Class planning in relation to teachers' educational background

Márcia C. Agustini(Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina)

Research in the area of English Teacher Development has focused on teachers-to-be or graduated teachers. These studies have shown that in spite of teachers' instruction, their practice was largely influenced by their previous experiences (Richards & Nunan; 1990; Wallace, 1991; Almeida Filho, 1999; Moita Lopes, 2001). Considering the large number of teachers that work as English teachers, but do not have formal instruction in the area, this research aims at investigating one teacher graduated in the area of English; and another graduated in a different area. The question is: on what they rely mostly when planning their classes considering their different educational backgrounds: experience as a student, experience as a teacher, principles from a method, or graduation studies? To answer these questions, the teachers were asked to plan a class based on a text, and after, during the interview, asked to explain their reasoning.

1. Introduction

Several studies have shown that in spite of teachers' instruction, their practice is largely influenced by their previous experiences (RICHARDS & NUNAN; 1990; WALLACE, 1991; ALMEIDA FILHO, 1999; MOITA LOPES, 2001). The parameters that tend to guide professional teaching are mainly: personality traits of the teacher; principles deriving from an approach or method; practice common in the school where the teacher works; educationally based or research-based principles; her/his own experience as a language learner; as well as the classroom experience s/he has had in the shoes of a teacher (RICHARDS & LOCKART, 1997).

Besides, the context of experiential development of the teacher as a human being has direct influence on his/her view of the teaching process. As Almeida Filho puts it: "The teaching approaches will be, originally, as many as are the teachers, their life stories and

professional development and work conditions offered by the concrete context in which they operate" (1999, p. 17, my translation).

Considering this scenario, this study investigated two teachers with different background in language teaching aiming at unveiling the sources of their inspiration in the moment of the class planning. Since teachers' personal story bring many possible versions for the teaching practice, the study of personal reports may bring insights into the process teachers go through while developing their teaching philosophy.

This study considers the cultural environment as a source of knowledge; be it in the form of common sense – information shared by its members in specific cultural groups - or received knowledge – acquired in educational institutions (KINGINGER, 1997). We understand that teachers continue building their internal logic allying their informed knowledge and common sense throughout their schooling experiences, what Kinginger called 'coherence systems' (1997).

The main objective of this research was to investigate the paths teachers with different background take to prepare their classes. The expectancy was that they would be able to relate their class plans preparation to the elements described by Richards and Lockart[1] and cited above. The assumption is that, even though considering that teachers may not be able to always accurately make these connections, through their discourse, they may reveal what they believed to be their main influences in their practice as a teacher.

---

[1] Personality will not be investigated since it involves a myriad of aspects which are not our main concern.

2. Research Questions and Method

The teachers were Sarah[2] who graduated in Letras from PUC in 2000 and John who graduated in Law. Sarah had been working as an English teacher for eight years at the time of the interview, mostly in private language institutes. John had been working as an English teacher for ten years at the time of the interview. Just as Sarah, John's experience had also been mostly in private language institutes and with methods that proposed a "communicative approach" to the teaching of languages, differently from public schools where the emphasis on reading is recommended by the 'Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (PCNs)[3].

The teachers were asked to plan a class for an intermediate level. The class should be based on a joke (APPENDIX 1) given by the researcher. This way, we hoped to be able to find similarities and differences between their class plans and their reasoning. Having their class plans in hands, some topics were selected for the interview, then they were asked to explain their reasoning and more specifically, if they could recall what had made them to take that specific decision.

Aiming at reaching this goal, two questions emerged:

1 - What kind of knowledge did the teachers report to mostly fall back on for the planning of their classes?

2 - Are there similarities/differences in reference to these two teachers reasoning?

[2] The original names were changed.
[3] The PCNs is a national publication that aims to give the school all over Brazil, parameters which the teachers can use to guide their teachings.

3. Teachers' reasoning

With their class plans and the interviews, many similarities emerged. Both of them wrote that one of the first steps in the class would be to ask students warm-up questions, aiming at giving the joke some kind of contextualization. Sarah and John would first have a general conversation with the whole group. John would talk about humor in general, and then, he would divide the groups in pairs so that the students could talk about this, while Sarah would make questions related to the genre letter.

In the interview (APPENDIX 3), when asked to talk about their reasoning, their motives were brought to light, for although they both said to be starting with warm-up questions, they had very different reasons for doing so. John, for instance, in the interview, related it to what he learned about communicative approach:

… because I've been working for almost nine years now with the communicative approach …

For the warm-up, John suggested that the students could be talking in pairs about the subject. John explained his reasoning by relating it to what he has learned in his teaching career. Sarah, when asked to explain her reasoning, came up with a completely different explanation for starting the class with warm-up questions. Her own recollections of learning English seemed to guide her decision:

…I always remember my experience as a student of English, and I remember that every time the teacher just started the class by showing a text or giving exercises or teaching grammar specifically, I never felt interested, I always felt tired, sleepy, you know, and every time the teacher started the class, asking us, the group about our

experiences on the subject, I know I felt more interested, more excited about the class, I wanted to participate more.

For Sarah, the second step, after some questions with the group as a whole, would be to check the students' comprehension of the joke. After that, students would discuss the letters, trying to unveil the purpose of it. As she later on clarifies in her interview, working with genre was something her teachers at the university were really emphatic about. Sarah's preoccupation in this moment is with students' reasoning. She wrote in her class plan (APPENDIX 2):

I think it is important the students discuss and come up with conclusions themselves, not only they will be practicing speaking in a reading/writing class, but also I think learning is nicer and more concrete when students have this sense of achievement, of having done it by themselves.

Introducing the joke to the class would be the third step for John. But up to this moment, both teachers proposal is to develop the class mainly with spoken activities.

Another point in common in their work in related to the homework. The tasks would be very similar – the students should write a composition trying to make use of 'hidden' messages like the one in the joke.

Both teachers stated to be developing their class based on the communicative approach, and seemed to adhere to it since they would work with the four abilities simultaneously as well as contextualize the tasks, two premises of the communicative approach. The main differences between what they wrote in their class plan and what they reported in their interview is related to two main concepts they would be bringing to their class: John would be working with subliminal messages and Sarah would be working with genre. Sarah would be assertive in attributing her reasoning to her graduation studies

whereas John would infer that his working with subliminal messages is related to parallel readings, not directly associated with his teaching practice or studies.

Also, although implicitly present in John's interview, a concern about students' participation in their own learning and motivation stood out in Sarah's words. In all the activities she proposed, she mentioned the student, showing a real interest in their development.

> …if the students have to come to conclusions by themselves to do the work themselves, like if you work with projects instead of exercises when they really have to construct something, I think they get more engaged, and because they get more engaged, they have better results.(Sarah)

While expressing themselves, through their lexical choices, we were able to identify a pattern of reasoning. In John's interview, he seems, by the lexical items chosen, to relate his reasoning mainly to his past experiences as a teacher and as a student of languages. Also his world knowledge is apparent when he eventually asserts that his reasoning, in that particular moment, was based on his own interpretation.

> Yes, actually this here was based on my interpretation of the joke, because the symbol of money conveyed with all the Ss in the joke and also the capitalization of the letters NO, meaning the Nos, as the answer from the father for the subliminal request from the son for money.

Sarah, on the other hand, seems to fall back on diverse resources when planning her class. Although most of the times she refers to her own experience as a teacher, she also reveals through the lexical items chosen that some of her reasoning could be attributed to her experience as a student of languages, and also from her graduation studies. As she says:

I developed this way of teaching that is more… they have more chances but I always used the same material, and, just, my conception was changing and little by little I changed my action inside the classroom.

When asked why she worked with "genre", she recalled her graduation studies.

These differences may be in part explained by these teachers different educational background, but also by the different experiences they have had in their trajectories into becoming teacher and later in being teachers. Every teacher's past is part of that person's story and therefore, it is also part of the way this teacher reasons when planning his/her classes.

4. Final Remarks

Both teachers made direct reference to the communicative approach and seemed to guide their planning to develop at least three basic premises of this approach: the activities are problem solving, there is encouragement of interaction for communicative purposes, and also the four skills; speaking, listening, writing and reading are explored in a single class.

John seems to use in his class planning a mixture of the communicative approach and his experience as a teacher/student in his work. Similarly, Sarah makes reference to her experience as a student of language, but also, being graduated in Letras, she makes reference to these studies for four times. However, what stands out is her own experience as a teacher, cited in half of the justifications proposed during her interview. In these moments, she revealed that some practices she developed over time, with the practice of what works best for her students.

In these teachers' reflection, it is also possible to visualize tendencies. For instance, Sarah's class plans and interview she places students usually in a first position, showing a concern in organizing the class in such a way that make the students interact more, being it not so self-centered. John, on the other hand, in his planning and in his discourse, seems to concentrate the tasks proposed in his hands, he is the one who takes the decisions and carries out the activities. Is it due to their personal styles or they are informed decisions? That is, Sarah focuses on her students for she learned so? And John's apparently more teacher-centered class is due to his personality or lack of information in the area of teaching? The graduation in the area of teaching seems to have affected Sarah's practice, but to assert this we would need more interviews and/or attendance of classes.

These teachers practice corroborates the literature in the sense that teaching is a complex matter, which requires teacher's reasoning to adapt his/her knowledge to the situations presented. As Johnson puts it, "…reasoning teaching reflects the complex ways in which teachers figure out how to teach a particular topic, with a particular group of students, at a particular time, in a particular classroom, within a particular school"(1999 ,p.1). And with the investigation of teachers' reasoning through their class plans and the justifications they gave for the decisions taken, we were able to identify this reasoning going through since this initial and essential moment of the class preparation.

The teachers' experience allied with his/her knowledge (university based and/or world based) are elements present since previously to the class itself, in the class planning. They reveal that reflection may be profitably present previously to the class in the class planning. The set of resources available to the teacher allows him/her to make use of them in different manners, conjugating an alliance of informed knowledge and common sense through which the teacher builds up his teaching style. Teachers coherence system − an

integration of knowledge and experience of the teacher (KINGINGER, 1997), is in constant change. That is how Kingigner explains the works of it in relation to a specific teacher's statement:

> "In constructing her coherence system, this relatively inexperienced teacher is seen to rely primarily on common-sense notions that are available to her as a member of her culture. The fact that she has not yet had access to the expert systems that form the "received knowledge" of her newly chosen profession does not mean that her account is atheoretical (KINGINGER, 1997, p.11)"

That is, common sense is based on socially and ideologically construed prospects and therefore it has its own "theory" of what is best for teaching; and second, it is a resource teachers, graduated or not, inevitably fall back on. Reflexivity may be an answer for eventual problems and through this practice the teacher may improve his teaching.

Through this study we could throw some light in relation to why teachers teach the way they do and how they get to these conclusions. For, according to Borg, "Continued research on teachers' theories can enrich our understanding of all aspects of ELT (1999, p.163)", and teachers can, in these studies, find encouragement to inquire about their own reasoning and develop their work through reflection.

References:

ALMEIDA FILHO, J. C. P de. Análise de abordagem como processo fundador de auto-conhecimento e mudança para o professor de língua estrangeira. In Almeida Filho, (Ed.) **O professor de língua estrangeira em formação**.Campinas: Pontes editora, 1999.

BORG, S. Teachers' theories in grammar teaching. **ELT Journal**, vol. 53/3, p 157-167, 1999.

CARDOSO, R. de C.J. **The Communicative Approach to Foreign Language Teaching.** Campinas: Pontes Editores, 2004.

GIMENEZ, T. Reflective teaching and teacher education: contributions from teacher training. **Linguagem & Ensino**, vol 2/2, p. 129-143, 1999.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K **An Introduction to Functional Grammar**. 3ª ed, London: Arnold, 2004.

JOHNSON, K. E. **Understanding Language Teaching: reasoning in action.** Canada: International Thomson Publishing, 1999.

KINGINGER, C. A discourse approach to the study of language educators' coherence systems, **The modern Language Journal,** vol. 81, p. 6-14, 1997.

RICHARDS, J. C. & LOCKART, C. **Reflective teaching in second language classrooms**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

I could use a little money

Dear Father,

$chool i$ really great. I am making lot$ of friend$ and $tudying very hard. With all my $tuff, I $imply can't think of anything I need, $o if you would like, you can ju$t $end me a card, a$ I would love to hear from you.

Love,

Your $on.

After receiving his son's letter, the father immediately replies by sending a letter back

Dear Son,

I kNOw that astroNOmy, ecoNOmics, and oceaNOgraphy are eNOugh to keep even an hoNOr student busy. Do NOt forget that the pursuit of kNOwledge is a NOble task, and you can never study eNOugh.

Love,

Dad

APPENDIX 2: Class plans

John's class plan

1) Well, I am taking for granted that this is the first class about this topic (maybe the first class of a Unit). So, before I start working with this joke, I would contextualize the topic by eliciting from them what kind of humor most appeals to them, things like: spoken jokes, written jokes, 'charges', sitcoms, embarrassing moments, etc. They would tell me how present these things are in their lives. They would also have the chance to tell a joke (in English) if they could remember, or even tell us about a funny embarrassing moment. By doing this, I would expect them to be in the mood to work with the joke itself!

2) After that, the students would talk in pairs about what they think makes something funny. Why are some jokes funny and others not? I would ask them to come up with as many explanations as possible. Then, we would have a group discussion, where they would share their ideas!

3) At this point of the class, I would bring the joke for them. The best idea would be to have it projected onto the wall, so that everybody could enjoy it at the same time. The best way for me to know how effective the joke was for them would be their spontaneous laughing. So, if this did not happen, I would ask if someone could explain what was supposed to be funny in it! However, I strongly believe they would easily see what was supposed to be funny in it, which certainly does not guarantee that they would laugh!

4) Then, there is the last discussion about the joke that I think would be interesting. We could all talk about subliminal messages, and how effective they can be, emphasizing that many times the subliminal messages we want to convey are projected in ways implicitly saying something we don't want to give so much emphasis to. In this joke, they

did it with the use of capital letters and a symbol. So, what other ways could we do it, by using language itself?

5) The idea is to come up with a new message (not necessarily a joke) like this, so that we can enjoy the idea of how powerful language can be, even, and specially, when we are not being to explicit!

6) Well, I don't think I would teach a whole class using only this joke. So, at this moment, I would certainly include some other related activity from the book, or else! However, imagining this would be the only activity of the class, I would now assign a piece of homework, in which they would be asked to come up with their own subliminal messages for them to present to the group the following class!

Sarah's class plan:

1) Warm-up: Discussion:

Ask students:

Do you write letters? If not, have you ever? How often? Who do you /would you write letters to? What do you think about writing letters? Do you like it?

I would start the class by introducing the subject and asking them to talk about it, relating it to their personal experience, **I think students get more interested** in the subject every time they feel related to it.

1) First letter: show the first letter only to the students and ask them (1)what is the purpose of the son in writing that letter. (2) Do you think the son will get what he wants?

I would use the **first question to check** that every student has understood the purpose of the letter (without translation) and the second question to **make them interested** in the answer from the father.

2) Second letter: show the second letter and ask students: has the son gotten what he wanted?

Again, my purpose is to check understanding without the use of translation.

3)Students discuss what is common in both letters, students come up with a definition of the **genre** 'letter', what should be in every letter.

I think it is **important that students discuss and come up with conclusions themselves,** not only they will be practicing speaking in a reading/writing class, but also I think learning is nicer and more concrete when students have this sense of **achievement**, of having done it by themselves.

4)Students write a funny letter to their classmate, asking for something, but without being clear.

Practice of the use of the genre, at the same time personalizing and making it interesting to them.

5)Homework: students answer to their classmates letter refusing their 'hidden request' with a 'hidden no'

Writing at **home**, students will have **more time** to prepare a good letter and use their creativity!

6)Follow up discussion: After letters were hand in, students tell the group about their requests and the answers they got.

Students will practice speaking, while they share their learning and the fun experience they had.

APPENDIX 3: tape scripts

Interview: John

Int: My question is: you decided to divide in six steps here. I'd like you to recall why did you take this decision, for example, first you would ask some information,

J: Yes..

Int: "I would contextualize the topic by eliciting …, why?

J: Because **I think** it would be strange to come to class, with a joke and then just ask them to read it and see if it is funny, so why bring a joke to class? **I think** it's important to create a context with whatever you bring to class, be it a topic or a game or anything.

Int: Ok, but did you have an experience with that, studied about that?

J: Yes, yes, I did. Because **I've been working** for almost nine years now **with the communicative approach** and with the communicative approach you are always, ah**, it's always been explained** to you that it is always important to create a contextual basis for whatever you do in class, be it grammar, vocabulary work or discussion,…whatever you bring to class you should contextualize, just for them to see the relevance of what you have a context to it.

In: What about "talking in pairs"?

J: Yeah, because, well, also **for my experience** I've noticed that when you ask students to talk in groups, at first they may feel a little embarrassed or not very, you know, not confident in talking, so in having them in pairs would give them some time to elaborate their ideas with each other and see if what they are saying makes any sense, so that this would make them feel more confident to share it with the whole group.

In: Ok, let me see what else…talking about subliminal messages…Why?

J: Yes, actually **this here was based on my interpretation** of the joke, because the symbol of money conveyed with all the Ss in the joke and also the capitalization of the letters NO, meaning the Nos, as the answer from the father for the subliminal request from the son for money. So, this is not, the request for money and the answer and the refusal to give any money to the son were not explicit, in the sense of having this written as a message, so but they did it sub-minimally through, the means, there was symbol and the capitalization of letters, so **I think** it is important… **This made me come up with the idea** of having students notice that not always do we have the clear the messages in whatever we write, something very implicit and being able to understand nuances of language of what if implicit I think it is mostly what could be the topic of the activity with the language.

Int: Have you worked with a similar idea?

J: Yes, subliminal, but in images, not in written texts. It was in images.

Int: What was the outcome?

J: Yeah, they thought… actually it is what I told you, they thought it was very interesting because usually when they are taught the language or when they have contact with it, it is always a very explicit side of it, so they enjoyed the nuances of the language, so, in the sense of the visual language, we saw an image, and it is very important to see what is behind that image, the use of colors, the position of people in the pictures, so, if the man is fore grounded and the woman is back grounded, if that represents anything. So, these subliminal messages of power, for example, in an image, in an image. They liked to discuss that. In here**, I thought** it was,… it could be interesting to have that with the class too. More like a side topic not like the main topic of the discussion.

Int: Because…what would they learn, not language…Well, language!

J: Yeah, It's a work with language, but in a more implicit level, in a more …in a deeper level I'd say. The language is not only the letters, there is… there are many more things to language than letters only, right?

Int: Oh, yeah. You said about "enjoy the idea of how powerful", when…Why wouldn't you teach a whole class about a joke?

J: Yeah, sure, because I actually, it would all depend, because you gave me this joke as a material and **for my experiences**… It depends on how long the class would be, an hour, an hour and a quarter, or an hour and a half, so it would all depend on this, I do see myself working with the same joke for a whole class, not that I couldn't do it, **I think** that we could do it, we could have different activities but **I think** we would profit more from having more one or two activities with the same joke but then bring in some other, some other kind of text in which you could also have this implicit work with language, for example, and they could compare how the language, how the jokes do it, and how the other kinds of text do it. This would include work with charts, for example, **it is only a thought**. I don't know I'd need the actual class, the actual group to see if I would be able to spend a whole class with a joke only.

Int: It would be too little material?

J: Maybe. It all depends on the group. On how many students I have, how long the class should be, where I am in the program. It all depends.

Int: Ok, that's it, thank you.

Sarah's interview

Int: Você colocou primeiro aqui (her planning). Eu coloquei in negrito. I'm going to speak English. "I think students get more interested in the subject every time they feel related to it." Why do you think that?

S: Because **I always remember my experience as a student of English**, and **I remember** that every time the teacher just started the class by showing a text or giving exercises or teaching grammar specifically, I never felt interested, I always felt tired, sleepy, you know, and every time the teacher started the class, asking us, the group about our experiences on the subject, I know I felt more interested, more excited about the class, I wanted to participate more. So that is why **I think** that students, when there is a relation to the personal life of the student, **I think** they get more interested.

Int: Ok.

S: And **that is from my experience as a student**, I never studied anything related to it..

Int: OK Huhum, Here, you kind of repeated to make them interested, would you use the first question to check if the students had understood the purpose of the letter. So, why?

S: The first question is: "what is the purpose of the son in writing that letter?" Because, I think that a letter, for example, it is a text, it always have a purpose, the purpose of who wrote that, had a reason for writing, he wants to achieve something with that, and, sometimes when I was a student I didn't realize that, I just read the text without relating it to the social context to the implications of that reading or of the writing. So, **I think** it is important to show the student that when we write a letter we have a purpose for that, when we read a letter, we have a purpose for reading that. And at the same time there is the

example of the letter, but all the text that is written or spoken has a purpose behind, so, **I think** it is important to check if the students understand it, in this case, specifically, the letter had a purpose, other than this, "Oh, I want my father to read my letter and get to know the news", he wanted to ask for money, without explicitly asking for money, so, before going on with these activities that involve asking things without being explicit, and involve some (…) without being explicit, I have to check if the students understood what was the purpose of the boy writing the letter.

Int: And on the line of what you are saying, you mentioned, "genre". How come…do you work with it? Where does this concept come from in your work?

S: **From my graduation studies**. I don't remember the name of the book I used when teaching classes at the university, but, it was like…I graduated in 2000, and it was kind of "vogue" at the university, **I studied at PUC** to work with genre. So the teachers always wanted that every class, during our practicum, we had to do activities related to one genre, it had to be always based on genre.

Int: OK, and, you say here that the students, "when they have the sense of achievement, when they do something by themselves" this is better for their learning, why? Why do you think so?

S: Because, I am comparing a more communicative and a more grammar focused way of teaching. When you just give the information ready for the student, if you just give the grammar. You just go, OK, oh yeah, that is it, I have to follow the grammar, but here if the students has to come to conclusions by themselves to do the work themselves, like if you work with projects instead of exercises when they really have to construct something, **I think** they get more engaged, and because they get more engaged, they have better results.

They are going to perform better. They are going to recall, later, better if they were engaged in the activity.

Int: And you are saying that based on…?

S: **I'm saying that based on my experience as a teacher**.

Int: Ok, all right.

S: Because I used to be a very 'given' teacher, I used to give all the information ready, and I realized that the students were not talkative so much, and I kept trying things and **I noticed** that when they have the chance to go for it, come up with the answer by themselves, when they have the chance to engage, they have better results.

Int: Did you have any kind of book that helped you, or lecture or something, or just…?

S: No, **I just changed** the…, I used the same book, for example, the Interchange. I used to follow the book, just to follow the exercises and tell them to fill in the gaps, then **I realized** they were not getting too much profit from that. So I started, well, let's try changing and I started doing the other way round, instead of first explaining the grammar and then telling them to fill in the blanks, I started to first ask them questions and then, **little by little,** I developed my… **I developed this way of teaching** that is more, they have more chances but I always used the same material, and, just, **my conception was changing** and little by little **I changed** my action inside the classroom.

Int: What about… You say here that they should "writing at home, …have more time". Why do you think students need time to do their things?

S: Well, one activity is to write in the classroom, the other one is to write at home. Because, **I think**, when students, they do an activity in class, on the spot, even if they are writing, it's spoken English, they are just writing what they would have spoken so, at home,

they have more time to think about correctness, or, to rewrite it, if they are not satisfied with their work. And **I think** it is harder for the students to evaluate what they are doing. In the class they don't have time for that. **I've noticed with my students, from my teaching**, that usually if they are doing activities in class, with the pressure of time, they make much more mistakes than when they do the activities at home, with more time. So that's why I always like to give them something for them to do at home, specially writing.

Int: Talking about abilities, you say here that "Students will practice speaking, while they share their learning..and the fun experience they had… What kind of practice and what are they sharing, what do you mean exactly?

S: Ah…

Int: Ok, speaking, writing… What do you emphasize in your teaching? Just to understand the purpose?

S: I always try to do a little bit of everything. In this case, as the activities are based on reading and writing, I would ask them to report, so that they have some speaking, or that they can do some speaking, otherwise the class is going to be always reading or writing. So, I would insert some speaking, and **I think**, students when they do something nice, especially teenagers, they do something nice; they want to tell everybody about it. So it's nice to give them a time, a space inside the classroom, where they can tell the class about the nice job they did or the fun they had, and at the same time they will be speaking, they will be using one of their abilities. They will be not speaking in Portuguese in the corridor after the class.

Int: All right, ok. Thank you!