

Students' Experiences and Beliefs in the Language Classroom: Challenges and Opportunities for Reflective Learning

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Classroom life is what teachers and learners make it. At the same time, classroom life is what they make of it, and what it makes them. These apparently simple observations capture both the inherent contradictions of classroom life and its complex, systemic nature. (Wright 64)

The language classroom has always had a special place in the fields of education and language teaching (Allwright, Breen, Dornyei and Murphey, Erickson, Feiman-Nenser and Floden, Gieve and Miller, Holliday, Murphey, van Lier). In my own work as a language teacher and as an applied linguist I have been studying and trying to understand the complexity of the language classroom by investigating students' culture of language learning ("A Cultura") and the relationship between teachers' and students' beliefs about language learning in the language classroom ("Understanding").

But why talk about the language classroom and its challenges? According to Holliday, "learning about the classroom is an essential aspect of learning to teach" (162). However, we need to ask: which classroom are we talking about? In which country? Which region? In which context: in a private English course, a private school, a regular school or a language classroom in a language teacher education course in Brazil? Depending on the answer, the challenges will be different. Each context brings its own possibilities, dilemmas, tensions and challenges for teachers, students and researchers

alike. In Brazil, we know of the enormous challenges faced by many teachers in regular schools with large classes, excessive work hours, lack of administrative support, lack of discipline and many times, violence. As important as these challenges are, due to constraints of time and space it is not possible to address all of them. In this paper, my examples will be from a language classroom in a federal university where I teach pre-service English teachers. However, many of the challenges presented here refer to the nature of the language classroom in general that are common to many language classrooms that we have been in as language learners or teachers.

The language classroom is full of challenges that have puzzled researchers for quite some time, as stated above. According to some researchers (Block, Holliday), understanding the language classroom challenges is the first step to becoming a teacher. There are no easy solutions or ready recipes for these challenges and it is not my intention here to discuss those. Rather, I discuss the challenges and reflect on them with the aim of offering a better understanding of this complex space which is the language classroom. What I can suggest is tolerance and humbleness to learn how to live with some of the challenges and extract from them the best opportunities for learning – both for students and teachers.

As one of the most common places people learn languages, researchers developed different ways to talk about it and different metaphors and images to depict this complex place where learners and teachers meet together to learn and teach a language. The aim of this paper is to talk about the nature of the classroom and its challenges based on previous studies on the nature of the language classroom. It is divided into three parts, according to images of the language classroom and its own challenges: the classroom as an iceberg, as coral reefs and as a discourse. I conclude with some suggestions for students and teachers to transform the challenges into learning opportunities for reflective learning and teaching.

1. The iceberg of the language classroom: beliefs and emotions

Although this image has been quite used in many situations (usually to talk about beliefs), this is an adequate image for the language classroom as well, since the actions we see on the surface are just the tip of the iceberg.

To understand what really goes on inside the classroom we need to look beneath the surface and ask ourselves questions, such as:

1. What meanings do teachers and students attribute to the task of language learning and teaching?
2. What beliefs lie behind their actions in the language classroom?
3. How do cognitive and affective aspects affect the language classroom?

Below the surface, we find the underlying beliefs and the meanings attributed to the actions of the main actors. This image emphasizes the force of students' and teachers' beliefs and the meanings they give to the task of learning languages in a given context, as shown in the anecdote below, which may ring true for most of teachers who have seen students' beliefs in action:

“I was reminded of when I was teaching in a language school in London. We had put some sentences on the board, and I invited a German student to suggest which was the best. He was a friendly, witty young man, and by way of a joke replied, ‘why don’t you say, you are the teacher.’ I replied, ‘I am not a teacher, I am a language acquisition facilitator,’ to which he instantly responded with: ‘In that case, please facilitate the right answer.’” (Philip Glover, November 3, 1998. tesl-1@cunyvm.edu)

Episodes such as these abound in language classrooms and give us a glimpse into the sort of cognitive dissonance that can happen. In other words, teachers and students bring their different beliefs about language learning and teaching and about the role of teachers and learners to the language classroom. Sometimes, as the anecdote shows, they come to the surface in teachers' and students' exchanges; other times, they become the hidden curriculum and may bring conflicts to all participants. As mentioned by Block, if we want to understand the classroom we have to understand the conflicts that occur within it. The conflicts bring with them emotions that students and teachers feel in this complex environment.¹ According to

¹ For an interesting work on students' emotions in the classroom, see Aragão.

Wright, “classroom learning and teaching is an emotional activity” (76). Part of this emotional dimension has to do with the nature of a *language* classroom. As pointed out by Allwright, the language classroom brings specific challenges since “the student can be wrong in several ways: he gets the content but doesn’t get the pronunciation or the grammar” (“Contextual” 120). This can generate several feelings in students and teachers, such as:

- Fear of giving the wrong answer
- Fear of not giving the answer the teacher wants
- Fear of making mistakes in front of others and sounding foolish or not intelligent
- Fear of silence
- Fear of being called on by the teacher
- Fear of looking different from the crowd, seeming to know more than others and being seen as the “know-it-all”

These are fears students may have. However, teachers also have many fears such as the fear of unintentionally embarrassing students and of correcting them too little or too much. Teachers face many dilemmas which are part of the teaching profession. As pointed out by Feinam-Nemser and Floden, “teachers must inevitably act on incomplete and uncertain evidence while maintaining their faith in the appropriateness of what they do” (515). Teachers are also afraid of students’ silence. This may be related to the advent of communicative language teaching which emphasizes speaking and participation. According to Holliday, the teacher in this method acts as an instigator who requires everybody’s participation. This may bring fears to teachers – who are afraid that if students do not “participate”, it is a sign of their failure – as well as to students who may feel afraid to display their knowledge to the whole group.

In short, the challenges of the iceberg refer to dealing with students’ and teacher’ beliefs and emotions and to highlighting their power bringing them to the fore. However, this image shows only part of the complexity of the language classroom. The image of the language classroom as coral reefs will add yet another dimension and other challenges to the language classroom.

2. The language classroom as coral reefs: the power of culture

The characterization of the classroom as a culture finds resonance in the literature which sees culture within a wider perspective. The term culture has been used in the educational context for quite some time now. Several authors have talked about the culture of specific activities (Holliday), organizational cultures (Handy), schooling and teacher culture (Hargreaves), cultures of teaching (Feiman-Nemser and Floden), and cultures of learning languages (Almeida Filho; Cortazzi and Jin; Barcelos, "A Cultura"). According to Erickson, the notion of culture has to do with a group's shared ways of giving meaning to the social action, which can reveal the patterns of actions and assumptions underlying educational practices ("Conceptions" 23).

Breen used the metaphor of coral reefs to illustrate the complexity of the culture of the classroom. According to the author, like coral reefs, little of the classroom life can be seen from the outside. To understand it, we need to look beneath the surface. This metaphor is similar to the iceberg. Yet, while the iceberg focuses on the power of beliefs, this image emphasizes the social nature of the classroom and its culture situated in a given social context. In other words, as pointed out by Coleman, in the language classroom, students can learn "other things in addition to – or even in place of – the language" (10). These other things may include aspects such as "an understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, the maintenance of face, and the development of student solidarity" (10).

Breen explained that the metaphor of the classroom as coral reefs entails eight essential characteristics:

1. Interactive: Each classroom has a dynamic nature of interaction and communication where personal purposes and meanings contrast with norms to be followed.
2. Differentiated: Each classroom includes multiple subjective views and difference of interpretations that may bring potential conflicts and dilemmas for participants.
3. Collective: Each classroom represents the meeting point of the individual as well as the collective world of the groups. Individual learners will be engaged both individually and collectively in the learning process.

4. Normative: Each classroom has its own norms, conventions, and rules. Learners come into the language classroom with a ready set of norms about classrooms in general, influenced by their earlier school experiences. However, learners and teachers may also create new norms in each new classroom.
5. Asymmetrical: Each classroom includes asymmetry of roles between teachers and students. This asymmetry may sometimes include a mismatch in beliefs, attitude, and values.
6. Inherently conservative: Teachers and students try to conform, overtly at least, to the rules and conventions of the classroom. Any innovation is met with resistance at first because it represents a threat to the established order.
7. Jointly constructed: Teachers and learners negotiate meanings and purposes.
8. Immediately significant: Each classroom accommodates individual and collective interpretation of activities, their purposes, and reasons.

While Breen portrays the classroom as a culture, Holliday emphasizes the aspects of subgroups or subcultures within the classroom. According to Holliday, the classroom provides both teachers and students with traditions, recipes, and tacit understandings about acceptable forms of behavior. Thus, they are constantly adapting and readapting themselves to the new classroom culture and subcultures within the different groups. This culture is transmitted to new members, who have to learn and share it in order to be accepted by the group. Hence, students are constantly trying to grasp the new classroom culture and its implicit rules.

The metaphor of the classroom as coral reefs emphasizes the classroom as a community where one does not learn by himself/herself but in the company of others. Learning is essentially a social and cultural activity, and learning a language is even more so, since language permeates all social relationships. In a language classroom, we learn a language in the company of others, and this social relationship influences what learning is and how it is done (Breen).

This brings us to the concept of co-presence put forth by Allwright (“Contextual”). He uses the concept of co-presence as a key contextual factor in classroom language learning that can influence how students learn.

This term refers to the influence that other people have on our learning (or on our actions and beliefs about how to learn). The following excerpts, taken from Miccoli, illustrate the effect of co-presence on students' learning:²

So, I wait for somebody to answer... because I know that some people have difficulties. But I have already studied this. So, I ended up answering and my classmate said, 'huh, she knows everything!'. Then I feel tense and afraid that people may think that I want to speak up, that I am the best in the classroom, that I am the best student, that I know everything. That is why I stay quiet, avoiding answering a lot so that the rest of the class do not think I am trying to show off in class. (207)

Even if I want to speak, I will not because the class will think I am a nerd. Sometimes I want to speak so bad, use a different expression, but I stay quiet so that they do not think I know it all. (209)

These excerpts offer us a glimpse into students' experiences as well as into the social dimension of the classroom. To Allwright, students under-represent their knowledge. Facing the conflict of how they want to represent themselves to teachers and colleagues in the classroom, they choose their classmates. This social pressure is exerted both onto students and teachers and it is a constant potential source of inhibition, according to Allwright. While Allwright emphasizes the challenge that group pressure can exert on students, Murphey highlights the fact that teachers and students can engineer their environment to create 'learning ecologies of linguistic contagion' in which students and teachers can contaminate each other into imagining possible and ideal selves for themselves as language learners ("Learning"). This influence can be encouraged and fostered by teachers who would promote this environment by emphasizing cooperative learning and learning in communities.

The metaphor of the classroom as coral reefs highlights its cultural aspects and social dimension. Like coral gardens, language classrooms are situated within specific contexts, embedded in other cultures, as shown in Figure 1.

² The excerpts were originally in Portuguese and were translated by the author of this paper.

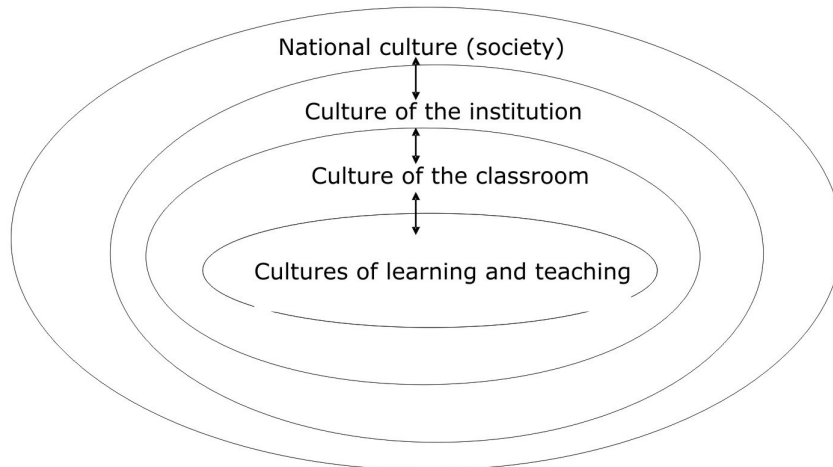


FIGURE 1 - Embedded cultures.

According to this figure, the cultures of teaching and learning are intrinsically related to each other. The culture of the language classroom is situated within these other cultures and they influence each other reciprocally. They are embedded within a specific culture within an institution which is part of a national culture of a given society, influencing all these cultures and being, at the same time, influenced by them.

In short, the image of the language classroom as coral gardens brings the challenge and opportunity of learning for teachers and students to be ethnographers and anthropologists of their own classrooms and recognize that they help mold, each day with their beliefs and actions, the norms of this culture. This metaphor allows us to see the language classroom as a culture with its own rules, traditions and recipes. But it does not say much about the kinds of discourses or texts that are present in this environment. This is what the last metaphor talks about: the classroom as a text and discourse.

3. The language classroom as discourse

According to Breen, learners should be seen as discourse practitioners. As such, they know what counts as knowledge worth acquiring, the valid

interpretations and appropriate behaviors in class. Based on Fairclough, Breen points out the several types of texts present in the language classroom:

- a) Classroom texts: in the classroom, the language or communication can be spoken, non-verbal, and written;
- b) Discursive Practice: “how texts are produced and interpreted and how different types of texts are combined” (121);
- c) Social practice: “organizational and institutional circumstances that generate and delimit both the specific text and discursive practices of lessons” (121), such as how the furniture is organized for instance. These social practices construct teachers and learners as such.

Breen explains that the text available to learners in the classroom is an amalgam of “three dominant and inter-weaving discursive practices”:

- “Communication through the target language;
- Metacommunication about the target language;
- Communication about the teaching-learning process, its procedures and classroom routines” (123).

As discourse practitioners, learners “have to navigate through its intertextuality identifying the textual cues which signal a transition from one kind of talk to another” (123). This navigation is certainly based on their a) beliefs about teaching and learning; b) history and experiences with outside classroom discourses; c) their understanding and contribution to the emergent classroom culture.

In short, the challenges of this image refer to teachers and learners as discourse practitioners who must be able to navigate the discourse of the language classroom. What is available for learning is related to the quality of a text jointly produced by teachers and students within the discourse and social practices of the language classroom.

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have talked about the language classroom through images that highlight its nature and the challenges it poses to teachers,

learners and researchers. The challenges can also be seen as opportunities for growth for both teachers and students.

As suggested by Kramersch and Holliday, the teachers' role in the language classroom culture should be similar to that of anthropologists in their own classrooms. According to Holliday, "just as anthropologists must humble themselves to the mysteries of the communities they are studying, so must teacher-researchers humble themselves to the classrooms with which they are involved" (31). Similarly, Kramersch suggests that the teacher should be "an ethnographer of his or her own classroom" (172). As an ethnographer or anthropologist, the teacher is "at least partially an outsider to the culture of the students, and the students to the culture of the teachers" (Holliday 142) and thus, he or she has to learn how to unveil the classroom text, as we do in a different social situation. An appropriate methodology, to Holliday, would involve teachers' sensitivity to the language classroom culture, since this knowledge is an essential aspect of finding out how to teach. Researchers who want to understand and investigate the language classroom should have, according to Breen, anthropological sensitivity and employ cautious triangulation in a longitudinal study, questioning his or her own well-established assumptions about the language classroom and having an insistent curiosity for the points of view of learners and teachers.

The following are suggestions which can help us face the language classroom challenges and to help us unveil the intertextuality of the misunderstandings of life in the coral reefs of the language classroom as learning opportunities for learners and teachers:

- a) Reading texts about the challenges of the teaching/learning processes. As an example, we can ask students to read texts written for them to reflect about their own learning process, such as Murphey's ("Language"), for instance. Another important text that can contribute to reflective learning in language teacher education courses is the one by Lightbown and Spada. According to Peters & Le Cornu, "teachers need to teach students more about the learning process and enable students to get to know themselves as learners. This is the role of reflection" (59). This is also a challenge for teachers who need to learn how to do this and for teacher educators who should help future teachers learn

how to provide learning opportunities and experiences that promote reflection on learning in their language classrooms.

- b) Learning how to listen to students: as suggested by Dornyei and Murphey, we need to have time in the beginning of the course to get know students, their beliefs, experiences and emotions in order to create a positive community of learning and minimize the conflicts.
- c) Creating learning opportunities for students to feel responsible for their learning and to understand their own learning processes, learning reflectively by writing their language learning histories and discussing them with their peers. According to Murphey, language learning histories:
 - Help learners to become more conscious about the roller coaster of language learning and of factors that help or inhibit their learning;
 - Help learners to feel more reflective about their own learning in finding out things as they write and talk about this;
 - “Allow learners to ‘invest’ in their learning by constructing their identity as language users” (98)
- d) Discussing their beliefs in the language classroom (Barcelos, “Crenças”). By creating such a space in the classroom we help students to reflect, question and confront their own beliefs, helping them to transform themselves as well as the environment of the classroom.
- e) Using exploratory practice as an approach to understand the puzzles of life in the language classroom.³

In conclusion, language classrooms can be seen as icebergs, coral reefs or texts, each with its own challenges. Each of these challenges can be seen as opportunities for reflective learning if we care to accept the complex and unpredictable nature of the language classroom and care to look underneath it to bring to surface the students' and teachers' experiences, beliefs and emotions that can bring quality of life to our classrooms.

³ For a detailed overview of exploratory practice, see Allwright (“Developing”).

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