The dialogue teacher-researcher: an ideological mediator on the reflective process in the EFL classroom

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Abstract: *Based on the conception of dialogic research proposed by Coulter (1999), this paper aims at discussing the process of knowledge construction as well as the reflection process triggered by the dialogue between the researcher and two teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in a private language school in Brazil. The data comes from some reflective sessions held with these two teachers after the video recording of their classes and integrate the corpus of my doctoral research. Bakhtin's conceptions of behavioral/crystallized ideologies and authoritative/persuasive discourse are used to understand the ideologies revealed and constructed in the dialogue between the researcher and the teachers. The analysis of two excerpts suggests that the researcher intervention happens both through the authoritative and persuasive discourse, reflecting the crystallized ideologies of the theoretical framework advocated by her. In addition to this, the brief analysis carried out in this paper also indicates that the conceptions postulated by the bakhtinian circle can shed light into the reflective process triggered by the dialogue between teachers and external researchers.*

Key-words: *ideology; persuasive and authoritative discourse; dialogue; reflection.*

INTRODUCTION

When we take a look at the research developed both in the area of Education and of Applied Linguistics in the last decade, we often come across terms dealing with the reflective process, such as reflection, critical reflection, critical thinking, collaboration, just to mention a few. Although researches that focus on the reflective process have increased considerably in the last ten years, these issues had already a privileged space in the studies of Habermas (1973), Freire (1970), Van Manen (1977), Schon (1983). In the area of Applied Linguistics, especially the teaching-learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Brazil, Celani already shows a

preoccupation with a reflective practice in the EFL classroom in papers written during the eighties (Celani, 1984a; 1984b).

If we place the focus of reflection on the construction of knowledge in cooperation with others and on the idea of language as a semiotic tool that mediates the development of critical thinking (both processes closely interconnected with the reflective process), we can find support in texts written much before the seventies and eighties, since Vygotsky (1930; 1934) and Bakhtin (1926; 1930) provide very meaningful constructs to help us reflect on these issues.

The considerable amount of studies on issues related to the reflective process does not mean that these issues have been solved. On the contrary, for being strictly connected to the situation and the sociohistorical context where it takes place, the reflective process varies according to the context and participants involved. Therefore, the possibilities as well as the necessities of research on teacher education and development are endless.

In spite of dealing with different problems and situations, researchers involved with teacher development seem to share the preoccupation of looking for a more effective intervention in the reflective process so as to enable teachers to assume more critical point of views towards their practices in the classroom and towards the ideologies that frame these practices.

For believing that no effective transformation and emancipation in teachers' practices can take place without critical awareness of the ideologies that frame their teaching and that the other (coordinator, research, peer teacher, etc) has an essential role in this awareness raising, I used the dialogue between researcher and teachers as a space to construct knowledge about the participants' actions in their EFL classrooms.

Based on the concept of dialogic research proposed by Coulter (1999), I view the dialogue as a privileged space to construct knowledge and to promote changes both in

discourse and actions. In this sense, the dialogue is not understood as a simple set of questions and answers, but considered in its complex bakhtinian dialogical dimension. It is in the concepts of behavioral/crystallized ideologies and authoritative/persuasive discourse found in the philosophy of language proposed by the circle of Bakhtin that I looked for theoretical support to understand the reflective process triggered in my dialogue with the two teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since they conceive the nature of language as constitutively dialogical, emphasizing the very complex interrelations between history and ideological conflicts in the constitution of conscience, the conceptions about language advocated by Bakhtin's circle have nourished my reflection on the role of the dialogue with the researcher in the process of teachers' construction of knowledge about their own action in the classroom. Because the bakhtinian conceptions of ideology and discourse are the ones that basically orient the comprehension of the reflective process carried out in my research, I outline below some important aspects of these concepts.

According to Bakhtin/Volochínov (1929) and Bakhtin (1953), the ideological as well as the dialogical nature of language is related to the fact that every single utterance is linked to other utterances in the complex chain of verbal communication and to the proposition that each utterance is directed towards an active *other* and not towards a passive listener. This means that the *other(s)* to whom our utterance is directed always take an active responsive attitude toward it, which can be materialized in the form of a non verbal action, an agreement, disagreement and so forth. The speaker expects this active responsive attitude and his/her utterance is oriented by it.

As both addresser and addressee construct their utterances from a specific situation and are, at the same time, part of a broad sociohistorical context, the structure of the utterance is determined both by the immediate situation and the broader social milieu. Based on the assumption that it is in the process of social interaction that our consciousness is filled with ideological content and constituted as such, Volochínov (1929) suggests that every apprehension, no matter how simple it may be, is subjected to ideological evaluation, reflecting and refracting a reality outside itself.

Each field of ideological creativity reflects and refracts reality in its own way, having a distinct function in the unity of social life. The aggregate of life experiences and the outward expression linked to it is referred to by Volochínov (1929) as behavioral ideologies, whereas the heterogeneous set of utterances originating from the more complex and structured activities of the artistic, scientific, political and religious spheres are placed within the limits of what the author classifies as established ideological systems, which are seen as crystallizations of behavioral ideology.

These historically crystallized ideological systems are fed by the behavioral ideologies. Therefore, they can only be understood, accepted, contested and transformed in the light of the life experiences that form the set of behavioral ideologies. In a dialectic and dialogic movement, crystallized ideologies influence and are at the same time influenced by behavioral ideologies.

In research focusing on teachers' critical development, the relations established between behavioral ideologies and historically crystallized ideological systems can shed light on the reflective process teachers are engaged in with the help of an external researcher and create conditions for effective understanding and possible transformation of teachers' actions in their EFL classrooms.

Based on Bakhtin/Volochínov (1929) categorization of ideologies into behavioral and crystallized, it is possible to

suggest that the prism through which teachers view their actions is mostly framed by behavioral ideologies, that is, the beliefs and conceptions they constructed about the teaching-learning process anchored on the practical experiences lived throughout their trajectories as students, professionals, parents and so forth.

During teachers' development processes, the most experienced interlocutor[1] seeks to interfere in teachers' actions by creating, through varied activities and in his/her dialogue with the teachers, possibilities to reflect about and transform current pedagogic practices. This intervention takes place in an uninterrupted conflict between behavioral and historically crystallized ideologies, between everyday and scientific discourse. Teachers' actions, framed by behavioral ideologies, start to be evaluated and analyzed under the prism of scientific discourse (ideologically and historically crystallized) revoiced by the most experienced interlocutor.

This uninterrupted conflict between behavioral and crystallized ideology places the issue related to the transmission of other people's discourse, to which Bakhtin/ Volochínov (1929) refers as quoted discourse, in the center of teachers' education processes. The fundamental question that imposes itself in this matter is how other people's discourse is transmitted in the interior of the dialogue between researchers and teachers.

Frequently, the crystallized ideological systems that constitute the scientific concepts are transmitted in educational and teachers' development practices through the authoritative discourse. The *author*itative word (the word of the *author*), which is regarded as an absolute truth, is filled with a dogmatic character that does not provide space for arguments, refutations, transformation or critical reflection. According

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[1]   An analogy with the vygotskian concept of more experienced partner. In this case, the external researcher, the coordinator, the director and/ or a peer teacher.

to Bakhtin (1975), the authoritative word characteristic of religion, politics, moral, science, the word of the father, professor, director, etc, lacks internal persuasion, thus requiring unconditional recognition and assimilation. Although it can be surrounded by masses of other words that interpret, exalt or apply it, the authoritative word establishes with these other words a relation of isolation and inertia, not mixing itself with them for the negotiation and construction of new meanings.

In contrast to the authoritative word, Bakhtin (1975) delineates the internally persuasive word. As it is not susceptible to any authority, the persuasive word can be unknown or even deprived of legality. The possibilities revealed by the persuasive discourse are also qualitatively different, since this kind of discourse allows our words to be bonded with other people's words. This bonding is a determining factor in the process of transforming the individual conscience and, consequently, in the search of an independent ideological life.

Although both the authoritative and the persuasive word are dialogically merged in processes related to teachers' education (it would be contradictory to the bakhtinian framework to take them as completely distinct categories), it is possible to propose that the persuasive discourse is the one that creates more possibilities for reflection as well as ideological transformations.

AN OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The interaction excerpts discussed in this paper are part of reflective sessions between the researcher (P) and two teachers (Fa and Ce) carried out during the data collection of Szundy (2005). The data was collected in a language school, a franchise in a city called Lorena in the state of São Paulo, Brazil and counted with the participation of two teachers, the researcher, and about twenty-eight students.

The four reflective sessions with the teachers Fa and Ce took place in the second semester of 2002, after the videotaping of several games used as teaching-learning tools in their EFL classroom. Based on Coulter's (1999) construct of dialogical research, the reflective sessions were thought of as contexts where relevant opportunities for meaning construction and negotiation are created in collaboration with an external researcher. In this sense, the four reflective sessions were organized in the form of a dialogue and can be regarded as 'discussion sessions', as defined by Magalhães (2002).

As preparation for each session the two participant teachers were required to watch the videotape of their own class and read one or more theoretical articles. Based on her own interpretation of the videotaped activities and on the theoretical conceptions discussed in the papers suggested for reading, the researcher prepared activities aimed at orienting the discussion in each of the sessions.

The reflective process constructed in the dialogue between the researcher (P) and the teachers (Fa and Ce) are analyzed in the light of the sociohistorical conceptions of language proposed by the circle of Bakhtin. The meanings negotiated in the discussions between P, Fa and Ce are interpreted fundamentally through the notions of behavioral and crystallized ideologies, authoritative and persuasive discourse, as outlined in the Theoretical Framework section above.

Given the scope of this paper, only two excerpts were selected to illustrate the reflective process constructed in the dialogue between P, Fa and Ce. The two excerpts discussed below share the preoccupation of bringing the reflective process itself into discussion in the dialogue.

DATA DISCUSSION: EVALUATIONS OF THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS

In different moments throughout the four reflective sessions, the dialogue between P, Fa and Ce turns into a

discussion about the reflective process itself. Although this focus is usually introduced by the researcher, in the excerpt below it is one of the teachers, Fa, who brings the reflective process into the discussion.

Excerpt 1 – Reflective Session 1[2]

10 Fa: *What an agony it is... we feel like doing everything again, videotape again.*
11 P: Yes, but *I think this is .... the purpose, isn't it?*
12 Fa: The purpose...
13 P: Because if we are always satisfied…
14 Fa: *See what a trash it is.*
15 P: No, it is not a trash. I believe there are always good things, but we…
16 Fa: Things I would do differently.
17 P: There will always be things you'd do differently. I think this is the purpose of reflection... because if you think you'll always do everything in the same way… that you have ccomplished an excellence level and has nothing else to accomplish…
18 Fa: What to accomplish.
19 P: Then nobody develops professionally. So, this is the objective and we have to, *that's what I learned with my experience in my MA, that we have to see ourselves as an external observer*, do you get it? Then, it becomes easier. It doesn't mean that you... ah, I'm not this person! But you are going to analyze your practice with the eyes of a third person.
20 Fa: *Hum, hum* (expressing agreement).
21 P: Well... to analyze yourself as if… In Ce's case? He observes several classes here, doesn't he? It is part of his tasks. Then, *when he looks into his classes, he will try to have this same vision, as if it was the class of another teacher.* The same with you. Ah, I'm watching a peer's class... because

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[2]   The transcriptions, originally in Portuguese, were translated into English for the present paper.

then you see yourself from the outside. It's not so... so... emotional. Not that we are going to separate, we can't do that. *We are only one, emotions are part of our nature*, aren't they? We are subjectively involved with that, but it's possible to establish a distance and you develop a lot.
22 Fa: Watching.
23 P: Then you will see, after this meeting... well, plan to watch it during the weekend, have a time for you... an hour is the approximate time of that game… and you will see how much you will grow with that. Not that you will change your action completely watching one of your classes, it's a process.
24 Fa: Well, I know that we learn. I like to discuss.... I like it. I'll be able to do that.

In the beginning of the first reflective session, Fa reports her difficulty in watching the videotape of her own class, acknowledging that she has not watched the complete recording of a board game videotaped in her Basic 3 group. The nine utterances that precede this excerpt consist of this report and her questioning concerning the experience lived by P during the data collection for her master's degree. In that occasion, it was Fa who videotaped all the games in P's classroom and both of them used to keep regular conversations about the videotaped practice, a fact that shows the connection of this discussion with an extra verbal situation shared by the two participants about three years before this reflective session.

Agony is the noun chosen by Fa (10) to describe the process of observing her own practice. This negative feeling concerning the observation of her own action leads Fa to express the desire of changing the teaching-learning situation in focus: *we feel like doing everything again, videotape again.* While Fa's evaluations are marked by an extremely subjective level of involvement, P's interventions are characterized by the establishment of the distance she considers necessary to evaluate one's actions. P's position (11) on Fa's feeling

conveyed through the modalization *I think this is…the purpose* and Fa's (14) pejorative declarative suggesting the purpose would be to s*ee what a trash it is* illustrate the distinct and conflicting opinions of both participants.

Starting with her utterance in turn 15, P, using her *authority* as a researcher and supported by the crystallized ideologies that support her practice as a teacher educator, lectures about the role of reflection, advocating the necessity of establishing a distance, that is, of observing one's own action from a third person point of view, so as to develop the ability of analyzing and reflecting about it. Ce's experience as a pedagogical coordinator and her own experience during her master research are examples used by P to reinforce the *authority* of her ideological position.

Nevertheless, if on the one hand P defends the necessity of establishing this distance, on the other, she declares that we *are only one, emotions are part of our nature*, thus assuming the impossibility of not being subjectively involved. The apparent contradiction reveals the ideology framed by the research paradigm advocated by P, which proposes that interpretations and evaluations are influenced by the socially determined point of view of the individual, being, therefore, naturally ideological and subjective. In this sense, the establishment of an observation distance does not imply carrying out objective interpretations. It refers to the capacity of *observing oneself from the outside* so as to *subjectively* reflect about one's own action.

Despite her intention of helping Fa, P's intervention, characterized by the monological discourse and by the *author*itative word, did not allow the real causes of the teacher's dissatisfaction to be brought into discussion. As she was bent on advocating her own ideological positions, P did not provide opportunities in the dialogue for Fa to rethink and reconstruct her ideologies. Fa's replies (18, 20, 22) are mere revoicings of the *author*itative word.

When, in the third reflective session, P questions Fa and

Ce about possible contributions that the association between theory and practice can bring to the reflective process, her intervention allows interpretations about the role of other people's collaboration to be developed. The *other* starts to include, besides the peers, the *other* author.

Excerpt 2 – Reflective Session 3

624   P: Do you think that... the fact of…. well… reading a text and trying to relate the concepts of this   text with your practice helps?

625   Fa: Oh yes, it helps. But we always do that. *Every time I read something, I ask myself if…*

626   P: You already do it mentally?

627   Fa: Oh, mentally. Gosh, *this has something to do with my class. Gosh, I use text. Then, sometimes you don't even know the theory, but apply it.*

628   P: *Why is it so that we apply the theory without knowing it?*

629   Fa: Oh, *because I think we always try to simplify, facilitate for the student*, don't we? And we always try to check what will facilitate. Oh, I don't know… sometimes I read and think I'm applying it.

630   P: I think we do it intuitively, don't we? And what is the difference... we do plenty of things intuitively. It also happens to me when I start reading several things and think: I do this, or I don't do that. I think like that, but act differently. *Yes... but what is the difference then between doing something intuitively and doing it aware of the theory? What difference does it bring to your action?*

631   Ce: I think that when you are, I mean, aware of... of the theory, *this creates a few more possibilities of identifying where you're making mistakes in order to solve the problem and do the right thing more often.* It's a more reflected thing, we can say like that. When it is only intuition, you...

632   Fa: It is really so...

633   Ce: I think it will be better.

634   P: Yes.

635   Ce: (?) *A theory is based on the experience of another*

person; it can be considered a kind of interaction as well.
636   P: Yes.
637   Ce: So.... if you know the theory of, I don't know, of Vygotsky you can be led to think of something that, maybe, you would do wrongly at that moment or maybe not... something that wouldn't be suitable for a specific group and you would only discover in the moment of the class and, certainly, you would have the possibility of making mistakes because of this.
638   Fa: I think Ce is right.
639   P: Then, *probably, knowing the theory, we have more possibilities, as you said, of reflecting on the action, right? Of reflecting about what we are doing.*

Through this excerpt it is possible to notice that the evaluations carried out by Fa on her own reflective process are fed basically by the perception she intuitively built about her actions in the classroom. The declaratives (Fa: 625 and 627) *every time I read something I ask myself if…this has something to do with my class; I use text and sometimes you don't even know the theory, but apply it* seem to indicate that it is the practice that informs the theory and not the opposite. This perception is confirmed in her reply to P's (628) questioning about the reason why *we apply the theory without knowing it*, in which Fa (629) evaluates that the intuitive application of theoretical constructs can be explained by the fact, equally intuitive, that *we always try to simplify, facilitate for the student.* Fa's utterances (625, 627 and 629) above suggest that theory is regarded as a way to prescribe actions for the EFL classroom.

In spite of valuing Fa's contribution for the discussion and report that she has gone through a similar experience, P (630) signals in her subsequent interrogatives – *what is the difference then of doing intuitively and doing aware of the theory? and what difference does it bring to your action?* – her ideological position that our action should be informed by the real instead of the intuitive knowledge of the theory. This ideological position is also uttered by Ce (631), who associates

the awareness of the theory with the possibility of *identifying where you're making mistakes in order to solve the problem and do the right thing more often.*

When he declares that a theory is based on the experience of another person, it can be considered a kind of interaction as well, Ce (635) ends up by expanding the view concerning the role played by the other(s) in his reflective process. In this sense, both the peers and the different authors become the other collaborators, interacting to trigger a reflective process. This view is supported by Ce's utterance in turn 637, in which the possibility of doing the right or wrong thing is emphasized using the vygotskian theory as a framework.

While Fa (638) expresses agreement with Ce, P (639) tries to reconstruct the position advocated by Ce in the light of the crystallized ideological systems that frame her research paradigm. Therefore, when she concludes that *knowing the theory, we have more possibilities, as you said, of reflecting on the action*, P is not simply revoicing Ce's evaluations, but changing the focus of doing the wrong or right thing to the skill of reflecting in action, skill that she regards as crucial for teachers' development.

Final remarks

The two excerpts briefly analyzed indicate that the reflective sessions that P held with Fa and Ce brought to the center of the dialogue the discussion about the reflective process experienced by the teachers. The fact of providing space for this kind of discussion is closely related to the epistemological belief advocated by P that critical reflection is fundamental to transform current actions in the ELF classroom.

By comparing the two excerpts, it is also possible to observe that the researcher's intervention is more *author*itative in the first excerpt and more *persuasive* in the second. While her utterances in the first excerpt are marked by declaratives

in which P authoritatively revoices the crystallized ideologies that frame her practice, in the second excerpt her intervention is filled with interrogatives that more persuasively allow for the negotiation of meanings with the two participant teachers.

Finally, I end this paper with the proposition that the theoretical framework delineated by the circle of Bakhtin, for allowing ideological conflicts engendered in the dialogue to be understood and analyzed both in relation to the concrete situation and to the broader sociohistorical milieu, represents a relevant framework in the search for a more persuasive, critical and, consequently, more revolutionary intervention in the process of teacher education.

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Título: *O diálogo professor-pesquisador: mediador ideológico do processo reflexivo na sala de aula de LE*

Resumo: *Com base no conceito de pesquisa dialógica proposto por Coulter (1999), este artigo propõe-se a discutir o processo de construção do conhecimento e o processo reflexivo desencadeado pelo diálogo entre a pesquisadora e dois professores de inglês como língua estrangeira em um curso de línguas na cidade de Lorena, São Paulo. Os dados a serem analisados são decorrentes de sessões reflexivas realizadas com esses dois professores após a filmagem de suas aulas e integram o corpus da minha tese de doutorado. As concepções do círculo de Bakhtin de ideologias do cotidiano/ideologias historicamente cristalizadas e de discurso autoritário/discurso internamente persuasivo são usadas para compreender as ideologias reveladas e construídas no diálogo entre a pesquisadora e dois professores durante sessões reflexivas voltadas para discussão da prática pedagógica dos professores-participantes. A análise de dois recortes sugere que a intervenção da pesquisadora ocorre ora por meio do discurso autoritário, ora por meio do discurso internamente persuasivo, refletindo as ideologias historicamente cristalizadas do paradigma teórico por ela defendido. Além disso, a breve análise realizada também aponta para o fato de que as concepções postuladas pelo círculo de Bakhtin fornecem pressupostos teóricos relevantes para a compreensão do processo reflexivo desencadeado no diálogo entre professores e pesquisadores externos.*

Palavras-chave: *ideologia; discurso persuasivo e autoritário; diálogo; reflexão.*