerpts below illustrate:

Laura:	So, do you believe you learned something from that activity?
Reginaldo:	I did. I did learn. I learned the vocabulary, 'stereotypes' and a few other words. I always learn something. Let me see... joke; tell a joke. To express 'contar piada' you say "tell a joke". I remember that. (Int. 2)
Laura:	So, do think you've learned anything?
Ana Est.:	Oh yes, for sure I've learned! For example, I learned about hospitality, the adjectives that we have to use; nationality... Even as far as vocabulary it is always developing as you are talking, right? ... I've learned some stereotypes. Yes, I did learn. (Int. 2)

Participants also shared patterns of behavior in their *"Perception of Participation and Performance":* (1) that more active participation would make them perform better and (2) that performance in writing is better than in speaking. The excerpts below illustrate these collective patterns:

Laura: So, usually, when the teacher asks a question, you first try to answer
             in writing and then you speak if she asks you to. But, offering to
             speak - that you wouldn't do, right?

Isabel: Yes. That would rarely happen. Unless the answer is a short one that
             I had mentally answered before. Only then, would I take a risk.
             (Int. 3)

Fernanda: ... Because when I have to write I know perfectly well when to use
             will or going to. I know when to use one and when to use the other.
             .... But, when it's time to speak, when I have to speak, and I have to
             make associations, that's when it becomes difficult. (Int. 3)

As can be observed in the excerpts above, speaking is a problem for students. The explanations they offer are many. For all of them, writing comes before speaking, and it was something research participants relied on as Isabel clearly stated.

These collective experiences transcend the aspects usually associated with the cognitive dimension of the L2 learning process such as the ideas of trial and error, hypotheses testing, or the learning of rules of syntax and conversation. In classroom language learning, these cognitive aspects of the L2 learning process seem to underlie participants' shared experiences.

COLLECTIVE SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

In the social domain, collective patterns of behavior or perception were also identified. Within the subcategory *Interaction and Interpersonal Relationships*, helping a classmate is the first shared behavior. Some participants did this more than others, but all of them did it many times during a class. The following excerpt illustrates this collective pattern.

Laura: But, what was it that you ((Cristina and a classmate)) had to do?

Cristina: She ((the teacher)) gave us this list for us to, it's a shopping list for
                Peter, with the things he had to buy. She had taught us the difference
                between the will and going to, so we had to use these in our activity.
                She also asked us to add what else Peter was going to buy. He ((her
                classmate)) had a terrible difficulty! I tried to explain to him what we

were supposed to do; he couldn't understand. Because she had given

us two examples of what he was going to buy. The question we had

to answer was - what else was he going to buy?. Well, what else from the

list, right? But, he didn't get it. He asked me: "How am I gonna do this if I

don't know what he needs". I told him: 'But, it's on the list!' Right? It was

tough! ((laughs)). (Int. 2)

The excerpt shows how Cristina struggled to get her partner to understand what they were supposed to do. It illustrates that the purpose of classroom interactions goes beyond the carrying out of a class task.

Social experiences include *Group Interaction* as well. The collective pattern of perception is seeing the classroom as divided in circles. The following excerpts illustrate this collective perception.

Laura: ((Clarifying a comment on a two-student group presentation.)) But, at

the same time that you say that they didn't speak as much, you say

that they have reasons for not feeling comfortable; that they don't feel

they belong in the classroom. Right?

Ana Est.:   Exactly. It works this way, there's a group that dominates. It is the group

who has become friendlier with the teacher; that seeks out interactions with

the teacher; it's the group that is always sitting together in the cafeteria; in

other classes they're always together. It's the same group. It's the same

group who does assignments together at FAE (Faculty of Education) and

here. (Int. 3)

Laura: Do you consider accurate this perception that inside the classroom

there is a community and that this community is not wholly working

together?

Paula: I do. I do agree. Just like I told you about feeling isolated, right?

There are people that remain isolated. Understand? In my case,

specifically, I stay with another 3 people at the most. Sometimes I

work with V. or with the girls... So, you stay with the ones you have

met. Then, there are those who already have their work group, right?

So, there's this isolation from those who are part of this tighter group. And, then there's the group who is closer to the tighter group. So, I believe that this exists in the classroom. But, not only in the English class. In all of them you generally perceive that. (Int. 3)

An analysis of the excerpts above reveals that Ana Esther and Paula saw the class divided into three circles. For Ana Esther, circle division was associated to the degree of interaction among peers as well as their knowledge of English. The second circle, although less academically able, took other classes with the dominant group, therefore, their members could interact with the central, dominant circle. Paula observed that some people in class remained isolated. For them there is a dominant and central circle of classmates; another circle of students who is closer in interaction to this dominant group, and a more isolated circle where newcomers and those who do not interact as much are found.

In the social subcategory, *Friction in Interpersonal Relationships*, the collective perception is that competition is more as a threat than a reality. The possibility of criticism brought out the collective perception of competition. The excerpts below illustrate this elusive collective perception.

Ana Est.: ((About consciously avoiding the use of the present perfect.)) So, this is deeply rooted. You know how to use it and when to use it. So, you feel good. But, at the same time you feel as if you were condemned. You don't express yourself because the others are going to criticize you... They're gonna say you're being…a... a show-off in class and things like that. It's such a weird thing... it shouldn't be like that...

Cristina: ((About her not being able to face the class during a class presentation.)) I don't know, you feel so low, so much comparing yourself to the others...to those who are better. And we think oh, such and such is so beautiful and I'm like this, I'm like that and we end up losing our confidence. Everything ends up influencing us. Then you start thinking that the person who is observing you, is observing everything; everything except what you are presenting... We feel the others are noticing all of that, except our work. I worry about these things... (Int. 3)

The statements above depict two of the ways in which competition and criticism affected research participants. Competition and criticism were a real threat because it restrained their participation and performance. These social collective experiences are evidence of shared patterns of behavior that confirm the classroom as a culture, where its members share behaviors and perceptions.

COLLECTIVE AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCES

A negative feeling is the collective pattern identified. One recurrent observation during classes illustrates the relationship between performance and affective experiences. It took learners a long time to respond to a teacher's question; the teacher often asked a question at least three times before someone answered. Questioned on this behavior, participants revealed that a fear of being criticized as a show-off or a know-it-all prevented them from answering immediately. Only Paula did not report this emotion. The following excerpt illustrates this common affective experience.

Laura:	Please tell me about this waiting for someone else to answer?
Ana Est.:	Because I don't like to be the first one to answer.
Laura:	Why not?
Ana Est.:	Oh, I don't know...
Laura:	((incomprehensible))
Ana Est.:	Oh, I don't know, but I'm afraid of being... like the smart one in class, the know-it-all, the one who knows everything. I'm afraid of looking like I'm like that and of becoming obnoxious. So, I wait for someone to say something. Because I've studied that and I know people have difficulty... Then, when I responded, my classmate said "hum, look, she knows everything!" So, I fear people will think that I am the best in class, that I'm cool, that I know all these things. So, I keep quiet, I try not to answer too much, not to speak too much. So, people won't think I'm showing off... inside the classroom. (Int. 4)

Students share the fear of criticism, which may be behind many instances of non-participation. Participation in the classroom, something crucial for foreign language learners is hampered by this common negative emotion.

The analysis of collective experiences through the selected excerpts broadens our understanding of the challenges participants faced during that term. They offer an understanding to the existence of proper behaviors and values, i.e. of the culture in this language classroom. However, each learner has a singular experience. This is the traditional understanding on the nature of the learning process. In the following section, Ana Esther and Paula's reports illustrate how different learners' individual experiences can be.

INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES

Data analysis indicated that differences among research participants ultimately affect their perception of the learning process. Ana Esther and Paula's individual experiences summarize their personal and learning histories as well as their trajectory through English IV. These are complemented with excerpts to illustrate the relationship between personal histories and learning experiences.

ANA ESTHER'S EXPERIENCE

Ana came from a middle class background. English was part of Ana Esther's life since she was a little girl. This 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 recalled that English was taught the "traditional" way. Ana was the only informant who took the University entrance exam wanting to become an English teacher. As a learner, she described herself as an interested student who took learning seriously. When she did not believe tasks offered what she wanted, she attempted to make them more interesting. This was a learning strategy she used quite frequently. The excerpt below illustrates this strategy:

Laura: 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 Esther: 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?

Ana Esther also showed awareness of the demands of her own learning process in the context she is in.

> But, this is how I see it: you have to strive... I know I'm putting effort
> in everything I do. At home, very 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 knew what she needed 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 form the others, as illustrated here:

> 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, to the operations for achieving her objectives and goal. Towards the end of term, she was depressed and anxious for a week. However, she recognized that she would lose more if she carried on. Therefore, despite the ups and downs, 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:

> 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 explains 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. Paula's mother was supportive of her education. Her father was not. 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.

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 from the one thought in her previous schools 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)

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)

When compared to the others, Paula had a singular experience of English IV. She referred more to affective issues rather than to social. In addition, she was the only research participant who ended the term feeling she hadn't learned much.

Paula had a good perception of objectives. Yet, 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 others moments, it was the materials which was limited. Paula repeatedly uses 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)

Paula's experience in the cognitive domain was conflicted. 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 take 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 form 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)

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. At the end of the term, she still reported feeling isolated.

"I continue 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 feeling a certain isolation because... Not just an individual

isolation, but an isolation 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.

(in response to a question of why she believes she feels tired) 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. (Int. 6)

Only once did Paula did come to an interview and report having enjoyed the class unreservedly. Regardless of my attempts to make her reflect on her typical dissatisfaction, she did not 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 reported feeling isolated, but Paula was not new to this class – a possible explanation for her isolation. On the contrary, she had been with same group since English I. Paula's avoidance of contact with other classmates is another unique social strategy she used. The following excerpt illustrates how Paula fully understood her isolation:

"I was alone so that 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)

The reason for her distance to classmates outside her circle seemed to be that making new friends would not have provided the secure sense of continuity Paula seem to have needed. 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 refrain 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 participatorier 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 o the term.

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. Paula expected the push she needed to come from her teacher, though she 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 to have a better experience. She ended the term unhappy about what she was taking from English IV, and provided the best summary to 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
us 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).

A DEEPER VIEW OF EFL LEARNING

FROM A COLLECTIVE PERSPECTIVE

In this paper, I have proposed the concept of classroom experience (CE) to refer to all the possible experiences learners may undergo while in the process of learning an L2 in a class setting. This concept complements current descriptions of the classroom L2 learning process.

Two authors, Allwright (1991) and Holliday (1994) proposed two different conceptual frameworks for the description of the process understood as classroom language learning. On the next page, in Figure 2 I present my conceptualization of the learning process inside a classroom from the results presented in this paper which complement Allwright's and Holliday's views of the L2 classroom learning process. I suggest including the two levels of action identified in the development of the lessons. Direct classroom

experiences are depicted at the deep level of action and indirect classroom experiences surround the classroom indicating their influence on the classroom L2 learning process.

Personal Background

PROCESS

Lessons
(what actually happens in the classroom)

Surface Lesson

Teacher Structures

Learning Opportunities

Class Tasks

Deep Lesson

Classroom Interaction

Learners' Perceptions

PRESAGE
(what people bring)

PRODUCT
(what people take)

Goals

Cognitive Experiences

perceptions
&
interpretations
of
class tasks

Social Experiences

interactions
&
interpersonal
relationships

Affective Experiences

emotions
&
feelings.

Beliefs
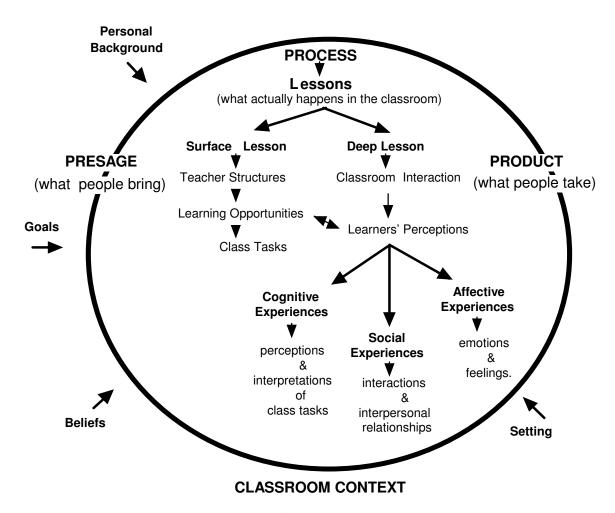
Setting

CLASSROOM CONTEXT

Figure 3: A Framework for Classroom Language Learning

Figure 3 above represents the factors involved in classroom language learning. The circle illustrates the classroom context. Presage and Product stages are involved in classroom language learning, but are not totally restricted to the classroom context; they transcend it. Surrounding the classroom context where the process stage takes place, are the indirect experiences that affect it, i.e., experiences involving learners' social background, beliefs, goals, and setting.

FROM AN INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

From studying participants' accounts of their CE, a discernible relationship between learning opportunities, participants' histories, motives and learning process can be established. 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 in them. These objectives were related to the interpretations they made of the task itself. These interpretations as we saw, were related to these participants' histories and motives. Histories comprise personal background, beliefs, goals, and a 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.

Ana Esther's experience illustrates that relationship. Becoming a teacher is a motive that was clear for Ana Esther before she entered the university unlike the other participants who took the Letras Vestibular because it was easier than the exam for other courses. Her motive for being in the university was not only learning a language, but also developing a fluency that would make her a proficient English teacher. The fluency and the professional orientation she had, motivated her to take the most out of the tasks she engaged in during classes. Unlike Paula, for example, Ana Esther found motives along the way. 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 on 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 seems 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 lacks a clear motive. She seems to be drifting in her course. She comes to class, does what she is asked to do, but she does not take an active role in the learning process. She expects a push. Paula needs a more meaningful purpose than the one she seems to have in order to find meaning to what she does in class. The activity of being in class lacks 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 is in a foreign language classroom, i.e., English is only spoken inside the classroom. Since she isolates herself and voluntarily restrains from interactions, she does not realize that this other dimension of the learning process - the development of communications skills - is directly related to social interactions. As a consequence, although her reflections have led her to internalize the need to change her behaviors 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 does, at least not until the end of English IV.

CONCLUSION

The identification of collective experiences and the individual experiences here presented reveal the dual nature of the learning process as a socially constructed event. More than just a process where individuals meet in a classroom to learn a language, bringing different expectations and taking knowledge of the language as the product, classroom language learning from the deep action level of direct experiences here presented emerges as an event influenced by the indirect experiences. Moreover, the interrelationship between cognitive, social and affective experiences brings a new understanding of the surface level of action where interactions take place.

The interpretations of the events that take place in a classroom, which shape what we believe is an individual learning process, are influenced by the social and collaborative nature of the learning process in a classroom (Donato and McCormick 1995, Swain 1995). Classroom activities are interpreted according to learners' different expectations, which are influenced in turn by their beliefs and previous experiences. Patterns of dealing with difficulties and doubts, assessing learning and participation of performance, although related to the cognitive aspect of the learning process at the surface level, reveal the collaboration among learners to carry out different activities and the intricate pattern of relationships in a classroom. Experiences such as the experiences of competition and fear

take place in the social and affective domains of classroom L2 learning, revealing a much deeper level of understanding of the events that happen in a classroom. These findings reinforce Holliday's (1994) claim of a classroom culture influenced by the culture complex that surrounds it and the sociocultural nature of learning (Lantolf and Appel 1994). Thus, these findings point to the value of classroom experiences as a unit of classroom data analysis. Moreover, they expand Allwright's (1991) framework for classroom language learning and integrate Holliday's (1994) deep and surface levels of action in the classroom.

In addition to that, in this paper the individual experiences of Ana Esther and Paula were presented and analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. 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 essential in defining the necessary operations to achieve the goals that are in the activity, in this case, becoming a teacher. Ana Esther's and Paula's experiences support that conclusion.

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 in her decision to put her feelings aside when her frustration was interfering with her development. Since she knows what she wants, she can always redirect the course of events in other to continue with activities that get her closer to her goal.

Paula's individual experiences are different form 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 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 different individual experiences of these two learners allows to understand that the complexity of learning a language in a classroom can benefit from the use if sociocultural theory. 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 that, if captured by learners, as both Ana Esther and Paula did, can contribute towards more active role in the learning process, although for Paula this active role was translated into an intention for change rather than a course of action as it was for Ana Esther.

The implication of this study leads to the importance of classroom experiences and learning motives. Teachers should benefit from these results since they point to the importance of knowing their learners' motives for studying the L2. In addition to that, teachers may also develop ways to raise students' awareness of their motives so that they may become more autonomous in their learning process.

However, this study needs to be followed by more investigations of experiences in different language classrooms for three reasons. First, documenting more learners' experiences may reveal other aspects of the classroom culture, allowing both researchers and teachers to have a more informed understanding of the interrelationship between its cognitive, social and affective dimensions. Second, more studies investigating learners' individual experiences should allow for the confirmation of the role that motive and goal play in the learning of EFL in classroom. Ultimately, more investigations focusing on other learners and on the experiences of teachers as well are necessary for the broadening of our theory of classroom language learning.

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