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## **Promoting the Development of Learner Autonomy and FL Oral Production through Peer Collaboration**

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the development of learner autonomy and foreign language oral production through peer collaboration in a Brazilian teacher education program. Brazilian students seldom have the opportunity to speak English beyond the classroom. In pre-service English teacher development, few students are proficient in the language, and to become teachers, they all need to make the most of opportunities to improve their competence in the language and to familiarize themselves with all the aspects of teaching and learning. This situation and the fact the university had an underused ICT laboratory for teacher development, led to the organization of a social learning space to stimulate autonomous work and collaboration among students beyond the classroom. A few students participated as volunteer collaborators, and their engagement in the activities was analyzed to find out whether they had opportunities to develop autonomy and oral skills. The aim of the paper is twofold: first, to describe the course of action designed for this context, drawing from literature on learner autonomy (Benson, 2000, 2011; Dam, 2000; Kohonen, 1992; Little, 1996; 1997; Murray, 2014) and social learning spaces (Allhouse, 2015; Heigham, 2011; Murray, 2014); and second, to discuss the development and preliminary results of this process.

*Keywords:* EFL, learner autonomy, oral production, social learning space, peer collaboration

The purpose of this paper is to present an ongoing research project that has been conducted in a teacher education program in Brazil and its preliminary results. The project investigates how learner autonomy and oral production are promoted through peer collaboration in a social learning space (Allhouse, 2015; Heigham, 2011; Murray, 2014).

In Brazil, spoken English is seldom used outside the university, and most learners do not have opportunities to practice the language beyond the classroom. In foreign language (FL) teacher education classes, students' English language proficiency levels vary widely. Since all the students in FL teacher education programs seek to become FL teachers, they need to be competent in English and engage themselves in the teaching and learning process.

With this context in mind, we sought to encourage collaboration and foster autonomy. One of the facilities available at our university is an ICT laboratory for teacher development, a space that, to an extent, has been underutilized, but which, nonetheless, seemed a suitable space to encourage collaboration. Therefore, as part of the teaching staff of this program, we decided to design a project to help students use the ICT laboratory as a social learning space and to foster the development of autonomy and oral production through peer collaboration. A few students volunteered to participate as collaborators and, therefore, to help their peers. At the same time, they sought to improve their own fluency in the FL. Their engagement in the project was analyzed to find out whether they had opportunities to develop their oral skills and autonomy in the FL. Therefore, this paper first describes the context of the project, its aims, and presents its theoretical bases. Next, it presents the methodological procedures we adopted to implement the project and to collect data. It also presents the preliminary results of the investigation. We conclude by reflecting on the outcomes and by presenting our considerations for future research.

### **The context**

The teacher education program where this project was conducted is offered by a traditional federal university in the State of São Paulo, in the southeastern part of the country. The campus is located on the outskirts of a large city, very close to the capital of the state. The neighborhood is poor and faces problems such as violence and drug dealing. There has been accelerated growth in the region recently, but it still lacks appropriate infrastructure and opportunities for leisure or cultural development. Schools nearby have limited resources, teachers are overloaded with work and usually are not well qualified.

Some of our students are local residents, but some come from São Paulo, the capital of the state, and nearby towns. Most of them have studied in public schools and are from low socio-economic backgrounds, but there are also a few from private schools and higher socio-economic groups. Some of them work during the day, take a long time to get to the campus, and study in the evening. Therefore, classes vary widely concerning students' profiles and levels of competence in the English language.

Our program was created in 2009 as part of the government's policy to offer opportunities for free higher education to less privileged districts. It lasts five years, and the curriculum includes, among other subjects, six terms of English Language, four terms of English Literature, two terms of English Language Teaching and two terms of Internship. The internship program takes place for the most part in local schools, where students attend classes, participate in a variety of pedagogical activities and implement lesson plans they design themselves, under our supervision, among other things. It is important to mention that fluency in the FL is not a pre-requisite when students enter the university, but they are expected to achieve a good command of the language by the time they graduate.

Part of our concern comes from the fact that the program does not offer students any other opportunity to improve their English competence beyond the regular classes. Our department does not have a language laboratory or a self-access center where students can work autonomously in order to improve their language competence levels, in particular their oral production.

Fortunately, in 2013 the Interdisciplinary Laboratory of Teacher Education (LIFE, its acronym in Portuguese), the locus of this project, was built with government funds. Since then, it has been shared by all the teacher education departments on campus: Education, History, Language, Social Sciences and Philosophy. This laboratory seeks to promote the design, implementation and evaluation of pedagogical practices for pre-service and in-service teachers. In 2013 and 2014, it offered scholarships for tutoring, which enabled teachers to organize lectures, workshops, classes and other activities within the space with the support of teaching assistants. Due to budget cuts, these scholarships were discontinued and professors felt discouraged to take charge of all the tasks required to maintain the room and equipment and to organize the activities without any kind of support from the institutional staff or tutors. This situation contributed to the underuse of the laboratory.

At that time, as professors in the program in charge of the internships, we were seeking ways to meet our students' needs more properly. We felt it was necessary to create ways of stimulating some kind of work beyond the classroom in order to foster autonomy and to help them improve their oral production. LIFE seemed to be quite a promising place for that. That context led us to think of

volunteer work and the organization of a social learning space. Therefore, the project we designed drew from literature on learner autonomy, more specifically on the social dimension of autonomy, and on social learning spaces. The next section of the paper presents this theoretical background.

### **Theoretical Background**

The project we present here drew from literature in the fields of autonomy and interdependence (Benson, 2000; 2011; Kohonen, 1992; Little, 1996; 1997), the social dimension of autonomy (Murray, 2014) and social learning spaces (Allhouse, 2015; Croker & Ashurova, 2012; Heigham, 2011; Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Murray; 2014). In the following subsections we discuss the ideas from this literature which informed our decisions.

#### ***The concept of autonomy***

We view autonomy according to researchers such as Benson (2011), Kohonen (1992), Little (1996), Murray (2014), who understand that autonomy implies interdependence. This view is in line with the socio-historical perspective of learning (Vigotski, 1998a; 1998b), more recently reinterpreted and referred to as sociocultural theory (Wertsch, 1991; Rogoff, 1995). Such a perspective considers that learning and development take place in social contexts, mediated by language and other systems, and it is in interaction with other people that human beings make sense of the world.

Therefore, we understand autonomy as the capacity to take control over one's own learning (Benson, 2011), but we focus on the social dimension of autonomy (Murray, 2014), and conceive interaction as well as collaboration as central concepts in our project. We also believe, in agreement with authors such as Benson (2000), Dam (2000), Little (1997) and others, that the development of autonomy involves reflection, assessment and self-assessment.

In our project, we operationalized the ideas above by stimulating volunteer work among the students. In our view, that would contribute for them to learn, to develop autonomy and, at the same time, to become aware of their social responsibility, a point clearly illustrated in Kohonen's (1992) remark below:

Personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways. (p. 19)

### ***Social learning spaces***

The present project also drew from experiences which demonstrated self-access centers had more success when they became social learning spaces (Allhouse, 2015; Croker & Ashurova, 2012; Heigham, 2011; Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Murray, 2014).

Heigham (2011) described the four-staged evolution of a language laboratory towards a student-run center facility with little teacher or staff control in Japan. Since the beginning the facility aimed at giving students some control over their language studies by allowing them to choose the material to be worked with in the sessions, which used to take place under the supervision of a teacher. The place went through several changes, concerning material resources as well as opportunities for learning, until it became a social learning space. According to Heigham (2011), the center opens every day, except weekends, and its users can consult the small library as well as participate in activities such as workshops, study and discussion groups and cultural events. The self-access center is run by six students who are paid to take care of the center; there are also two grammar tutors, paid as well, and up to twenty volunteer students who lead discussion groups. There is a teacher, for the overall supervision, and an administrative assistant, for paper work and the provision of materials, but they work in another room, in order to keep the center run only by students. Participants' accounts have demonstrated that attendance is due mainly to the opportunities to meet and exchange ideas with more experienced peers.

Heigham's experience gives us an example of an institutional space almost totally run by students and involving volunteer work. However, it is worth emphasizing that the center has financial assistance to cover teaching and administrative staff; relying completely on volunteer work, as in our case, is a

more unpredictable situation since students usually give priority to opportunities where they receive financial support and, consequently, give up collaborating.

Allhouse (2015) coordinates a self-access center, in the United Kingdom, where interactive activities such as reading clubs, discussion groups and peer-oriented learning are organized. In this social learning space, students operate as assistants or volunteers. The researcher has investigated other self-access centers in the United Kingdom and has observed that activities which involve peer, tutor or teacher interaction attract more attention than material-oriented activities. Based on his investigations and agreeing with other researchers such as Croker & Ashurova (2012), Heigham (2011), Murray & Fujishima (2013) and Murray (2014), Allhouse points out the positive results and acceptance of socially-oriented activities, and stresses the new role of self-access centers as social learning spaces.

Taking previous studies into account, and bearing in mind the characteristics of our own context, it seemed to us that we could consider using LIFE—the teacher development laboratory mentioned above—as a social learning space. Our objective was to promote autonomy and to develop oral production. This idea sprung from the fact that LIFE is not as formal a place as the classroom setting and could function in between the classroom and the students' lives. The fact that we work in a less privileged situation with inequalities and challenging conditions stressed the need to promote peer collaboration and social responsibility among students within this space. It seemed to us that investigating what happens in this situation might be a relevant contribution to studies in the field of autonomy, its social dimensions, the construction and maintenance of social learning spaces.

### **Methodology**

This study aims to investigate how to promote autonomy and oral production through volunteer peer collaboration. In the first term of 2017, we started the process by inviting undergraduate students to be LIFE collaborators. Five students agreed to volunteer: Bianca, Carlos, Daniel, Giovana and Renato.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the research participants have been changed to keep their identities confidential.

The volunteers were expected to plan and deliver workshops to foster autonomy and to encourage oral production among their peers with our support.

Bianca and Daniel were both enrolled in the third term of the course, but while Bianca had demonstrated to be quite fluent in English, Daniel had difficulty to understand and to speak the language. Despite his uneasiness with the FL, Daniel caught our attention for his engagement in all the activities and his willingness to improve and to help his peers. Carlos and Giovana were both enrolled in the ninth term and had opened a small language school in the neighborhood. They were enthusiastic about participating in the project, but they were available for our group's weekly meetings only on Fridays, when both of us, the teacher-researchers, were busy with other pedagogical duties. Renato had almost completed his credits, but was enrolled in the internship program.

Our initial idea was to organize a group with all the volunteers. However, due to the participants' time constraints, we were forced to split the group in two. Group 1 (G1) included Bianca, Daniel, Renato and the two of us – teacher-researchers. Group 2 (G2) included Carlos, Giovana and Renato. G2 comprised only students and Renato was supposed to be the leader, since he participated in both groups. That was the way we managed to include all the volunteers in the project. Furthermore, we thought this organization would allow us to observe how G2 would work by themselves, without our participation in their meetings. G1 was expected to meet every Wednesday, and G2 on Fridays.

The volunteers made it clear from the beginning that they wished to practice the language, and as the development of oral production was one of the objectives of the project, we decided that conversation among the participants should be only in English.

In the weekly meetings, in order to help volunteers understand the theoretical concepts that underlie the project, G1 and G2 were expected to discuss texts on learning, learner autonomy and social learning spaces. Such concepts were also expected to guide the collaborative work that volunteers had to engage in with their peers in the social learning space. In every meeting, one of the participants was supposed to bring a summary of the assigned text, presenting and discussing it with the group. As teacher-researchers, we were available to assist when necessary. Volunteers agreed to the task of organizing workshops, based on authentic materials from the internet, such as games, songs, poems, TV series,



excerpts from movies and documentaries, under our supervision. We made it a point that those workshops should be interactive, entertaining, and should stimulate students to continue to use websites on their own to improve their proficiency in the language.

During the first semester of 2017, G1 met once a week with both of us, and engaged in the activities we had planned at the beginning: reading, summarizing and discussing texts, designing, implementing and evaluating workshops to help other students to improve oral proficiency and to become more autonomous. G2 also met regularly, but not every week because sometimes one or two of the participants had problems at work and were not able to arrive on time. And, despite our agreement at the beginning of the project concerning all the activities both groups would engage in, they focused on preparing and implementing workshops. We were informed about their work by Renato, who participated in G1 and G2, and we talked informally with the other members of the same group occasionally. We understand their time constraints and engagement with other professional activities contributed to this change of plans, but also the fact we were not present in their meetings.

As teacher-researchers, we gave volunteers from both groups opportunities to make decisions about the workshops they would prepare and deliver. We participated in most of the discussions with G1. However, we only participated indirectly with G2 in all the activities. We also assigned texts to be discussed in the weekly meetings, but gave volunteers the responsibility to write summaries of the texts and to conduct the discussions. We took field notes during the process.

After the implementation of the workshops, besides carrying out oral evaluations of the events, the volunteers wrote reflective reports on what the experience meant to them and how they perceived the audience, their own performance and their own development as students and volunteers, as well as future English teachers. At the end of the term, they also completed a questionnaire about their perceived language development, their experience in peer collaboration at LIFE and its impact on their development as future teachers.

Our field notes, the transcriptions of the volunteers' workshop oral evaluations, their reflective reports and the answers to our final questionnaire comprise the data for this study.

### **Preliminary Results**

A positive result of the study was that we were able to hold three one-hour workshops at LIFE during the first term of 2017. In these events, the volunteers implemented activities aiming at helping their peers develop oral production and autonomy.

The volunteers were free to choose the theme and the manner in which they would conduct the activities. For each of the workshops, they prepared a plan beforehand, and discussed the mode of delivery for the activities. These preparations and discussions helped them learn how to plan pedagogical activities, one of the objectives of our teacher education program. It was thus an opportunity for them to develop their capacity to take control over their own learning since they could make decisions, integrate the theory we had studied with their own ideas, and exchange opinions. It also provided an opportunity for them to develop their sense of collaboration and social responsibility by analyzing their peers' interests and needs, their own potential to teach and by interacting with each other, their teachers and peers.

As these workshops were not compulsory and students were invited to spontaneously join the activities, we consider that participation was fairly good. The first workshop, *Let's learn (in)formal English together*, planned by G1, was attended by 10 students. The volunteers chose to work on sayings, proverbs, informal expressions and some of their equivalents in more formal situations. They prepared an activity that was presented using PowerPoint to the audience, who had to use computers to follow and complete the exercises. The workshop was well received by the attendees, who seemed to be pleased at the end of the session. However, when the volunteers reflected on their work in their oral evaluation, some interesting data emerged, as illustrated below<sup>2</sup>:

- Teacher 1: “But if you had to do it again? What would you change in the activity?”
- Daniel: “ I think is... the interaction...about the students and us.”
- Bianca: “Yes, among the students...yes.”

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<sup>2</sup> When presenting our data, we decided not to correct what students said or wrote in English because it is a way of illustrating what their level of proficiency in the language was.

- Daniel: “I think it was very...”
- Bianca: “Classroom...it was a class...I felt like...sometimes like we were teaching...And I don’t know if this is the purpose.”
- [...]
- Bianca: “And if we could change, according to the time we had, we could put less examples...”

(Oral evaluation of the 1<sup>st</sup> workshop, Teacher 1, Bianca and Carlos)

The data above show that, despite the language problems (e.g. “about the students and us” instead of “between the students and us”, and “less examples” instead of “fewer examples”), volunteers reflected upon and were able to assess how interactive their work had been. It seems to be a good indicator that they were aware of the importance of interacting meaningfully with other people to learn the language, one of the theoretical themes (Vigotski, 1998a; 1998b) read about and discussed during our weekly meetings. Moreover, it indicates that reflection and self-evaluation took place, relevant aspects of autonomous learning.

The second workshop, planned by G1, was attended by 10 students. The activity was named *English beyond the Classroom: Learning English with Games*. The main activity during this workshop was online quizzes. The participants formed pairs and had to solve the quiz they chose together. They enjoyed the workshop, and some of them decided to continue the activity at home.

An indicator that volunteers were becoming aware of the theoretical bases we had discussed in our meetings is exemplified below:

“I like very much of the second one because it was more in line with the proposal to teach in a different and informal way.” (Final questionnaire, Daniel)

The volunteer took into account the idea we had considered, in our weekly meeting discussions of organizing a social learning space which offered activities such as reading clubs, cultural events, and peer-oriented activities (Allhouse, 2015; Heigham, 2011; Murray, 2014). It may also be observed through the comment above that Daniel was not very proficient in the language. This can be seen through the use of the preposition “of” after the verb “like”, a structure

which was probably transferred from Portuguese. In spite of that, he was engaged in the activities, reflected about them, and played a critical role in the project, suggesting to us that students should be welcome to collaborate in the project regardless of their level of proficiency in the language.

The third workshop was attended by 11 students and organized by G2. It was also named *English beyond the Classroom: Learning English with Games*, but this time the volunteers decided to make a board game and all the cards for the audience to play with from cardboard. The game was Monopoly and the extract that follows explains the game and presents the volunteer's reflection upon the activity:

“The activity we organized with Monopoly, board game in which participants are meant to buy and rent houses in order to make money to monopolize all the places. At our activity, students were meant to speak English to negotiate, buy properties and take out loans to win the game. The good point of this activity was the performance students and tutors had because we were really interested in playing the game and interact with peers, although we had several organization problems.” (Final questionnaire, Renato)

The comment above shows that the activity was successful among the audience and enabled interaction among participants, which was one of our goals. The board game produced by the collaborators from cardboard also demonstrated their creativity and engagement in a case where they did not have the material resources available. On the other hand, the report suggests they had organizational problems. By talking to Renato during the process, and by observing the activities, we understood the members of G2 did not manage to organize all the weekly meetings as we had planned at the beginning. They were enthusiastic about the workshop they organized, but, with the exception of Renato, who participated in both groups, they read and discussed only one or two of the texts we had recommended, and spent the time they had just organizing the workshop. They did not manage to advertise the activity in advance and had to invite their peers to participate on the same day it took place. The result of the workshop was positive, as it can be perceived by the report above, but there was less planning, theoretical discussions, reflections and evaluations involved. That caught our attention to our role as teachers-researchers and our participation in the process. The idea was to give volunteers opportunities to make decisions and to take on

more responsibility for the administration of the space. Nevertheless, it seems to us our direct participation at the beginning of the process is relevant since it allows us to help them to better organize their meetings, their readings and the time to plan and advertise the workshop.

A positive outcome of the three workshops is that most students who took part in the first event came for the next ones, although they were not compulsory. It suggests that students probably appreciated the activity, the chosen theme, and the way it was conducted. But we did not devise an evaluation instrument for the participants to give their opinion.

Another result of the experience was that oral practice and other skills of the FL were involved in our weekly meetings and during the activities in and out of the university. Volunteers had the opportunity to use English to read texts, write summaries, hold discussions, make plans for the workshops, negotiate their decisions, reflect upon and evaluate the workshops and their experiences in the project. In the workshops, they also used English to establish a good rapport with their peers, present the activities, give instructions as well as stimulate participation.

We conclude this section by summarizing some of the main findings of the study. First, volunteers were allowed to make decisions concerning the design and implementation of workshops, and they were motivated, creative and responsible in doing so. Reading and discussing theory about learning, autonomy and social learning spaces allowed them to make some informed decisions concerning those events. In the process, there was reflection and self-evaluation, relevant aspects of autonomous learning. Second, concerning the use of the English, the participants were involved in different types of activities which required the use of written and spoken English. The participation of Daniel, who was less fluent in the FL than the other volunteers, indicated that peer collaboration might be a good way to help students practice the language. And finally, concerning our role as teachers and researchers, the different types of engagement in the activities by G1 and G2 indicated to us that direct participation and support is necessary at the beginning of the process. But it is our belief that the initial support will prepare learners to take on more responsibility in the next stages of the process and in their development as language teachers.

## **Conclusions**

The preliminary results described above indicate that it is worth investing in the project of maintaining a social learning space on the university campus so that learners can learn while they help each other. It was evident that in some cases the environment and the activities provided opportunities for the volunteers to develop autonomy in their language skills, mainly oral production, through peer collaboration.

With regards to autonomy, the data suggest that volunteers made decisions concerning the workshops to be organized, and those decisions were informed by the literature discussed in the weekly meetings. Some of the main points of the project theoretical background are that learning takes place through interaction, and that autonomy implies interdependence. Volunteers appeared to be aware of the principles of autonomy as interdependence by taking into account their peers' needs and interests, by preparing interactive activities for the workshops, and by analyzing how interactive those workshops had been.

Further evidence of autonomous learning among volunteers is related to taking responsibility. Volunteers took charge of the whole process of planning, implementing and evaluating the workshops, counting on us to exchange ideas, give opinions and suggestions and help whenever necessary. Concerning the theoretical background for the workshops and for the whole project, volunteers led the discussion and produced reports based on the readings suggested by us as teacher-researchers. The fact that there was more participation and engagement from G1, who had our direct participation, than from G2 made us think of how we can balance our presence in the activities in a way that volunteers take more and more responsibility. Our idea is to have them take charge of LIFE administration, and to make it their own space for learning and for helping each other and their peers.

As further evidence of autonomous behavior, the volunteers took the opportunities created in the project to reflect on their decisions and to evaluate the workshops they had organized. This finding shows us that learners are willing to be reflective and critical when they are encouraged to do so.

Another important finding that emerged from the data relates to the volunteers' level of proficiency in English. We attempted to create a relaxed atmosphere and to stimulate people to develop their fluency. Because of that, we avoided making corrections while they were speaking unless the ideas they were

explaining were not clear. We found that the volunteers used English all the time as we had planned, but we realized something more objective had to be done concerning their language mistakes and inadequacies. So, one implication for the next stages of the project is that we will need to find a better balance between encouraging fluency and accuracy.

Still concerning the level of proficiency in English, the volunteer who had more difficulty with the language had a good level of engagement in the project, demonstrating willingness to improve and to help his peers. This fact encourages us to invite more students to collaborate in the next stages of the project, regardless of how good their command of the language is. Their language development should be a focus of investigation.

Some further implications for future research and practice include the need to explore the motivations behind students' participation in the workshops. Besides that, it would be interesting to inquire whether or not the activities designed by the volunteers foster autonomy and the learning outcomes achieved through the activities.

To sum up, this study corroborates the importance of organizing spaces within universities where students can practice the foreign language in a relaxed atmosphere outside the classroom. It also shows that students may adopt a creative, reflective and enthusiastic attitude when they are given opportunities to collaborate, make decisions and take responsibility for their own learning.

### **Notes on the Contributors**

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