

Can the Teacher Act? Agency in Language Teacher Education

Pode o/a professor/a agir? agência na educação de professore/as de línguas

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ABSTRACT: Based on the assumption that agency is a discursive practice and one basic premise of an education aimed at developing critical, participative and transformative agents to live in a society under constant changes associated with globalization and neoliberalism, the main objective of this paper, which results from my PhD research (Landim, 2020), was to investigate if agency development implies a critically oriented English Language Teaching (ELT) in global times. To address such objective, the research was conducted with a group of teachers and student teachers participating in the English Language Teaching (ELT) practicum of a public university located in the north of Brazil. The study followed qualitative research methodological paths of ethnographic nature, within the field of critical applied linguistics, using concepts borrowed from decolonial theories, new literacies studies and critical literacies and other fields, especially sociology and philosophy of education. The main results indicate that agency concepts developed by the participants ranged from neoliberal traditions in education to decolonial/critical perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Agency; Teacher education; Critical literacy; English Language Teaching (ELT); Practicum

RESUMO: Partindo do pressuposto de que a agência é uma prática discursiva e uma premissa básica de uma educação voltada para o desenvolvimento de agentes críticos, participativos e transformadores para viver em uma sociedade em constantes mudanças associadas à globalização e ao neoliberalismo, o objetivo principal deste artigo, que resulta de minha tese de doutorado (Landim, 2020), foi pesquisar se o desenvolvimento da agência implica em ensino crítico de Língua Inglesa em tempos globais. Para atender a tal objetivo, a pesquisa foi realizada com um grupo de professores e alunos-professores participantes da disciplina de Estágio Supervisionado de Ensino de Língua Inglesa de uma universidade pública localizada no norte do Brasil. O estudo percorreu caminhos metodológicos de investigação qualitativa de natureza etnográfica, no campo da Linguística Aplicada Crítica, utilizando conceitos das teorias decoloniais, estudos de novos letramentos e letramentos críticos, bem como de outros campos, em especial a sociologia e a filosofia da educação. Os principais resultados indicam que os conceitos de agência desenvolvidos pelos participantes variaram de tradições neoliberais na educação a perspectivas decoloniais e críticas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Agência; Formação de professores; Letramento Crítico; Ensino de Língua Inglesa; Estágio Supervisionado.



1 Introduction

Since the 1990's, the concerns about the education of critical citizens in Brazil and around the world have been focused on the question of agency in the formal curriculum of basic schooling, as a response to huge social transformation due to the advent of globalization and digital technologies (Junqueira; Buzato, 2013; Monte Mór, 2013).

Such debates over the question of agency underpin political agendas which include the Brazilian ones, these being a reference for the implementation of formation actions and teaching, in general, and of teaching English, in particular, following the Education Law – LDB (Brasil, 1996), National Curricular Parameters – PCN (Brasil, 1998), as Curriculum Guidelines for High Schools – OCEM (Brasil, 2006) and more recently National Common Core Curriculum – BNCC (Brasil, 2017).

In order to reach an education which meets such demands, teacher education under the concept of teacher agency has revealed to be an essential element, though not the only one. In face of the rising challenges of the teaching profession in contemporary education, we see agency as a need to respond critically to it and contribute to the transformation of our political and educational scenario.

Among the many lines of research in human agency, the sociological debate over structure versus agency is questioned by other strands that aim at integrating those realms (Archer, 2004; Bourdieu, 1983; Giddens, 2003), which we also propose to do following the lead of these critics. Here we focus on agency not as a capacity that people have, but as something that emerges from a context, resulting as something that people do or achieve in a particular situation (Biesta; Priestley; Robinson, 2015). Being an emergent and contingent phenomenon, the concept of agency with which we work in this article demands a permanent critique towards attempts to centralize in the individual responsibilities associated with conditions to which one has no control of, in particular when these are connected to discourses of efficiency and success.

However debated in various fields, the concept of human agency is still beginning to be explored in Brazil, especially in Applied Linguistics and its intersection with teacher education and critical literacies, for we believe the conceptualization of agency is related to the act of meaning making that provides a higher engagement of the individual with their context.

Considering the relationship between the concept of agency and the acts of meaning making, the goal of the present article is to describe and analyze the concepts of agency developed by pre-service and in-service teachers who participated in an ethnographical research at a federal university in the north of Brazil. By making connections between those concepts and their context, it is understood that teachers do not develop their agency by themselves, but in conformity with the discursive, cultural and institutional communities that they belong to (Biesta; Priestley; Robinson, 2015). I also consider what kind of agency is needed to a solid formation of English teachers meeting the requirements of a critical, transformative and emancipatory education (Freire, 2009; Biesta, 2009; Monte Mór, 2013, 2015) in the globalized society (Kumaravadivelu, 2012b) and permeated by the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007; Castro-Gómez; Grossfoguel, 2007; Kumaravadivelu, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Mignolo; Walsh, 2018). In order to reach such goal, I seek to answer the following research question: What concept of agency do the pre-service and in-service teachers develop in their working context?

2 Methodological path

The field of teacher education has been evolving to give voice and room for teachers to act as agents of change, focusing on the critique of oppressive scenarios, such as the relations of power and decoloniality, and preparing students to be active citizens in a changing world.

Given that, I chose to conduct qualitative procedures of ethnographic nature for data generation and analysis. Thus, this article falls within an interpretative philosophical background, interested in how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced and constituted by the participants of the research (Mason, 2002). When dealing with the situated phenomenon of developing teacher's agency connecting its conceptualizations with social practices, this article is inserted in Applied Linguistics. According to Moita Lopes (2006), knowledge is political and, therefore, politicizing research to think of different alternatives to our social life is necessary to build new ways of theorizing and doing applied linguistics.

The research was carried out in the period between 2016 and 2020, having its field observation in 2017. In order to record the data, I used field diaries, document analysis, audio recordings of interviews and of a focus group. The investigated community was composed of nine pre-service teachers enrolled in Supervised Practicum VI of a public university located in the north of Brazil and two in-service teachers, as well as one teacher educator.

The research had four phases. In the first one, pre-service teachers were presented with readings and debates over the topic of teacher agency and the researcher conducted individual semistructured interviews with them. In the second one, pre-service teachers were observed in their teaching practice by the researcher. In the third one, the researcher conducted a focus group with pre-service teachers, one in-service teacher and one teacher educator. In the last one, the in-service had their classes observed and were interviewed by the researcher. The focus of this article is on the answers given in the semistructured interviews in which pre-service and in-service teachers participated.

3 The role of agency in teacher education

Diniz-Pereira (2006) delimits three basic models of teacher education, based on three different rationalities: technical rationality, practical rationality and critical rationality, which correspond to what I name the technical teacher, the reflexive teacher and the critical teacher.

The first model, technical rationality, is embodied in teacher training, limiting the teaching practice to theory application or techniques previously elaborated by a theoretical body established in order to control practical results. Teachers are limited to serving as a conduit role of transmission of information flow from the knowledge built by specialists and the knowledge reached by students (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

In the second model, the practical rationality, on the other hand, based on Schön's (1999) reading of Dewey's pragmatism, professionals do not separate thinking from doing in the practical context. They reflect, question and examine their pedagogical practice, being collaborators in the process of humanization of historically situated students (Pimenta, 1999).

The third model, critical rationality, based on Freirean views of education, assumes that education is historically located, has a socio-historical foundation and projects a future, being a social activity, not individual, with political implications. It is required a socio-politically aware and assertive position for teachers to act in class, which expands the teaching task in two: one should seek educational advance and personal transformation. In this way, it is possible to maximize learning opportunities while transforming life in and outside the classroom. A pedagogy of agency reflects the third model of teacher education, more adequate to the needs and challenges of the contemporary digital and globalized society.

The concept ‘agentic teacher’ is based on the literacies educational perspective, a post-structuralist foundation of language, subject and knowledge, which assumes that reality is constructed through language and subjectivity, being fluid and multiple (Martinez, 2007).

Agency is conceptualized in many different ways depending on different standpoints (Ahearn, 2001). In this article, conceptualization follows the ecological approach (Biesta; Priestley; Robinson, 2015) and the literacies approach (Kalantzis; Cope, 2012; Monte Mór, 2013).

In the ecological approach, agency is treated as an emergent phenomenon. Hence, agency is relational, once human beings operate by means of their social and material contexts and, temporal – rooted in the past, oriented to the future, but located in the present.

In the literacies approach, there are two integrated scopes: engagement and criticality. The first one is the possibility of a greater engagement with meaning making in face of the valorization of the plurality of new literacies, as of the expansion of new media. In this context, multimodality favors not only complex decoding, but a production of meanings resulting from varied semiotic means, from audiovisual to kinesthetic resources. The second one supports the idea of extension of positions in the world, which may result in a more transformative and emancipatory view of experiences in this ambience, marked by power, inequality, and oppression. With critical literacies it is possible to regain amplifying readings of the social world in which users are not only protagonists of the text they interpret, but they are protagonists of themselves as subjects in the world.

4 Conceptualizing agency to act in the world

The conceptualization of agency does not occur in isolation, as a theoretical exercise in itself, once agency is relational, that is, it is something towards something (Biesta; Priestley; Robinson, 2015), through which its actors articulate people, places, meanings and events (Emirbayer; Mische, 1998). That is why the concept of agency relates to the role of teachers in exercising their profession, which encompasses reflections on the role of the school, the education and the project of society to which such school and education collaborate to construct.

In order to reach such aim, I chose to ask pre-service and in-service teachers to conceptualize agency bearing in mind the relational and temporal aspects, as well as their connection with the context in which they practice teaching. I found four main concepts of agency: the technician teacher, the teacher as a “hero”, the sensitive teacher, and the critical teacher.

4.1 The technician teacher

To start with the most traditional view of teaching, the conceptualization of the technician teacher is also connected with the neoliberal view of society, which predominates in unreflected teaching practices and teacher education, such as the one given by Fernanda, one of the teacher-students of *Estágio Supervisionado VI*:

Agency would be *the development, the performance* you have during the course. The steps you take in things that you are required to do. I think that, according to my personal experience, *we receive a lot of input, a lot of orientation, we receive a lot of theory, a lot of practical things too. We have support to do the course.* Only in the first practicum I found the professor a little distant in her way of teaching, she let us free. At moments like these we want the professor closer. “I don’t know. I’ve never done it, what now?” We will always need to talk about how the practicum is, how we are facing the practicum at the school. People talk about the need to have a psychologist to support us. I don’t think it is necessary. I think we need to have more time with the professor who supervises the practicum, to be able to listen to everyone. In two hours’ time we can’t talk, clarify our doubts. “Professor, this happened, what do you suggest?”. *It is time to recycle, to recover strength.*

Interview – Fernanda (08/25/2017)

The keywords in Fernanda’s conceptualization of agency are performance, input and recycling. Performance is highly connected with the technician and neoliberal vocabulary because it understands teachers as transmitters of preestablished, measured and controlled content. In such view, the teaching practice is destined to measurement and control, as well as the educational processes in order to have a better condition of keeping results compatible with the status of the dominant neoliberal ideology.

As for the word input, it is related to the view of teacher education in which the teacher receives content that is understood/absorbed in order to exercise their profession. In Applied Linguistics, the input hypothesis in second language acquisition was elaborated by Krashen (1985, *apud* Paiva, 2014), and states that there is only one way to acquire language: understand oral or written messages, that is, receive comprehensible input. The output, or speaking and writing messages, will emerge naturally as the result of the input. This is what the teacher student might be referring to when she used the word input to describe the process of teacher education. Agency, in this view, would be the natural output, which derives from a certain input, meaning that the student will present the results in conformity to what was previously given. Such view decreases the role of agency of the teacher student as a protagonist of their own practice, offering little or no opportunity for creating or innovating, once it disregards their role as an agent who actively interprets such process.

Recycling, the third keyword of Fernanda’s conceptualization is highly linked to the business sector. In other meanings, recycling refers to things, not people. In both cases, agency is decreased once the conceptualization ignores the active role of the subject who goes through a process of new learnings.

Summing up, the definition of agency as performance resulting from an input and related to recycling limits the teacher as a replicator of theories constructed by others, being dependent on their evaluation and monitoring, which reflects the features of a passive subject who offers services and commodities in the neoliberal society.

4.2 The teacher as a “hero”

The concept of teacher as a “hero” refers to the neoliberal idea that the teacher is expected to act bravely in spite of the conditions of their work, which includes material and social conditions. It denotes the neoliberal view that expects that the individual should be responsible for changes that do not alter the regime according to which society is organized. Such concept of agency is limiting because it reinforces the frustration and impossibility of acting, once it centers in the individual situations that should be viewed as opportunities that could be possibilities to question and transform the school and the education that are expected by the society.

In Karine’s conceptualization below, we recognize the concept of teacher as a technician, but she adds some elements which characterize the expectation of a teacher to overcome all difficulties.

For me, when talking about agency *I didn’t imagine absolutely anything out of the classroom. I saw agency as a resource that I have and the students I have to work with. I didn’t imagine the principal or the coordinator. I didn’t think of the enviroing.* I thought about the classroom. I thought about the students and the strategy of teaching a certain content to those 30, 40 students. This is agency for me.

Interview – Karine (08/24/2027)

From that point of view, the teacher works in isolation, having the duty of overcoming the lack of resources. This teacher has to act despite the obstacles, and does not reflect about his or her enviroing, that is, the school or the world, which leads to the work being done without any problematization. Therefore, in this concept of agency school and education exist for citizens to move on without criticism and being capable of educating themselves despite all problems. This is a view that reinforces the predominant ideology which presupposes that teachers must work by themselves, so that the system is not impacted.

4.3 The teacher sensitive to the student: a Freirean dialogue

Being with the student is one of the basic premises of the deconstruction of the banking education denounced by Freire (1987). Learning from students, being open to knowledge and culture brought by students into the classroom, and learning to put such knowledge and practices in dialogue with school knowledge and values is part of the job of a teacher who is sensitive to the predicament of the students, having this relationship as a starting point. Arthur’s remarks are based on such view of teacher agency.

Arthur: Teacher agency... First, it is not the teacher, that idea we have of the teacher being a level above the students. It is when the teacher puts himself or herself in the student’s place. Most times, the teacher forgets he or she has been a student. We see this here at the university and at schools. So, I think that when the teacher puts himself in the student’s place, he or she is at the same level of the student. The interaction between the teacher and the student is kind of equal because it is the teacher who is going to feel “This student has difficulties. I haven’t had this kind of difficulties, but I’ve had something similar”. More than being in front of students, it is necessary to put yourself in the students’ place. Never forget you’ve been a student. Don’t fill the student with rules. You know? It’s when the teacher puts himself or herself in the student’s place. I think there is a balance. [...]

(Interview – Arthur – 08/25/2017)

According to Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015), building agency is not only a temporal process, but also relational. Thus, Arthur emphasizes the relationship between the teacher and the student as the basis for building agency, which will characterize the teacher's actions to reach the objective of teaching, that is, reaching the student. That is why putting oneself in the student's place is both an exercise that counteracts the hierarchization of roles, understood as the traditional approach to education, and an exercise of dialogue, basic for the autonomy pedagogy of Paulo Freire (2009). This dialogue starts with the respect to the differences between the teacher and the student, between their knowledge, built around their experience and their social reality.

This leads to the materiality of the environing in which this other lives (Freire, 2009). Knowing this reality sustains a pedagogical practice which is more meaningful and equipped with social commitment, just like Igor defines agency and the role of the agentive teacher:

Igor: The agentive teacher is not the teacher deeply connected, but minimally connected to routine questions he or she faces, and the students face to get to school.

Researcher: And to keep studying in spite of it.

Igor: I think that if you, if the teacher has... It doesn't have to be the hunger in city, the hunger in state, or the water crisis in São Paulo. No. If you are able to connect in the way I leave home to get to school, so. What questions I surpass. There is a problem here, if I'm capable of discussing, if I'm capable of making it object of reflection, I think I'm being an agentive teacher. I'd say I'm a militant, I'm a teacher who is in militance. So, I'd say that for us to enhance the impact of what we do in the classroom, we need to be sensitive to these questions, about the route from one's house to school, what my student faces.

(Interview – Igor – 11/04/2017)

Igor's idea contrasts with the one of the teacher "hero", who is invested with a limited power. The idea defended by Igor does not involve a more social and global fight in his classroom (hunger, water crisis), as defended by Critical Pedagogy. Instead, what he defends is closer to critical literacy, whose origins are in the work of Freire (1987, 2009), that is, act as a micro rupture with the traditional way of thinking that the school does not need to understand where the student comes from so that this student is contemplated in its discourse. For a pedagogy of dialogue, in Freire's words, it is essential to understand the ecological, social and economic environing where we live, as Freire (2009) advocates, once in this way it is possible to understand the student in his or her individuality. Thus, the teacher has the possibility of doing what Igor calls "militance", which is connected to a social responsibility of making sure the students' thoughts and reality are heard.

4.4 The agency of the critical teacher

According to premises of critical literacies, criticality involves reading and writing texts in the processes of becoming aware of the historically built experience under power relations (Shor, 1999). In turn, still within the premises of critical literacies, Jordão (2013) states that the school favors the confrontation of interpretative procedures that allow questioning and problematization of social systems that hierarchize subjects and knowledges, which makes possible inquiring the meanings of the world and its processes of production, sharing and renovation. Besides those premises, I include the genealogical approach developed by Menezes de Souza (2011), based on Freire, to defend the critical exercise of understanding why we think the way we think, once our views of the world are embedded in the linguistic and social communities in which we live/act in.

As the notions of criticality above indicate, the reflective practice underpin the critical one, once it reflects, situates and interprets the plurality of possibilities of the pedagogical practice, as Carmen points out in her definition of teacher agency:

Carmen: I think, as that girl said, it is to act. It is to act, above all, you first analyze your actions, you know how to stop and reflect on what you are doing. Reflecting brings criticality. You question what is good and what is not, what can be changed and change it. I believe it is part of your rethinking and reviewing of your attitudes and your speaking as a person and as a professional. [...] We can always improve as a person, we must see that the world is currently so difficult and if we do not observe ourselves we will think it is normal all the bad things that are going on in the world.

Interview – Carmen (09/21/2017)

As part of her answer, Carmen highlights the reflective practice as also an instrument of improvement of not only the pedagogical practice, but also of the personal realm of teachers, which indicates a holistic view of teacher's identity. As Carmen puts it, her identity as a teacher who acts is connected to her identity as a person. She also highlights that the classroom is in the world, once it depicts questions that go beyond the school walls. The world to which Carmen refers to imposes a variety of problems and challenges that should not be ignored by either the school or the teacher in their pedagogical practice, but should be addressed somehow. As Carmen puts it, teachers should at least not normalize/naturalize world issues, which resonates with what Jordão (2013) defends when she refers to the school as a space that favors the actions of deconstruction of interpretations, a critical exercise. When we do not normalize/naturalize our actions, we are practicing critical literacies in their genealogical instance, as proposed by Menezes de Souza (2011), who advocates the practice of dealing with the process of meaning making which are embedded in the interpretative communities in which we participate. That is, based on freirean concept of "reading ourselves reading", we should understand why we think the way we do within a collectivity of literate social practices.

Such exercise might be expanded to issues external to the classroom both in the local realm, connected to the community, as well as in the global one, such as the city, the country or the even the planet. Treating challenges in several aspects of life, as well as not treating school as if it were disconnected from the world, refers to a critical practice of situating the student as an agent of the world where they live, who is invited to think, discuss, problematize and transform this world.

The next extract reveals agency in its temporal aspect: it gathers past experience with the present evaluation in order to impact in a future project of action. Bearing this philosophical attitude in mind, Carmen describes one situation in which she reflected about her own agency as being limited, but which caused her to change her attitude from then on.

Carmen: I believe the English teacher, I, as an English teacher will observe myself to improve in certain issues. As I always say, we focus too much on the United States and on England. So I, as a teacher, have to regulate myself because I know it and I know there are things we are not aware of. We do things unconsciously. We may be chauvinist, racist or acritical as language teachers, we might be saying something that is discriminatory against our friends from Africa. (...) Once a boy asked me which English I spoke.

Researcher: Which English do you speak?

Carmen: (laugh) On this day I could not answer (laughing). I could not answer but I fell within the American English. I answered "I do not know. I think it is more connected to the United States". But I do not speak the English from the United States. I speak my English, my English with my accent from the North of Brazil, my English with my Brazilian accent.

Interview – Carmen (09/21/2017)

Carmen problematizes the naturalization of coloniality, specially concerning the relations between peoples from supposedly “central” countries and “marginalized” countries. Carmen’s agency is associated with the decolonial break (Kumaravadivelu, 2014; Mignolo, Walsh, 2018), which destabilizes hierarchical relations between native and non-native speakers of English and changes the terms of the conversation among them. Under such view, there is no hierarchy, but a horizontality of the diversity of users of English, which is especially critical in the valorization of action in the particular case of elementary education. Such valorization brings agency and identity which are critical and active. Criticality is also the basis of the pedagogical practice described by Mariana, as we can see in the extract that follows:

Mariana: The issue of not teaching only content, but values and criticality. There was a very good professor that once taught vocabulary about food aligned with the topic of hunger. She worked on the topic of food production, starvation, and the distribution of food around the world. I thought it was amazing to work like this, so I try to bring this to my classes. In my classes in the private school where I work there was the topic of Family. Then traditionally it would be only vocabulary, but I will explain that there are different kinds of Family, there is the Family in which the parents are divorced, there is the one in which the grandparents raise the children. Anyhow, you must respect and know they love us.

Interview – Mariana (08/24/2017)

Mariana emphasizes the linguistic and social diversity in her classes, which highlights an educational approach that confronts the isolation and neutrality of an autonomous language (Street, 2014). According to Mariana, her higher education has provided her with a critical posture, especially coming from the critical approach of one of her professors. The relational and temporal aspects of agency can be identified in this case. This projective aspect of agency, in which she shows her desire to work critically in the future, intertwines with her present evaluation of her own iterational dimension of agency. In other words, she aspires to break traditional rules inspired in her assessment of her relation with one former teacher, which expanded her perspectives of critical practice.

5 Final remarks

The proposal of this study was to investigate the concepts of agency developed by pre-service and in-service teachers in the context of their pedagogical practices. Since the concept of agency is a discursive practice which directs itself towards something and consequently does not end in itself, conceptualizing agency involved a reflection on social positionings of the teaching profession. While conceptualizing agency, participants also reflected about it in relation to a socio-historical context and the place of schooling in this construction, concerning the role of education in the contemporary society. It was especially important to confront those agency definitions with the theoretical lens of critical literacies which permeate the position of the English language in the so-called globalized and digitally oriented society in which we take part.

Concerning the concepts of agency developed in the context described above, four inter-related categories emerged: the agency of the technicist teacher, the agency of the teacher as a hero, the agency of the teacher sensitive to the student’s predicament and the agency of the critical teacher. The first two categories refer to the traditional and neoliberal approaches that underpin the technicist education operating in the current globalizing system without problematizing its foundations. The third category,

the agency of the teacher sensitive to the student, is established in the Freirean dialogue, in which there is a mutual construction of knowledges located in the pedagogical practice. Similar to the agency of the teacher sensitive to the student, the agency of the critical teacher highlights the power relations in the world, which permeates the pedagogical acting of the teacher. This practice reflects, situates and means a plurality of the context in which the pedagogical practice occurs.

Though every human being has the potential to act, agency might be more or less transformative and this is why I believe this study might contribute for the future English teachers to understand their teaching role as transformative agents within the conditions they are given. The exercise of conceptualizing agency can be understood as an opportunity for the participants to exercise their agency, to theorize their own practices, as local acts of English teaching in a globalized world. Thus, reflecting and acting on their own practice – and being invited to modify their nature – might impact the future generations of English teachers as they come to regard their classes not in isolation but as part of the world to think their classrooms as part of the world.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank CNPq for the grant received during her PhD research, which allowed the development of the work presented in this article.

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