Autonomy development and the classroom: reviewing a course syllabus

(O desenvolvimento da autonomia e a sala de aula: revisando um plano de curso)

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper we describe the process of updating a course syllabus designed to foster the development of language teacher autonomy for course planning and materials preparation. Three main factors were taken into account: participants' reactions and evaluations concerning the first version of the course, the new context, and the developments in the literature related to learner and teacher autonomy. We draw on literature concerning learner and teacher autonomy (Little 2000; Lamb 2000; Benson 1997a, 1997b, 2001; Dam 1995; Aoki 2002), on Critical Pedagogy (Freire 1970, 1973, 1980, 1996) and on studies that deal with learner and teacher narratives (Benson et al. 2003; Benson 2005; Murphey et al. 2005; Karlsson & Kjisik 2007; Liberalli et al. 2003; Telles 2002, 2004). We conclude by raising some questions concerning the theoretical and practical decisions made in the second version of the course and their implications.*

KEY-WORDS: *teacher autonomy; distance education; teacher education; syllabus design.*

RESUMO: *Neste artigo descrevemos o processo de reformulação de um plano de curso que tem como objetivo o desenvolvimento da autonomia de professores de línguas para planejamento de curso e preparação de materiais didáticos. Foram levados em conta as reações e avaliações dos participantes com relação à primeira versão do curso, o novo contexto e o desenvolvimento da literatura relacionada à autonomia do professor e do aluno. A fundamentação teórica do trabalho baseia-se na literatura sobre autonomia do professor e do aluno (Little 2000; Lamb 2000; Benson 1997a, 1997b, 2001; Dam 1995; Aoki 2002), na Pedagogia Crítica (Freire 1970, 1973, 1980, 1996) e em estudos sobre narrativas do professor e do aluno (Benson et al. 2003; Benson 2005; Murphey et al. 2005; Karlsson & Kjisik 2007; Liberalli et al. 2003; Telles*

2002, 2004). Concluímos com alguns questionamentos sobre as decisões teóricas e práticas tomadas na segunda versão do curso e sobre suas implicações.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *autonomia do professor; educação a distância; desenvolvimento do professor; plano de curso.*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe the process of updating an online course syllabus whose aim is to help teachers develop autonomy in order to deal with course planning and materials design. We assume that the development of teacher autonomy is of utmost importance in that context since the decisions made in the processes of course planning and materials design will depend very much on the teacher's level of autonomy. If more autonomous, he or she will probably feel confident to make decisions after a careful examination of the students' characteristics, needs and wishes, of his professional context and of his own potential and beliefs. If less autonomous, he or she will probably accept decisions made by other people without much examination, regardless of his students, his professional context and his own identity. Even in contexts where teachers' right to make decisions is very limited, the teacher's careful examination of the situation will determine what attitude he or she should adopt and will help him or her identify how much space there is for change.

This updating took into account three main factors: teacher students' reactions and evaluations concerning the first version of the course (V1), the new context (including the target public, institutional specifications as well as the educational software available) and the developments in research concerning teacher development and autonomy.

V1 was designed for an independent online teacher development course offered to teachers of English from state schools who had been enrolled in Teachers' Links (TL) before. Teachers' Links is a continuous education course for teachers of English developed by the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo in a partnership with Cultura Inglesa – São Paulo. After being offered for some years, TL underwent a revision which defined that the course in focus in this paper would become one of its modules. This revision also defined that TL would be offered to teachers from other

contexts as well, including private schools, language institutes and universities.

The decision to transform V1 into a module of TL was based on teacher students' positive reactions towards it and on some evidences that there was progress concerning teacher autonomy in its implementation. Data which showed teacher students' reactions were collected through guided evaluations completed by the participants throughout the course. And the assumptions concerning the development of teacher autonomy were possible due to a study which included a comprehensive analysis of all the messages published in the course (Sprenger 2004).

The concept of teacher autonomy that underlies the course is based on the literature concerning learner and teacher autonomy (Little 2000; Lamb 2000; Benson 1997a, 1997b, 2001; Dam 1995; Aoki 2002) and on critical pedagogy (Freire 1970, 1973, 1980, 1996). The second version of the course (V2) also took into account studies that dealt with learner and teacher narratives and how they affect the development of autonomy, language learning and teacher education (Benson *et al*. 2003; Benson 2005; Murphey *et al*. 2005; Karlsson & Kjisik 2007; Liberalli *et al*. 2003; Telles 2002, 2004).

In section 2 of this paper, we present our view of teacher autonomy, how we believe it develops, how it guided the design of V1 and how this view has changed considering the new studies in the areas of learner and teacher autonomy and teacher education. In the third section we describe the context where V1 was designed and contrast it with the context of V2. In the fourth section, we describe the main features of V2. We conclude by raising some questions that should be investigated in relation to our new approach towards teacher autonomy and V2.

2. Theoretical background

The concept of teacher autonomy which underlay the first version of the course was grounded on the literature concerning language learner and teacher autonomy (Little 2000; Lamb 2000; Benson 1997a, 1997b, 2001; Dam 1995; Aoki 2002) and on critical pedagogy (Freire 1970, 1973, 1980, 1996). It refers to teachers' capacity, willingness and right to make

informed decisions about classroom tasks[1] (Sprenger, 2004). Making informed decisions, in this definition, implies that the teacher situates the task in its wider context and is aware of the different aspects related to planning and implementing the task. It also means that the teacher is conscious of his potential and his students' potential to produce changes in his or her cultural, social and political context.

Taking the definition above into account, the course assumed the development of autonomy implied a process of *conscientização*, as defined by Freire (1970, 1973, 1980). For this author, conscientização is more than simply becoming aware; it is the process, developed through practice and reflection, by which people leave behind the status of objects, develop critical thinking, become aware of their roles and responsibilities and take on the status of historical subjects. As it can be inferred, people are not considered as abstract, isolated and neutral beings but in their true and meaningful relations with the world. On the other hand, the world is not seen as independent, impervious from people's attitudes and actions.

Although the aim of the course in focus is to foster the development of teacher autonomy, it is possible to say that our approach is in line with Pennycook's view that autonomy is a matter of helping students to *find a voice in English* and confront *a range of cultural constructions as they learn English* (Pennycook 1977). Following the same reasoning we can say that fostering the development of teacher autonomy is a matter of helping teachers *to find a voice* in English teaching and education and *confront a range of cultural constructions as they teach English*.

According to Benson (2007), some recent studies in the field of second language learning (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Norton & Toohei, 2002) adopt a view of learners as socially constructed but, at the same time, human agents, able to construct their own terms and conditions of learning or to cause changes in their social worlds. Still according to this author, several studies (Cotteral, 2005; Malcolm, 2005, among others) have offered insights into relationships between agency, identity and autonomy within the learning process. Benson himself has followed this trend by investigating the development of autonomy through (auto)biographical research (Benson *et al.* 2003; Benson 2005). Working with self-access center, Karlsson &

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[1]   In this paper the word *task* is used as a synonym for classroom activity.

Kjisik (2007) also emphasize the role of autobiographies in the learning process. They assume that *counseling and research on counseling mean dialogue, converging autobiographies and individual and shared narratives* (:41).

The report on the Symposium of the AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning at the 14th World Congress of Applied Linguistics (Lamb 2005) clearly reflects the concern about learners' identities, how it can be dealt with and how it relates with autonomy. It states:

> *Given that learner autonomy is about opportunities to have a voice in the learning process, the challenge for the researcher and teacher is to gain access to these voices.* (Lamb 2005)

Actually, the symposium explored the following questions related to learners' voices:

- *What can we learn from our learners' stories about their language learning?*
- *How can we access their voices and integrate them into our planning?*
- *What does 'voice and influence' mean in our contexts?* (Lamb, 2005)

Here again we think that the literature on learner autonomy should be considered when we deal with teacher autonomy. Isn't it possible to establish the relationship between agency, identity and autonomy within the teaching process? Isn't it desirable to investigate teachers' voices and how they can be integrated into our teacher education programs?

Although our original definition of teacher autonomy was in agreement with the more recent research on learner autonomy described above, the emphasis on identity and its relationship with the development of autonomy attracted our attention. We thought that V2 should give more emphasis to teachers' identities; it would be interesting to investigate how their identities and stories as language learners and teachers could contribute to the development of their autonomy as teachers.

We took into account Murphey *et al*'s (2005) consideration that

> *...an activity system, i.e., a class, can potentially become more emancipatory through having as the primary subject matter the participants, their stories, their identities and their development.* (Murphey et al. 2005:99)

We also found out that several researchers in the field of language teacher education were devoting attention to language teacher narratives

(Liberalli *et al*, 2003; Telles, 2002, 2004 among others). Liberalli *et al* (2003) reports on their practice involving teacher narratives as instruments for the development of critical reflection. Telles (2004) argues that narrative research allows teachers to reconstruct their personal knowledge and representations, helping them to be more conscious and, therefore agents of their own practice.

In the specific literature concerning language teacher autonomy, as Benson (2007) puts it, teacher autonomy is often seen as *a professional attribute, involving a capacity for self-directed professional development* and there is an emphasis on the link between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. This researcher adds that *attention has also been paid to teacher freedom as a component of teacher autonomy.*

It seemed to us that the working definition of teacher autonomy we adopted when we designed V1 (teachers' capacity, willingness and right to make informed decisions about classroom tasks) could still be used to update the course. According to this definition, teacher autonomy is seen as a professional attribute. The relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy, indicated by Benson (2007), is not clearly mentioned in it because we believe that making informed decisions about classroom tasks implies that the teacher sees not only him or herself as subject, aware of his or her potential to cause changes in the cultural, social and political context but his students as well. Concerning teacher's freedom, another aspect pointed out by Benson (2007), we do mention the word *right* in our definition, but we understand that this relationship between teacher's capacity and the right to make decisions is extremely complex. We thought we should take the opportunity to think over this aspect of teacher autonomy as we developed and implemented V2 of the course.

Besides reviewing these theoretical ideas we looked very closely at the context where V1 was developed, at teacher students' reactions and attitudes during the implementation of V1 and at the new context of the course.

3. The context

Developing autonomy for materials preparation, V1, was first offered online from August 2001 through January 2002. It was designed as a response

to the results of a research carried out before in one of the modules of TL.[2] These results revealed that some of the teacher students expected to find, in the module they were taking, material they could use with their own students (Ferreira & Sprenger 2004).

As it can be inferred from its title, the twenty-week online course (120 hours) we designed and offered after that research did not attempt to meet teacher students' expectation as it had been expressed, but to help them become more autonomous to be able to develop their own syllabi and materials.

In this section of the paper we describe the digital tools, the rationale, contents, activities and main features of V1.

3.1. The digital tools used in V1

When V1 was designed, the research group we belonged to did not have a learning management system (LMS)[3] available for that specific course, and we made up our minds to build a website with the syllabus, the contents, instructions, frequently-asked questions (FAQ) and an area where we could publish the participants' profiles. We also decided to count on open-source software available on the internet. With the help of the webmaster we chose a digital calendar, where we could schedule all the events in the course, a discussion forum, where we dealt with all the topics we focused on and where the participants published their productions and a chat room. As all the individual productions were published in the discussin forum, teacher students were encouraged to read their colleagues' texts before writing their own. We thought this would stimulate reflection, collaboration and improvement. There were also some regular guided practices meant to develop critical thinking, awareness and reflection: journal writing, self-evaluation and the evaluation of the course. The results

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[2]   TL was then organized into six modules, each two of them focusing on a language skill (speaking, listening and reading) and dealing with issues related to teachers' professional interests.

[3]   A Learning Management System is a digital platform that gathers different resources for developing and implementing an online course. It usually has a discussion forum, chat rooms, special areas for teaching materials, individual and group portfolios, different choices of exercises with automatic feedback, electronic calendars from announcing the events of the course, an email program and resources for registering and checking students' participation and performance.

of these practices were presented in the discussion forum and the participants were aware that their texts would be read by all their colleagues.

The digital tools in the course did not belong to a single system; they were all independent from each other, but they were made available through links on the course website. To have access to the course the participants had to log in with a password. The discussion forum we chose produced a report which showed the dates of each participant's first and most recent messages as well as the total number of messages he or she posted. We did not have resources within the webpage to register the teacher students evaluations as the different choices of LMS have nowadays. So, the teacher needed to have her own digital worksheets for that purpose and she was supposed to send frequent reports to her teacher students, through her own e-mail program, concerning their participation and performance.

3.2. Rationale, contents, activities and features of V1

As we have mentioned before, V1 aimed at helping teachers to develop autonomy in order to deal with course planning and classroom activities. It focused on teacher autonomy but, at the same time, it dealt with the concept of learner autonomy since the teacher was seen as responsible for fostering autonomy among his or her students. V1 also attempted to stimulate reflection, awareness, critical thinking and collaboration among teacher students as well as to help them see the importance of these concepts concerning their own students.

According to the socio-constructivist approach to learning (Black & McClintock 1995; Jonassen *et al*. 1993; Spiro *et al*. 1995; Wilson 1997; Wilson & Lowry 2000), knowledge is constructed through interactions in a social context. Taking that into account and the aim of the course, we attempted to develop a learning community where all the participants had the right and were stimulated to interact with each other and to develop their autonomy.

The activities of the course invited participants to share their experiences, to give opinion and suggestions, to question, to collaborate with their colleagues, to evaluate themselves, the other teacher students and the course. This point can be observed in the general pedagogical instructions of the course:

{…} I expect we will all learn and so your participation and collaboration is essential. Write to me whenever you have doubts or suggestions. Ask me or your friends for help whenever you need. Share with the group the interesting things you have discovered in and out of this course.

I suggest that you observe yourself during the course, reflect about the decisions you make and their consequences. Register all the ideas you have and discuss them with our group.

At the same time you do the proposed activities, I would like you to pay attention to the way this course was organized and to think about the steps I took during the process of designing it. Try to compare this context to your own classrooms. What are the similarities and differences? How would you deal with the different aspects involved?

The messages below, written by two of the teacher students, are evidences that the course did stimulate them to reflect about what they were doing in the course, about their students, their own professional contexts and to share their thoughts:

I totally agree with it {with the idea conveyed in a text that only providing technology and other material resources is not enough to improve education} and many times I think to myself: "My God, if content isn´t so important, if we have to teach other things besides content, if my school is now equipped with computers and I can try to do something different and motivating with them and it isn´t everything. So, what am I doing here?" Sometimes I get lost at school. The head says: content isn´t important, if necessary go back two, three years and teach them what they haven' learned yet. Then comes SARESP[4] and in some schools, teachers prepare their students to do well in this test. Then comes vestibular[5]. What is it necessary to know when you do this kind of test? {…}

I wrote the ideas I got up to now from the course. I took notes in a notebook while doing the activities and now you can see what I have got so far. In the first week we thought about what we were going to learn and how it would help us with our classes. It was a preparation of ourselves for the course. In the second week, we worked on the term "autonomy", describing it and giving examples on how important it could be to a teacher and students to become autonomous. In this part, we came out with very nice ideas. We described "autonomy" as a process not necessarily related to learning in isolation; it can be an exchange of experience specially when thinking of teaching/learning process. {…} Only this way we are teaching them to be independent when they leave school or when they face a "problem" in their future life. I really thought a lot about all this while teaching this week. {…} Based on this, I tried, this week to adapt one exercise, so that students could participate more and be more autonomous. {…}

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[4]   The State of São Paulo System of School Performance Evaluation, designed to test students in elementary and high school

[5]   College entrance examination

Considering its structure, V1 was organized into ten units. In Table 1 we present their titles and objectives and below we make some general comments.

Unit	Title	Objectives
1	Getting ready	• Think about our roles as teachers and learners; • Think about the role of the syllabus; • Analyze the syllabus of the course; • Organize ourselves for the course; • Get familiar with the tools and resources used in the course.
2	Developing teacher autonomy: the aim of the course	• Reflect on the aim of the course; • Reflect on autonomy, its implications and the ways to develop it.
3	The view of autonomy/learning adopted in this course	• Discuss the rationale (principles) of the course and relate the ideas to our present professional context.
4	What's in a task	• Talk about the position tasks occupy in the teaching and learning situation; • Talk about the different aspects to be taken into consideration when we design a task.
5	Joining a task	• Participate in a classroom task; • Develop the ability to negotiate; • Discuss the discipline problem; • Collaborate with classmates in solving problems; • Reconstruct the process of planning/developing a task; • List aspects involved in the task; • Discuss problems and solutions involved in the process of planning and designing the task; • Reflect on our participation and feelings concerning the task.
6	Developing a needs analysis	• Talk about your students/your context of work/your experience; • Choose adequate instruments to develop a needs Analysis; • Carry out a needs analysis.
7	Designing a task	• Plan a classroom task taking into account the results of the Needs Analysis; • Present and discuss the plan for your task; • Collaborate with classmates by giving suggestions; • Look for authentic material to be used in the task; • Transform the material into classroom tasks.
8	Trying out the task	• Try your task with your own students; • Analyze the results.
9	Reflecting on the process	• Present the results to the class; • Collaborate with classmates by suggesting changes or making comments.
10	Evaluating the experience and making plans	• Participate in a task aimed at developing the writing skill; • Evaluate the adequacy of the task concerning your own students and context; • Evaluate this course; • Make plans for future activities.

Table 1: The Structure of V1

As it can be observed, in the first units of the course we attempted to raise awareness about the meaning and importance of teacher and learner autonomy and to discuss issues related to teacher's roles. One of the aspects we insisted on discussing was the relationship between autonomy and interdependence. We also called the teacher students' attention to the course they were enrolled in (by having them analyze its syllabus) and suggested they had a reflective and critical attitude towards it. Another important feature in this first part was our attempt to help them get prepared to take the course by organizing themselves and getting familiar with the resources in the online environment. The activity below, in Unit 1 of V1, illustrates some of these points:

{...} Answer the questions silently or write down your answers in a separate file in your computer:

1. What is the aim of this course?
2. How are we going to achieve that aim?
3. Do you understand the principles that guide this course?
4. Do you agree with these principles?
5. What will you probably learn?
6. How will the course probably affect your work?
7. What are your other priorities and how do you think this course will affect them?
8. Do you want to take the course?
9. How are you going to organize yourself to take the course?
10. What do you intend to do when you have difficulties concerning time management, technical problems or doubts concerning the tasks in this course?

Click on <Reply> and write a summary of the decisions we made while you answered these questions.

In Unit 4 of the course the focus was on the classroom activity. In its first section, participants were asked to discuss what different aspects should be taken into account when designing a task. In the second section of the unit, teacher students engaged themselves in more practical work: analyzing one of the course activities and transforming authentic materials into classroom activities. When we implemented the course we asked the teachers to send us one of the syllabi they were using at school at that moment so that we would help them develop tasks that were suitable for

their professional contexts[6]. Having analysed the material they sent us we realized there were many problems concerning the design of the syllabus and we concluded a new version of the course should give much more emphasis on syllabus design than V1 did.

In Unit 5 the teacher students were expected to participate in an activity that dealt with classroom discipline and to reconstruct, by discussion, the whole process of planning, implementing and evaluating that activity.

Units 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the course suggested the teacher students looked more closely into their own classrooms and engaged into practical and creative work related to them. First, they were supposed to carry out a needs analysis with their students. According to the results, they had to design, try out and evaluate a classroom activity. Each teacher student was in charge of his own work but all of the stages were developed in collaboration with the whole group through discussions, sharing of ideas, materials and suggestions.

Naturally the syllabus of V1 was ready before the beginning of the course, but the material was developed as the course went on and we had a certain degree of flexibility. In the first discussions carried out in the course, the teacher, who was also the syllabus designer, assumed the participants adopted different views concerning the concept of language and language teaching and they were not aware of it. This allowed us to include some reading and discussions about the subject in Unit 6, although that unit was originally designed to deal with needs analysis. It also reminded us to give the topic more attention in the next version of the course.

As Unit 10 was supposed to be implemented near Christmas season, we decided to include in it an activity related to this event which explored aspects such as poetry, the discussion of values and pleasure. The intention, besides creating a warm atmosphere, was to help participants see that teaching a language is also helping the students to enjoy the arts, to have fun, to develop values and to live well. Besides that activity, the participants

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6   In state schools, at the time we implemented V1, teachers were free to develop their own syllabi. The State Department of Education recommended that they use *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*, an official document with a set of principles concerning teaching and learning, as a reference.

were supposed to evaluate the whole course and to make plans for their professional future.

3.3. The need to update the course

Five years after its implementation, the independent online course *Developing autonomy for materials preparation* was supposed to be revised in order to become one of the modules of *Teachers' Links, Autonomy development and the classroom: reflecting on course planning and materials preparation.*[7] This module (V2) was supposed to be much shorter than V1, more specifically 15 weeks (90 hours). Following a new decision concerning TL, V2 would be offered not only to state school teachers but to all teachers of English, working in state and private schools, language institutes, universities as well as in-company. Besides that, V2 could count on the same open source LMS used in TL, TelEduc. This digital platform has different resources including a bulletin board, a discussion forum, chat rooms, production tools, e-mail as well as course management tools that allow the teachers to check participation and to evaluate students.

The decision to transform V1 into a module of the program TL took into account teacher students' reactions and evaluations while it was first implemented. As we have stated before, we could observe during the course that the participants reacted well to the activities which involved reflection on their practices, sharing of experiences, exchange of ideas and opinions. This type of activity is essential to foster the development of *conscientização* (Freire, 1970, 1973, 1980, 1996) and autonomy, according to the theory we presented above.

The guided evaluations carried out during and at the end of the course by the teacher students also suggested it was worth investing on it. The comments below, part of the final evaluation completed by four different teacher students, illustrate this point:

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[7]   Teachers' Links was then reorganized into three modules: (1) *Professional development and the classroom: reflecting on new routes*; (2) *Autonomy development and the classroom: reflecting on course planning and materials preparation* and (3) *Academic development and the classroom: reflecting on language teaching/learning as research object*.

My expectations were basically exchanging ideas and be in touch with some theory about teaching and learning process. I also thought I would have suggestions for internet materials. In fact it went beyond my expectations.

Yes, I do {I think I have become more autonomous to prepare classroom tasks} because now when I prepare something I always ask me: For what? For whom? Is it useful? Etc.

Now I think everybody can think better about preparing a task, reflect better about the process and evaluate the results of a task.

When we started the course, I expected to prepare many classes and exchange ideas with the teacher and colleagues. I had never thought about the things we learned here. {…} It didn´t meet my expectations, as I was waiting to do other things here. Of course, now I can think better about the things involved in preparing class and I think I have to continue studying more and more.

A study carried out before (Sprenger, 2004) also showed there were some evidences of autonomy development within the course. This investigation proposed that involvement in learning actions, as described in the learning by expansion model by Engëstrom (1987) leads to more advanced levels of *conscientização*, essential for the development of autonomy as assumed in this paper. Data in this study revealed that, according to the tasks in V1, teacher students described and analysed their actions in their professional contexts and in the course, perceived contractions in those actions, suggested and negotiated instruments to deal with the contradictions. They also got involved in actions that implied the use of those new instruments and they reflected about the process. All of these are considered learning actions according to the learning by expansion model and were regarded by the author as moves towards more advanced levels of autonomy.

When asked about negative points, in the final evaluation of the course, teacher students mentioned mainly lack of time to do the activities as it can be observed in the comments below, written by four different teacher students:

I didn't find anything just about myself because in the begining I wasn't organized and now I think I improved a lot.

Not all the people who intended to do it, did it. We could have had much more ideas. Time was another problem.

The lack of time I have (this isn´t an excuse). Sometimes I have to do something very quickly or do it any other time to have time to do everything: look after the children, take them at their courses, go shopping, teach at two schools, prepare and correct tests, go to the banks, chat in this course, do the activities, etc.

The lack of time, the lack of organization in my schedule.

Taking into account what we had already observed during the course, teacher students' evaluations and the characteristics of the new context, we assumed we had to be very careful about the amount and extent of the activities to be included in V2.

After having gone through an evaluation of V1, based on teacher students' reactions and attitudes, reviewed the literature on learner and teacher autonomy and analyzed carefully the context we set out to update the course syllabus.

4. Updating the course syllabus

As described above, the new context of the course implied the use of a LMS which offered more technological resources than V1 did. It also required the course to be shorter and to be integrated into the new version of TL, which consisted of three modules. Besides that, V2 was supposed to take into account the new literature developed in the last years concerning learner and teacher autonomy. We describe below the most important details concerning these changes.

4.1. The digital tools used in V2

The most important change concerning technological resources implemented in V2 was the fact that we could count on TelEduc, a platform which centralized all the resources and offered the teacher very detailed reports about teacher students' participation in the course.

One of the important benefits we gained was the availability of an area where students could develop and present individual and group work. Being able to count on that, we could use the discussion forum exclusively for its original purposes: discussion, exchange of ideas and opinions.

The bulletin board in TelEduc is the first page the participant sees when he or she enters the course and it displays a large area where the teacher can welcome the students, give general instructions and set the pace of the course. Since it was originally designed for those purposes, it is much easier for the teacher to update its contents then the webpages we had in V1 and therefore, it had the potential to give V2 a more dynamic

appearance. We also think it is very helpful when teachers make an effort to create a warm online atmosphere and to organize the activities.

The access logs of TelEduc are also more detailed than the ones we had in the forum discussion in V1, allowing the teachers to check not only the frequency and dates of students' access to the forum but also to all the other resources. It also has an interaction map which allows the teacher to check on who each participant interacts with in the forum discussion.

It is also important to point out that the Evaluation area in TelEduc is very suitable for continuous evaluation, since it allows the teacher to edit the objectives, the criteria and the evaluation for each activity. Also when the teacher wants to evaluate students' participation and performance in a forum discussion, for instance, this resource displays the number of messages published by each participant as well as the messages themselves. Besides that, the students may check their own progress whenever they want. It is important to observe, however, that the updating of students' grades will always depend on the teacher.

4.2. *Rationale, contents, activities and features of V2*

The module *Autonomy development and the classroom: reflecting on course planning and materials preparation* as well as V1 aims to help teachers to become more autonomous to deal with course planning and materials preparation.

Following a similar approach to V1, it relies on the principle that the development of autonomy requires *conscientização* which involves practice, reflection and critical thinking. It also attempts to create a learning community where people learn through interaction and work collaboratively. This excerpt from the presentation of TL explicits that the approach is adopted in the three modules of the program:

> *Modules have been planned with strong support of socio discursive perspectives of language. This means that comprehension and production practice activities have been planned to make sense and be relevant for teachers of English and their professional lives. Moreover, the modules have been planned to foster the development of personal reflection, to give participants the opportunity to learn how to work collaboratively and how to express their opinions and ideas critically.*

The module also proposed reading and discussions which would serve as theoretical background for the productions and for the participants to understand the approach that guided the activities. This excerpt from the presentation of the module Autonomy development and the classroom evidences these points:

> *The reflective component of Teachers' Links: Reflexão e Desenvolvimento para Professores de Inglês helps teachers understand the theoretical background that underpins the activities of the course. In what ways will autobiographical narratives help teachers become more autonomous and contribute to their professional development? What is the relationship between autobiographical narrative, context of work and course planning? What are the different ways to organize a course syllabus? What different aspects should we take into account when we design a task? These are some of the questions we will deal with.*

The main change concerning the rationale of V2 was an emphasis on teacher students' stories and professional contexts. In V1 we did deal with needs analysis and the importance of taking into account the participants' own identities, professional contexts and students when making decisions about classroom activities. In V2 we started with teachers' stories, identities and their professional contexts. After a few weeks of productions, reflections and discussions centered on those themes, they were invited to start thinking about course planning, syllabus and task design.

As it was evidenced through the excerpts from the course included in this paper, teachers' reactions towards V1 were positive and they did share with the group their experiences, feelings and beliefs concerning teaching and learning. Nevertheless the literature we read in the process of updating the course helped us realize that these experiences, feelings and beliefs could be the starting points in the course. We were convinced this change would make a relevant difference and so we decided to implement and to investigate it.

Still in the first units of the course, when the activities focused on teacher students' stories, professional contexts and identities, we included readings and discussions concerning the issues that had not been explored at the right moment in V2: different views concerning language and language teaching, different ways to organize a syllabus and the principles that guide them. The participants were always stimulated to take a stand based on their stories and identities, professional contexts and students. It

was our belief that it would be more natural for the teacher students to be critical about the ideas in the texts they read if they started the course by thinking about and sharing their thoughts about who they were, what they believed concerning the teaching/learning process, how they felt about teacher and learner autonomy, what their professional contexts of work were like. Of course this approach we adopted raised some questions and these were the most persistent ones:

- Will the participants feel comfortable to share their stories and beliefs with all the others?

- How will the teacher students react towards the others, considering the fact that in V2 they work in completely different contexts and come from very distinct backgrounds?

- How can the teacher deal with teachers' stories in a warm but, at the same time, objective way?

The module was organized into four units, each one to last approximately three to four weeks totalling fifteen weeks. The titles and objectives of the four units can be seen in Table 2.

The first unit of V2 proposes a discussion on learner and teacher autonomy, and it requests the participants to share and to reflect upon their autobiographical narratives. To help them understand the meaning of that activity and to get prepared for it, there are some pre-activities where they read about autobiographical narratives and they analyze a teacher's story.

The extract below gives an idea of what these pre-activities are like:

As you read in the previous activity, it is believed that narratives help teachers reflect on their own practices and beliefs. Some authors also argue that by having teacher students' stories as starting points in teacher education we are allowing them to have a voice. In the paper Future perfect: reflecting through personal narratives, Coya and Taylor (2001) report on the findings of a research they carried out concerning the function of autobiography in pre-service teacher education. They conclude that "finding a voice in relation to others is one of the most profound implications of the study".

Taking these assumptions into account, go to the forum Teachers' Stories and discuss with your colleagues what you observed in the teacher's story you listened to. Was there any evidence of reflection? Did she use the opportunity to go over her beliefs concerning education, teaching and learning? Can we infer anything about her beliefs from what we listened in the story? Could you learn anything interesting concerning the use of narratives?

Unit	Title	Objectives
1	Teachers' portraits	• To discuss the meaning of teacher and learner autonomy; • To understand the role of narratives in the development of autonomy as well as in the processes of teaching and learning; • To reflect upon our identities: who we are, what we believe concerning education, language and learning; • To write your autobiographical narratives and to share them with your colleagues; • To analyse narratives, taking into account what they can reveal about teachers' identities and beliefs.
2	Teachers' Landscapes	• To understand the role of context in the development of autonomy as well as in the processes of teaching and learning; • To discuss and define which instruments will be used for data collection; • To collect data in your working environment; • To organise the data collected; • To analyse the results of the information collected and to present it to the group.
3	Course planning	• To understand what course planning involves; • To discuss and define the different levels of course planning; • To analyse a syllabus; • To design a new syllabus.
4	Evaluating and preparing materials	• To design a didactic unit related to an item in the syllabus you planned before, together with your group; • To discuss your ideas and decisions concerning the didactic unit you're going to develop; • To analyse your friends' didactic units and help them refine their final versions; • To evaluate your own actions and prepare new actions.

Table 2: The Structure of V2

After these preparation activities, teacher students are requested to write their autobiographical narratives:

> *Now it is your turn to write your story and to share it with our group. Use this list of items as a reference, but feel free to include and/or to exclude anything you feel like and to organize it the way you prefer as long as it focuses on your life as a language teacher and learner. {…}*

In the process of producing, presenting and discussing the narratives, the participants are invited to establish the relationship between personal narratives and autonomy. Can teachers and students express their own voices through autobiographical narratives? How does that happen? At the same time, they are requested to reflect upon and to share with their colleagues their views concerning teaching, learning and education.

In the last stage of Unit 1, the participants read each others' stories and talk about them in the discussion forum. There is also a suggestion for them to go over their own stories and to reflect once more about them:

> {…} After you finish analyzing the stories, go back to the forum Teachers' Stories and use the notes you took down to discuss the questions above.
> As you could realize, this unit was a moment for you to look carefully at your own portrait as a teacher, to talk about your story with everybody in this group. It is advisable that after this process you take some time to read your story again, silently, and to take some minutes to think about what role you would like to play in your students' learning process, what your present view on education is, what your present view on language and language learning is, what your view on teaching is. That will probably help you make more informed decisions concerning your future practice.

In Unit 2, there are several activities focusing on the participants' professional contexts as well as their students' characteristics, needs and wishes. Here is part of an activity:

> Look at the pictures and choose one or more to represent the school community where you work. {…} In what way/s does the picture you chose represent your school? What are the characteristics of your school community? What are the values of this community? What is your view of the context in which you work/ teach? Write your answers in the Individual Portfolio. Identify the icon in your portfolio by using the title of the picture.
> {…} Go to forum Where do you teach? to share and discuss the answers to the questions in step 1.

In the third and fourth units of the module, the focus is on course planning and materials design, taking into account the information collected and the ideas the participants came upon while sharing their autobiographical narratives and looking closely at their contexts of work and at their students.

The activity below deals with course planning. It illustrates clearly that the participants' stories and professional landscapes should be the starting points in their syllabus design.

> Now it's time to design a new syllabus in small groups! It can be a brand new one or it can be a new version of one of the syllabi you analysed in Activity 2. So, to start with, go to Groups and check what group you belong to. And do not forget to go back and look at three things:
> • The autobiographical narratives you wrote in Unit 1.
> • The results of the inquiries you carried out into your professional contexts in Activities 2 and 3 of Unit 2.
> • The examples of syllabi you saw in Activity 1 of this unit.

The activity below, in Unit 4, deals with materials design and it is meant to help the participants get prepared to design their classroom activities. As the teacher students had been asked to share their stories at the beginning of the module, we, the designers of the course, also thought it would be important to share our stories concerning course planning and materials preparation.

> *Now, let's watch a video with Betty Pow, Cida Caltabiano, Maria Paula Wadt, Otilia Ninin and Terezinha Sprenger. They look back at their process of developing materials for Teachers' Links. While you watch it, think about the following questions:*
> *a. What aspects of course planning did the teachers take into account?*
> *b. What experiences do they highlight in the process of developing and teaching the course?*
> *c. What important/informed decisions did they have to make?*

After some preparation activities, the participants are requested to design their own tasks. This extract illustrates how this work is expected to be carried out:

> *In the previous activity you made plans for designing a didactic unit in groups. You chose an item from your syllabus, thought over the unit of work you would probably develop and searched for input data on the Internet.*
> *As you know, on the Internet we can find materials and tasks suggested specifically for teachers and students and we also find authentic materials. Neither of them can be used before we consider their adequacy concerning our students, our context, our principles, objectives and aims.*
> *And after we select the materials, we need to transform them into tasks or make adaptations. This is what we are going to do in Activity 2.{…}*

As it can be observed from the examples, we assumed that the development of teacher autonomy depends very much on listening to teacher students' stories and stimulating them to take their own identities and experiences into account when planning their courses and activities. We also assumed that teacher educators (course designers and teachers) play an important role in this development not only by stimulating reflection and sharing of the teacher students' stories but also by sharing their own ideas and narratives. The preparation activities in V2 very often are teacher educators' experiences and ideas that are presented for discussion. They are also meant to work as references for the participants to start developing their own projects. We agree with Vieira (2007) that teacher educators' initiatives sometimes may sound to contradict teacher autonomy

but, actually, they might help us to create *a supportive environment, laying the ground for more autonomous decision-making (:22)*.

5. Final Remarks

The paper aimed at describing the process of development of a syllabus geared at fostering teacher autonomy for course planning and materials preparation.

We started by presenting the concept of teacher autonomy that underlied V1. After reviewing more recent literature we assumed the original definition of teacher autonomy could still inform V2, but we realized that placing a focus on teachers' autobiographical narratives would possibly be a good decision to give voice to the teachers. Based on this latter assumption, we showed that V2 still deals with course planning and materials preparation but there is a shift in focus. Teacher students' stories, identities and context of work became the starting point and not aspects to be considered while we deal with the contents and pedagogical activities within the course. This seems to have made a difference concerning the opportunity to give teachers a voice in the development of their autonomy.

We also explained within the paper that some aspects that were not looked at properly in V1 received more attention in V2. Teacher students' views concerning language, language teaching/learning and education are dealt with in the first unit of the module. Participants are requested to read some texts about those topics and to reflect about their own positions in relation to them. They are also requested to include their thoughts about that in the autobiographical narratives they are writing.

Different aspects related to course planning and various ways to organize a syllabus, other points that needed a revision in V1, became the focus of the third unit in V2. There are readings and discussions about how a syllabus can be organized and what principles guide the different choices. Participants are requested to analyze one of the course syllabi they are using at school, to revise that syllabus or to create a new one. It is important to point out that these activities concerning the design of course syllabus are proposed after the participants have already shared their autobiographical narratives and accounts concerning their professional contexts.

It was also shown through examples that we assume in V1 and V2 that teacher educators play an important role in the development of teacher autonomy not only by stimulating teacher students to share and reflect on their experiences and ideas but also by sharing their own ideas and experiences. These ideas and experiences are not expected to be taken as models but as references and objects of discussion.

Concerning the online environment of the course and the technical resources we used in V1 and in V2, we presented some examples that revealed it is possible to handle an online course without an LMS. On the other hand, our examples showed that the availability of an LMS offers more resources, centralizes them and makes it easier for the teacher to organize and manage her/his activities. It also helps the students to get organized, to develop individual and group work and to follow their performances.

We also suggested that there are several questions to be investigated in the stage of implementation of V2. Data has already been collected and some of these questions are being dealt with at the moment so that they will be the focus of a next research paper.

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