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**RETROSPECTIVE-INTROSPECTIVE REFLECTIONS ON A
LANGUAGE LEARNER'S EXPERIENCE**

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RESUMO – O artigo tenta fazer um relato subjetivo da experiência do autor como aprendiz de Inglês Língua Estrangeira. Embora baseado em julgamentos pessoais inconscientes, intuitivos e subjetivos, o autor tenta explicar alguns fatos de sua aprendizagem e possíveis causas e/ou fatores.

EFL IN THE EARLY HIGH-SCHOOL YEARS

The first time I came into contact with learning English was in the late 50 's. I was then 10 years of age, and attended the first grade of high-school. My first impressions of the language were great. At the time, I had a great respect and admiration for the American culture, and my empathy and attitude towards English would probably have laid the cornerstone for a successful EFL learning. The method adopted in class was a grammar translation (GT) one. Looking back at it now, although that might sound a little too strong, I feel that the method would have mattered little at that time, because, perhaps due to my great psychological proximity, I would have learned the language in spite of the method. My unconsciousness of methodological considerations and my brain plasticity might have contributed to my openness to the teaching method, whatever it might be. As to my biological age, I was in the pre-puberty years and a learning method based on the conscious inference and or application of grammatical rules could not have been what would be more adequate to my developmental stage at that time. Probably the Piagetian stage of Formal Operations had not been established yet. I wonder how different my learning would have been if at that time I were brought into a community in which

English was spoken. But that's not how the story goes. There was no rejection of the teaching methodology. On the contrary, I was eager to learn the language. The concept I had of both the subject and the teacher by far outweighed the inadequacies of the approach, if any. I liked the classes and emulated the teacher.

I can remember the storyline described in the textbooks and the search for the hidden treasures of the pirates of the Caribbean

Throughout the subsequent years of junior high-school, I continued studying English by doing grammar translation from and to English texts. The secondary education system in Brazil in the early 50's comprised 4 years of junior plus 3 years of senior high-school. In the 4th year of high-school I began studying Latin and once again using the GT method. It was amazing looking back at the protolanguage of my native Portuguese language. I could recognize many grammatical patterns, vocabulary and verb paradigms I could use as a native speaker of my language without being conscious of where they had come from. The study of Latin has contributed a lot to my success with language thereafter.

It certainly strengthened my analytical reasoning and increased my taste for literature, although I know a lot of people who have had trouble with Latin and the effect of this is just the opposite. Thus throughout my high-school years Latin has received considerable attention as one of the pivot disciplines of the curriculum. I reached a high degree of sophistication in both the grammar and the literature and I read most of the classical masterpieces of Latin literature in its original text.

The effects of classroom instruction and the school system on my learning are undeniable. Maybe their importance resides on the mere fact that that it was the only chance available for me at that time so I had better make the most out of it. This calls for the intervention of self-esteem as personality factor which in my particular case contributed to promoting higher achievement levels. The role of emulation and competition on classroom pedagogy cannot be overlooked. This evidences that the instructional variable cannot be minimized in an EFL situation. The faculty in our school promoted higher academic standards and I was proud to be an A student throughout high-school. No wonder reinforcement theory strikes again. Feedback and incentive from my teachers were constant throughout my studies. I believe, based on my personal experience as a learner and a teacher that follow-up assistance to students outside the classroom with their homework and assignments is of equal, if not greater importance than classroom instruction. I remember the reading sessions we had to take and the other literary activities we had to participate in. Particularly exciting was the literary marathon we had each

semester. The winning class would have a weekend off to go camping and other symbolic rewards.

Part of this description aims at giving the reader some aspects of the stimulating setting in which my FLL took place. In the 4th year of high-school, I also started studying French. I believe my teacher and the method had a lot to do with my learning of French. The teacher was very communicative and the method stressed communication and was presented with audiovisual aids. I continued studying French throughout the last years of high-school and could reasonably communicate in French in matters of conversation. Concomitantly with conversation, grammar and vocabulary were taught and reinforced by homework and reading assignments. French literature was also a great help in the learning of French culture and thought. I can still remember whole passages from the classic and modern French authors. French was also further reinforced as the medium of instruction in the study of Greek literature I did during the three years of senior high-school. What's left of studying Greek through the grammar translation method is a passive knowledge of the language from the high standards of comprehension and written production attained at that time. I wonder why I did not achieve the same standards of success with Greek. Perhaps the goal of the language was just instrumental, for reading purposes, since Classical Greek was not spoken anymore.

Having digressed a little about the other components of my high-school tossed-salad language learning I will now focus on English. I continued studying English throughout the years of senior high-school by the GTM. A high degree of proficiency in comprehension and written production was achieved, although, unlike French, the language was not used for communicative purposes. Although the emphasis was not on communication in TEFL both in the case of English and French the cultural and literary aspects of the language were highlighted by the teaching of folk songs, movies, records and selected magazines. This certainly helped to create a more meaningful setting for the learning of the language.

THE LEARNING AND TEACHING OF EFL IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

A real shift in my language learning took place when I entered college. My high-school course had been excellent and little was really added to it by the college years. But I got the credentials to use my language knowledge in a

more meaningful way. With my BA in English and Portuguese what I really gained was the pedagogy, the educational psychology and teacher training I needed. From my sophomore year on I started teaching English and Portuguese. During this time a revolutionary process began to take place in my English learning. I wanted to teach my students differently than I had been taught. Although I had met with success through GT method, I must confess it took a lot of energy and extra effort to learn the language and a very great motivational level to overcome the methodological shortcomings of that approach. Thus now I wanted to teach conversation rather than about the language. This was the beginning of a total shift which would lead me to speak the language I had already learned. Would this be an example of learning leading to acquisition in Krashen's terms? Of course, that will depend whether I had really learned it or acquired it in the first place. Whatever it may be called it was a conscious attempt (monitor model) to make the language I had soaked up for years become active for me. I wonder what the interlanguage of my students might have sounded like in relation to my own interlanguage. But at least then I had some speakers to practice with. Needless to say that the innovation had cost me a couple of lost jobs. Thus my reaction to the teaching method came in as a rebellious professional attitude. And when you start teaching you really start learning. Maybe my high motivation and my ego-permeability appeared in the form of openness to new approaches and ideas. Allied with my self-esteem they made me establish high standards for myself, which might have made up for the lack of a range of social factors which could have exerted a great influence on my learning. Once the taste for language has been acquired, learning becomes much easier because affect is a very important factor in any kind of learning. You learn better what you love better. Once again self-esteem in the form of professional competition was the leit motif of my acquisition of English. As an English teacher I needed to become a model for my students and I took every chance I had to improve my knowledge. To name just some, I indulged in movies, recorded language courses, radio and TV broadcasts and used every chance I had to talk to native speakers in my strong drive to communicate and practice the language. The support and feedback I got from these attempts increased my willingness to proceed. Thus the social distance in which I found myself by a geographical accident was by far outweighed by my psychological proximity which would promote good language learning. I used every single opportunity I had to promote my professional development by participating in workshops, seminars, congresses and institutes related to my area of interest. As I was getting acknowledged in the field, my transition anxiety was diminishing and certainly the nature of the input I was receiving had a lot to do with it. As a professional teacher I was

able to communicate with my peers and foreigners in a relatively proficient way. There are many slippery steps in the life of a teacher/learner, and a chapter in the storyline is the search and discovery, the trial-and-error attempt at communicative success. Although we rarely talk about the citing of an individual person, a model, emulation nonetheless is a very strong motivator of language learning and each of us can remember an idol in his or her younger years.

THE LEARNING OF EFL IN THE GRADUATE YEARS

Having acquired the language and the classroom experience through many years of teaching-learning one suddenly feels the need for further specialization. This instrumental motivation has led me to undertake an MA course in linguistics in which the technical knowledge about the nature of language has opened a wide new range of learning about an interdisciplinary set of sciences and fields such as philosophy of language, semantics, discourse analysis, syntax and pragmatics, to name just a few. And once you've learned these new concepts they become part of you and of your new perspective to look at language. My MA represented a lot to me mainly in terms of my reading and writing competence in English. Concomitantly it opened the doors of college teaching to me and I felt I learned a lot by teaching at this level. Grammar and conversation classes and language laboratories when well planned and designed certainly contribute a lot to broadening one's learning of a language.

The conscious study of somebody else's acquisition of a language certainly makes you much more aware of your own learning/acquisition processes. My study of a Brazilian adolescent's acquisition of ESL was certainly a great source of new learning to me. My MA thesis opened the door to a new phase in my life as a language learner. I had the chance to work in a center for applied linguistics in the preparation of teachers and in the research and design of pedagogical materials for TEFL. You certainly learn a lot when you have to match the theory and the practicalities.

FROM EFL TO ESL

A big jump in my acquisition of English was made when I got a scholarship for my doctoral studies in the US. One of the hard things about an introspective paper like this is that each aspect of my learning could be a paper and so one runs the risk of being too superficial when trying to give a full account of something life lasting as language learning. That is certainly true. But it is also important to see the trends in the whole thing. So for the remainder of this paper I will focus on some of the multifaceted aspects of my current stage of SLA.

Whenever a foreigner moves into a new country there is an inevitable language and culture shock no matter the degree of his or her proficiency in the TL and knowledge of the TL culture. This language and culture shock can be exemplified by the disappointment I experienced with the language and the people to judge from the first impressions. To speak English with upper middle class educated people in my country is not quite the same as just passing through Customs and having to guess the muttered routines of the Customs officers. From the Customs into a cab you get the second dose of language and culture shock which lets you down at the beginning. But adaptation should not take too long particularly if the learner's assimilation pattern is not impeded by the desire for preservation and cohesiveness of the group. As my attitude towards the American language and people was very positive, acculturation was tremendously facilitated particularly by the lack of social and psychological distance, which is the only way for acculturation to take place.

It is certainly easier to be bilingual than bicultural. For a language learner to become fully bicultural there are many variables involved which cannot be given full account in only one paper. I will touch just some by means of illustration. It certainly involves becoming bicultural in every aspect of the TL group's life. Let's stick to the academic side of this biculturalism. As a language learner I had to learn how to function like an American, how to attend classes and participate in discussions in the most articulate way that was possible in terms of the new system. Affective factors like motivation and ego-permeability were crucial for me. Although my intended length of residence in the TL area was considerably long I felt eager to identify myself with the TL group from the very beginning. Dealing with people from different cultures may be very tough at times and more than once my sensitivity to rejection was hurt. Needless to say that it was much more because of my high self-esteem than my aversion to rejection.

When it comes to evaluation, introversion vs. extroversion may make quite a difference in the classroom. My introverted character makes me feel silent for at least a certain observational stage before I start publicly speaking. This may be deeply interrelated with my tolerance for ambiguity because I am

able to cope with some vagueness till it gets clarified in the process. I modestly rate myself as a good language learner. As there is no need to specify the components of a good language learner in this paper I will try to finish this study by discussing briefly some cognitive factors which I can identify as composing my cognitive profile. I remember having quite often used cognitive processes such as imitation (mainly of slang and idioms) and analogy as tools to learn new language and its application to new contexts. More than once I have overgeneralized like in “paint” for “dye” one’s hair. I don’t go in very many details and I believe my cognitive style is marked by more field dependence and conscious monitoring than relaxed performance, although sometimes I feel that my higher cognitive systems seem to delegate their functions to some lower infrasystems particularly when my limbic system finds affinities with specific interlocutors and communication can rely on a lot non-verbal cues. On the other hand, when my inhibitory systems seem to be operating I experience a lot of cognitive interference particularly in states of tension and high anxiety. When I know that I am being evaluated, my English does not come out natural and my performance is much lower when I am operating in a conscious mode.

If there is such a thing as language aptitude I consider myself apt for languages, first, because I like to learn them just for the sake of it, and, second, because my experience with languages has proved to be successful. At this point in this paper, one might ask what happened to the French I had learned quite well at high-school. Without too deep an examination I would say it has fossilized due to a lack of practice, input and reinforcement, but I would say it is still stored somewhere in the neurofunctionally organized systems of my brain waiting to be retrieved when deemed necessary. As to the German I tried to learn for a while, due to the lack of continuity, I think it has never got there.

In short I believe learning is a life-lasting activity and thus my English is on the move. In spite of all the labels our current-best-shot researcherese might coin for the most up-to-date description of the processes of the science-art of SLA, we have to keep in mind that no matter how well found it might be, a label is just a label and the ultimate variables for a language learning or acquisition reside within the individual, although we hope they are generalizable enough to be interesting.

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