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**AN EXPERIENCE REPORT OF THE DIFFICULTIES TO IMPLEMENT
STUDENT-CENTERED STRATEGIES DURING ESL CLASSES IN TRADITIONAL
CLASSROOMS IN FORTALEZA-CE.**

***RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIA SOBRE AS DIFICULDADES DE IMPLEMENTAÇÃO DE ESTRATÉGIAS
CENTRADAS NO ESTUDANTE EM AULAS DE INGLÊS COMO LE EM SALAS DE AULA
TRADICIONAIS EM FORTALEZA-CE.***

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CLASSROOMS IN FORTALEZA-CE.

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Orientador(a): Prof. Dra. Diana Costa Fortier Silva.

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ABSTRACT

Student-centered strategies and constructivist approaches have been largely promoted in university courses and teacher's trainings in current times. These approaches suggest enhancement in student's motivation, stimulation of critical thinking, and better preparation for real-world challenges. However, attempting to implement a number of such concepts in a traditional classroom setting might be demanding and face many obstacles, such as time constraints, obligation to follow the school curriculum, lack of proper training, absence of appropriate resources and the grading system. All of the aforementioned might negatively impact the effort to follow some of these guidelines, as well as evoking feelings of inadequacy. In this experience report, I discuss moments in my teaching practice, in Fortaleza-Ceará, as an ESL teacher, where I tried to apply student-centered techniques as well as reflect on the obstacles I faced in my practice. Thus, I intend to contribute to the discussion on the struggles and the pressure teachers in the traditional school sphere encounter when attempting to apply student-focused methods.

Keywords: ESL teaching. Student-centered strategies. Traditional schools. Experience report.

RESUMO

Estratégias centradas no aluno e abordagens construtivistas têm sido amplamente incentivadas por disciplinas em cursos universitários e treinamentos de professores atualmente. Essas abordagens sugerem aprimoramento na motivação dos alunos, estímulo ao pensamento crítico e uma melhor preparação para desafios do mundo real. No entanto, tentar implementar alguns desses conceitos em uma sala de aula tradicional pode ser desafiador e enfrentar muitos obstáculos. Por exemplo, restrições de tempo, obrigação de seguir o currículo escolar, falta de treinamento adequado, ausência de recursos apropriados e o sistema de avaliação podem fazer com que o esforço em seguir essas diretrizes esteja fadado ao fracasso e a sentimentos de inadequação. Neste relato de experiência, discuto momentos em minha prática docente em Fortaleza-Ceará, como professora de inglês como segunda língua, nos quais tentei aplicar técnicas centradas no aluno, além de refletir sobre os obstáculos que enfrentei em minha prática de ensino. Ao proceder dessa maneira, pretendo aprofundar a discussão sobre as dificuldades e a pressão que os professores na esfera escolar tradicional encontram ao tentar aplicar métodos focados no aluno.

Palavras-chave: Ensino-aprendizagem de LE. Estratégias centradas no aluno. Escolas Tradicionais. Relato de experiência.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a highly important role in individuals' lives and society as a whole. In that sense, it is crucial to study and adapt methodologies as well as creating new ones to meet the needs of younger generations and their specificities when it comes to learning. In light of this context, strategies of constructivist approaches are being used and suggested as tools for teachers, given that those methods emphasize active participation of students in the classroom using their own personal experiences. According to Gunduz and Hursen (2015), "classrooms that practice constructivist activities empower the learners to gain access to their experiences and beliefs that reshape their prior knowledge in the light of the applied course content" (P. 526). However, implementing such principles in traditional classroom settings might present many challenges.

In Brazilian traditional classrooms, English classes have been known for excessive use of decontextualized grammar structures, repetition of sentences, and vocabulary and great focus on reading abilities. According to Siqueira and Anjos (2012), it is necessary to integrate a broader perspective on social and subjective aspects of the target language into our schools' curriculum, for if "there is no clear function, no clear objective, for learning, it is not possible to justify the maintenance of a foreign language in the curriculum of public schools" (p.134). This conventional model of teaching seems to distance students from the language as they do not understand why it is relevant to their lives and do not see any meaning in learning it. In opposition to that, constructivist approaches present ideas that seem to solve those issues. As suggested by John Dewey (1938), people learn through experiences in a process he called "learning by doing". In regards to that belief, Tarnopolsky (2012) stated:

"It is based on learning not through theory but through the experience of real-life or modeled practical activities in the course of which knowledge is used as the means or tools for those activities. As a result of using knowledge in practical activities, it is not simply learned but internalized, or appropriated, by learners, i.e., acquired much better and more efficiently (and with less effort) than in the traditional learning process." (P. 13)

With that in mind, it has been common to observe constructivist methods being suggested in many types of schools (including traditional institutions) and universities. Considering this scenario, during my learning process in the university and my work as an

English teacher in both regular and English language schools, I have been asking myself how could teachers work with constructivist methodologies when they also have to grapple with overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, the pressure of standardized testing, and a rigid curriculum.

In this experience report, I will present and discuss three moments (henceforth called ‘triggering events’) I have experienced during my classes as an ESL teacher when I faced adversities in the classroom, as well as presenting some recommended strategies to manage challenges, as proposed by constructivist approaches, and my personal experience of trying to implement them.

By addressing these issues, my objective is to share my experience in hopes to contribute to the knowledge and learning process of other ESL teachers and students, as well as providing an opportunity for critical reflection and analysis of the points presented in this essay, or implications of the experience I will report.

2. TRIGGERING EVENTS AND DERIVED REFLECTIONS

It is commonly discussed in the academic and teaching field that using student-centered, or constructivist strategies, in the classroom is beneficial to the learning process of students, as mentioned previously. Constructivist teaching methods are believed to engage students more due to the emphasis on active participation and experimentation. This means that these methods could promote a deeper understanding of the concepts since it resembles the way that speakers acquire L1, which is not using the language for the sake of the language, but as a mean to doing and achieving other activities that need language to be done. On that matter, Tarnopolsky (2012) states that “that is why if acquiring communication skills is achieved through extra-linguistic activities which model real-life human activities, the results for mastering communication functions are much better.” (P. 24)

The constructivist methods also allow personalized learning by taking into account individual differences and the students’ own knowledge by involving them in real-world scenarios and situations, which encourages students to apply what they learn in real contexts. The learning process could be constructed individually or as a group, considering that the methods usually involve collaborative settings, which might prepare students for the demands of society, especially in social and professional environments.

Although I have access to the techniques and have capacity to implement such strategies, it is challenging to implement them successfully in traditional settings for a number of reasons that will be discussed throughout the paper. I have been teaching since 2018 and for the last three years I have been working mostly in private schools with children from 7 to 11 years old. I have decided to delve deeper into three instances (named "Triggering Events") I encountered in classrooms where I faced challenges in implementing student-centered strategies.

2.1. Grouping students

When grouping students, it is advisable to let them decide how many of them are going to be in the groups and how many groups there will be. The reason behind this is that it can give them a sense of control over their learning process, especially when they are given the responsibility to decide the size of their groups and who are going to be the integrants.

Students will probably choose peers they are more comfortable with, which might result in a greater variety of perspectives and approaches to decision-making. Also about the benefits of grouping, Olusegun (2015) states that:

“Students must therefore exchange ideas and so must learn to "negotiate" with others and to evaluate their contributions in a socially acceptable manner. This is essential to success in the real world, since they will always be exposed to a variety of experiences in which they will have to cooperate and navigate among the ideas of others.” (P. 68)

Furthermore, when students are authorized to define with their own groups, they tend to take more responsibility and accountability for their results and mistakes, from what I could observe during classes.

- Derived Reflection

While allowing students to form their own groups can be beneficial, most of the time I have to intervene and decide how the class is going to be divided because sometimes I realize that they might not include some students they are not good friends with. Students would also create groups with a gender bias which is understandable considering certain phases of children’s development. I choose not to entertain this because I want to give students opportunities to interact with people with different genders and preferences. They sometimes spend too much time arguing and deciding who will or will not be a member of the group, which brings forth a discomfort for the excluded child that could possibly be harmful to their learning process, as well as jeopardizing the activity itself and the class as a whole. In addition to that, Garcia and Van Soest (1997) argue that “the learning process will be stymied if students do not feel sufficiently ‘safe’ to openly discuss their experiences and feelings” (p. 121).

Time is also a factor that plays a highly important role in deciding how I’m going to carry out the classes. Almost half of the time I have for the classes are destined to bureaucratic demands from the school, which includes picking up students from their classroom and bringing them to the English classroom, writing their daily school diary on the board and then correcting every school diary (correcting spelling mistakes is also expected). After doing activities on the book, I must collect all the books to correct the pages answered on that class. With all those things considered, I still have to follow an yearly

schedule/program that determines the pace in which students must go through the book and where they should be during a specific time of the year because there will be tests requiring the topics studied until that point in time. These factors often leave me anxious and make me aware of the time I have left during every class, so I can assess if I will be on or behind schedule, therefore determining which action I should take in that moment.

2.2. Reading Activity (Overly agitated class)

When it comes to teaching the reading ability, constructivist authors often mention creating meaningful contexts, activating prior knowledge, helping students to construct meaning by themselves, and reflecting on the topic proposed by the text. Gambrell (1996) defines the engaged reader as “able to share and communicate with others in the process of constructing and extending the meaning of text.” (P. 16)

Considering this definition, I often try to help students relate to the topics they are about to read, even when the book is discussing something that is not generally part of their daily lives (what to do when it is snowing, for example). I also try to create hands-on projects concerning the themes in the book, which is normally an activity they enjoy participating in and that allows them to move around and work with peers.

The classroom I normally teach all my classes in a day is quite big, so, in order for students to see the board and each other better, the seats are arranged in U-shaped fashion. For the reading class I am about to report, I asked students to sit in a semi-circle on the floor, because I have noticed that most of them feel calmer when given the opportunity to move freely around the class and change positions. By doing that, I intended to help them focus and assist some others who hadn't brought the reader, given that, by sitting on the floor, they were closer to the board where the book was projected.

The goal of the class was to explore the meaning of the story, look for familiar structures, and learn new vocabulary (in that case, wild animals).

Before reading the books with students, I elicited from them what was the expected behavior for that moment of the class. However, they were too agitated and unable to avoid bumping into each other, kicking classmates and engaging in conversations.

I tried to reason with them and ask how they were feeling so I could understand why they (as a whole) were so stimulated. Based on that, I could assess what is the best strategy to continue the class. Perhaps I was not clear enough or did not know what were the

most appropriate questions because the students could not give me the reasons as to why they were acting in that manner. They would only tell me that someone “stepped on their hand” or “was being annoying”.

- Derived Reflection

I reflected upon it later and inferred that perhaps the amount of activities that students have to do during the day are too much for them to handle. Some of them spend approximately eleven hours at school. A few of my students told me that they can barely interact with their parents due to the exhaustion of an entire day of classes and activities. There are too many classes, assignments and homeworks in a school day and not much time available to self-regulate, considering that is a skill they are still learning, (SHANKER, 2010) (P. 5).

The pace I have to follow everyday makes me stressed and keeps students agitated. I assume it is a lot for them to handle, especially considering that the age group I have been working with for the past years is considerably young and is still learning to socialize, control their emotions, and vocalize their needs.

Being the adult in a situation where students are agitated, I feel overwhelmed as I am supposed to find ways to keep them calm (seeing that in the school settings I have been teaching, making the entire class behave ‘properly’ is considerably more relevant than addressing the needs of a single student). I often have to figure out how to keep myself calm in order to think clearly regarding the next steps of the class with all these situations happening at the same time.

The system in traditional schools advised me to proceed in this manner to make it easier for me to teach (and consequently, perhaps, for students to learn¹), given that, if a student is too agitated the others will probably mimic their behavior or have trouble focusing, which is a consequence I have indeed observed in several instances. This leads me to believe that that is ‘the way to proceed’ because removing the student from the class seems to have the best outcomes in that environment.

2.3. Handling misbehavior

¹ By that, I mean scoring high grades in exams.

Teaching young students might be challenging when it comes to behavior, considering that they are still in the early developmental stages of social and emotional skills. Therefore, they might struggle to control their urges and to communicate effectively.

They also seem to have a shorter attention span, which could possibly lead to lack of focus and disorderly conduct. In addition to suffering with the language barrier (especially in ESL classrooms), other factors, such as unstable home settings, might also affect them.

Concerning misbehavior, constructivist approaches suggest that instead of focusing on punishments, the teacher should try to understand what are the problems fueling the behaviors by means of asking broad questions and eliciting solutions for the obstacles faced by the students in the classroom, as well as providing a safe environment and deciding collectively what can be done in those situations.

By using these strategies, the teacher must try to help children learn how to regulate themselves rather than implementing rules and repercussions. On this topic, Dollard & Christensen (1996) states that:

“Choices should not apply solely to selection of the rewards, incentives, and reinforcement schedules. To increase relevance, and thereby increase likelihood of success within and generalization across settings, the children should identify specific behaviors they think will require some work and the order and manner in which to address them.” (P. 11)

- Derived Reflection

When trying to implement those techniques, I find it very challenging to start the conversation or have the opportunity to speak individually to the student in need due to time constraints and lack of knowledge on how to proceed. In our undergraduate degree, we have courses such as “Didactics” and “Developmental Psychology”, however, they are not necessarily focused on addressing situations like those that require us to assist our students in self-regulation or guiding them in externalizing their feelings, something that many adults may not have the capacity to do for themselves. Therefore, it almost feels like we, as teachers, must perform the roles of psychologists and parents as well.

I also have not had access to effective training in the schools I have worked at. Most of the pedagogical trainings I went to were mainly focused on theoretical work, generalizations of situations, with lack of clear guidance and instructions regarding the school environment. When addressing challenging students, the strategies suggested to us are to embrace them and be empathetic, among other recommendations. Not that I disagree, because

I completely believe that we must have those in our skill set to be good teachers, but telling us to be “more empathetic” without clearer instructions or guidelines is not actually providing guidance. In fact, it only fuels my feeling of inadequacy, given that I have been receiving instructions that apparently were not made to the traditional school system, which is precisely where most of us teachers will work when graduating.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on my experience, I have faced many difficulties when trying to implement student-centered aspects into traditional classrooms. Throughout the process of writing this report, I constantly analyzed my classes and the way I respond to my students behavior, especially the way they should be physically (seated) in class. Kinesthetic learners must be regulated at all times in order to avoid disturbing the other students and making the classroom environment unfavorable to learning, since the school settings do not allow them to move in class as they please.

However, how can I put my students in the center of their learning process if they are not allowed to move freely? How am I expected to have them as the main characters of their learning if I control their every move?

Before starting this paper, I was not able to identify from where the guilt I have been feeling since starting working as a teacher had been coming. I have come to realize that the classes and school training fueled my insecurities and made me think I was not putting all my efforts and abilities in my classes because they were not similar to how the trainings portrayed them or to the constructivist theories I had been exposed to. Not to say that there are not uncountable aspects that I must work on, but this process made it easier for me to identify what are actually aspects I have to improve (and are possible to be accomplished) and what are the impossible demands coming from the school system.

Another significant obstacle emerged from the absence of appropriate resources and specific knowledge on how to handle students' needs and behaviors in general. Throughout my journey as a teacher, the insufficient training and professional development provided by schools intensified this feeling of being incompetent, making it almost impossible to act the way I was expected to, which was using constructivist-based strategies in traditional schools settings.

This sparked the following reflection: Is it possible that I have been “failing” to implement the techniques because the school structure in itself doesn’t allow that, therefore, by establishing that this is how the classes must be, they are setting themselves (and myself) up for failure?

According to Simon and Schifter (1993), teachers must reflect on what they believe concerning constructivist practices and then adapt those to their own classroom practice (P. 334). The solution I have found when discussing those issues with my colleagues

was to try and adapt the strategies to our reality, not focusing too much on a particular set of rules or recommendations that often face obstacles in traditional settings. Some of these solutions include providing controlled and previously thought options to let students debate and decide which one is best for them, promoting group work when times allows, coming up with presentations in English with a topic of their interest that is somewhat related to the curriculum, as well as thinking of activities to help students self-assess their learning even though this evaluation will not be used in their grading system, given that the school does not allow for it and the evaluation system is not in harmony with the nature of constructivist approaches.

Despite these difficulties, I recognize the potential benefits and transformative power of constructivist approaches. The engagement, motivation, and deep understanding fostered by student-centered learning can lead to meaningful knowledge construction and long-term retention. It is crucial to address the identified challenges and provide comprehensive support to educators in order to bridge the gap between traditional and constructivist methodologies and create more effective and inclusive learning environments.

In conclusion, although this process of trying to understand my struggles were extremely difficult and took a toll on my mental health, I believe it was an enriching process that contributed greatly to my professional and personal development because it stemmed from my desire to make my classes as student-centered as I could in unfavorable environments. Creating and providing a safe atmosphere for my students to learn is what motivated me to write this report and is what pushes me to go to work every day.

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