

English language teaching for children: negotiating meaning in the continuing education praxis

Jozélia Jane Corrente Tanaca¹

Elaine Mateus²

Introduction

Through the sociocultural lens of learning and of language teacher's education (MATEUS, 2005; 2006; JOHNSON, 2006; LIBERALI; MAGALHAES, 2009; EDWARDS, 2010; LIBERALI, 2013) we take, in this paper, the challenge proposed by Johnson (2006, p. 236) of examining and reflecting upon our (discursive) social practices and the role of teachers' educators, with the intention of (re)creating practices that strengthen the professional learning process and the English language teaching for children, in a complex scenario of educational policies that do not take this field of work into consideration, as already stated by Santos, 2005, Tonelli and Cristóvão, 2010, Rocha, Tonelli and Silva, 2010, Tonelli and Chaguri, 2012, Gimenez, 2009, 2013, Tonelli and Gimenez, 2013, Gimenez et al, 2013, among other scholars.

We investigated the learning process of English teachers in the context of continuing education, holding the belief that they continually rearrange professional identities, forging opportunities for the creation of new practices such as the experience of expansive learning (ENGESTROM; SANNINO, 2010). We explored the expansion of social practices that create new activities, the challenges of playing a different role in meaning-making contexts, and the idea of "learn in the process of learning" (JOHNSON, 2006). In Mateus' words (2014, p. 337), we addressed "learning as the subjective occupation of positions previously established in social

1 PhD Student, Graduate Program in Language Studies, State University of Londrina, joze-liatanaca@gmail.com

2 Associate Professor, Department of Modern Languages, State University of Londrina, mateus@uel.br

practices, that is made possible during the course of action in situated practices, in which discursive action plays a central role”. In some aspects, this is a perspective that is closely related to what Edwards (2010) denominates “relational agency”, which key explanatory principle is the situated professional development, mediated by the creation and innovation that arises from experience and from the (re)signification of collective work.

On this basis, we understand that the broader the space for dissent, the most expansive the latitude for an agency, for the negotiation and for the (re)signification of practices (MATEUS, 2013). Thus, we characterize meaning negotiation as a complex process constituted of antagonistic positions, veiled as beliefs and understandings, that is established based on social roles and places that we hold during events of interaction in communities of practice (WENGER, 1998) which are supported in and through the action. We are aware that the concept of community of practice is essential to the comprehension and development of expansive learning in situated practice contexts. Nevertheless, we take into consideration that an exclusive look towards “legitimate peripheral participation” (LAVE; WENGER, 1991) is not a sufficient analysis to the understanding of how meaning negotiation takes place in this context; we, hence, established a connection between language and learning theories, with a theoretical and methodological apparatus of analysis on the functioning of language and the development of learning in a community of practice (GEE, 2000; TUSTING, 2005; FAIRCLOUGH, 2003).

We essentially analyze the constituted and the constitutive language of understandings and socially crystallized practices; and the discursive movements of meaning transformation of those aforementioned understandings. We focus on the analysis of how discursive voices are alternated and intercepted in the meaning negotiation of learning activities. Our objective is to analyze expansive learning practices through the reoccurrence of authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse between teachers and educators that (re)create activities of English teaching for children. Authoritative discourse acts through fixed and immutable meanings that are socially built in – and through – the discourse as absolute truth. Internally persuasive discourse, on the contrary, can be characterized by the alternation of voices and meanings, with movements of argument and counterargument that happen through the overture to dialogue and to different ways of comprehending and signifying the object of negotiation settings (BAKHTIN, 2010).

The meaning construction movement can be analyzed through the style of discursive position as “linear” and “pictorial” (BAKHTIN, 2009, p. 156). The linear style is a characteristic of “*lords of the thoughts*” ideas from a verbally expressed era, some fundamental tasks, lemmas, etc (BAKHTIN, 2010 p. 294, emphasis added). We take into consideration the position a discourse holds in

a social hierarchy. In this regard, the more prominent the feeling of hierarchy in negotiation settings, the more clear and defined are the boundaries of the position, and thus, the less open to replies that destabilize meaning they are. The more impersonal the way of taking the discourse from others, the more categorical and strong are the words that take meaning, and less will be the appreciative apprehension and the changes in comprehension regarding what is being discussed. The strength of linear discursive style is maintained by the clear exterior shape of the discourse mentioned, by the impersonality and weakening of the voice that takes it and, consequently, by the strengthening of the position of the discourse mentioned, that acquires the shape of authoritative discourse.

Contrary to the discursive enunciation veiled as authority, the pictorial discursive style potentiates different voices in the argumentative process. In this sense, language, as explained by Bakhtin (2009, p. 156), “elaborates more subtle e versatile ways of allowing the author to infiltrate their replies in someone’s discourse. The narrative context makes efforts in order to undo the compact structure of closed discourse, in order to absorb it and erase its boundaries”. It is noteworthy that the pictorial discursive style does not bear an ideological authoritarianism and hence it erases clear exterior shapes of somebody’s words through a fluid and individualized discursive movement that expresses “authentic lexical coloration” by intonation, sense of humor, irony, enchantment or despise.

In this movement, beliefs exert forces that are interrelated in an antagonistic manner, creating conflict zones e doubts that develop questioning situations of practice that are understood as finished and ready, those forces are called “centrifugal” (BAKHTIN, 2009). On the other hand, “centripetal forces” create zones of conformity through symmetry, affinity and discursive alignment that maintain the harmony in social relations and crystallizes practices that are ideologically constructed.

Those distinctions are relevant and enable the analysis of the way argumentative enunciations act in the meaning negotiation and expansive learning. The analysis is oriented by the following question: What are the implications of the reoccurrence of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses to the development of expansive learning?

Based on our objective and the aforementioned question of this present study, we analyzed the development of expansive learning through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA), according to which the conception of discourse comprehends the use of language as a social practice (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003) and the learning process as interrelated to the discursive practice that, in turn, is related to the process of making meaning. We elected intertextuality (RAMALHO; RESENDE, 2011; FAIRCLOUGH, 2003) as an analytical category that enables one to investigate the implications of occurrence of authoritative and

internally persuasive discourse to the development of expansive learning. Linguistic mechanisms described by Liberali (2013) are also relevant to this investigation, especially, **lexical mechanisms** that sustain argumentation through experiences, scientific knowledge, metaphors, particular expressions; **conversational mechanisms**, marked by repetition, complementation, exclamation, pauses, questionings, permeabilities; **nominal cohesion mechanisms** that enable the investigation of connection between arguments, shares, recoveries, meaning expansion; **valuation mechanisms** in which participants mark their positioning through adjectives, appreciation, depreciation, identification and descriptive expressions; **modalization mechanisms** that indicates aspects of mandatory, possibility, probability, comprehension of ideas as the only truth, conformity, judgment; **voice distribution mechanisms** that denote inclusion or the weakening of voices, involvement of others in one's own discourse; **utterance mechanisms**, marked by turns of silence, pauses, laughs, speaking rhythm (simultaneity); and **shift of turns mechanisms**, that can be observed in interruptions, pauses, changes in conflict topics, turn taking, control of turns, emphasis and complementation.

The text is organized in order to present in the first section the theoretical and methodological framework in which this study is based. We address, in sequence, the researched context, the data collection and analysis procedures. The last two sections of the text are focused on the analysis and interpretation of excerpts selected from meetings regarding continuing education of language teachers of English for children. This present paper is part of a bigger research developed by the first author of this text as a PhD study. Other studies regarding the same project can be read in Gimenez et al (2013), Coradim and Tanaca (2013), Tanaca and Mateus (2014).

1 Context and data

The data analyzed is part of the recordings' transcripts of three continuing education meetings with English teachers that were participants in the Londrina Global project (LG), developed in municipal schools of Londrina-PR. The recordings were made in 2013, when the Activity Development to the English Language Teaching for Children project (DAEIC/LEM/UEL), proposed and coordinated by Dr. Denise Ortenzi, participated in five out of the ten meetings of continuing education, with the objective of promoting the development of the practical activity of English teaching in the early years, as well as generating empirical knowledge regarding this experience. We organized the transcripts into two groups. Group 1 is constituted by transcripts from the meetings coordinated by the LG project and group 2 is constituted by transcripts from the DAEIC project meetings.

Both transcript groups were organized in parts denominated “thematic interactional sequences”, based on the duration of the issues discussed. We analyze, in this paper, the “parts of the house” thematic interactional sequence, with duration between 0:01:06 to 0:07:47 from 2013, May 24th; and 1:48:33 to 2:11:00 from 2013, November 8th, from data group 1. We related the analysis of this sequence to the “classroom routine” thematic interactional sequence, with duration of 0:35:55 to 1:07:17 from 2013, September 20th, from data group 2. The “parts of the house” sequence deals with the negotiation of a teaching activity, called “parts of the house”, which is part of the “Host Family” didactic material, collectively developed in the continuing education meetings.

We analyze, in sequence, the way voices were recovered in meaning negotiation settings of the “parts of the house” activity in those days, by the community of practice Londrina Global, constituted by 39 teachers with a degree in Languages or Pedagogy (and an English education from a language institute), experience in mother tongue literacy and English teaching for children. Except for the first author and the coordinators Rafaeli and Denise, the names used are all fictional, in order to grant anonymity to the subjects.

2 Data analysis and interpretation

The “parts of house” thematic interactional sequence presents an activity composed by an illustration of parts of a house, with numbered objects inside each part (laundry, garage, bedrooms, bathroom, kitchen, living room and garden) and, below the illustration, four columns with vocabulary referring to those objects. The activity asks students to number the columns of vocabulary according to the parts of the house. Nineteen teachers, Rafaeli and Jozélia initiate the discussion on May 24th regarding the way the “parts of the house” activity is organized. The developed argumentation has, epistemologically, traces of argumentation as dialogue (LIBERALI, 2013) that characterize the learning and educational environment as collaborative-dialogical (MATEUS, 2005). The sharing of experiences and the articulation of voices mark the process of meaning negotiation in the activity.

The dialogue is initiated by teachers Miriam and Milena: 0:01:06- *can I give one more suggestion? But, maybe if before there were an exercise to relate the picture to the word*; 0:01:41-Miriam- *I think it is too much in parts of the house, in that question*”; Miriam- 0:01:48- *It can be like that, parts of the house, bedroom, living room and some objects*. Miriam- 0:01:48- *I thought the same*.

The discursive modalization highlighted in the excerpt expresses the convergence of points of view, establishes distance between the teacher and what they say, opening, consequently, space and power to other voices to decide, collectively,

the creation or not of an activity previous to “parts of the house”. This overture creates the possibility of constructing an “internally persuasive” argumentative practice, characterized by replies in the movement of voices interchanged in the meaning negotiation setting (BAKHTIN, 2010).

The predominance of modalized turns of speech continues with teacher Roberta, who resumes and shares Miriam’s opinions of “too much”. Subsequently, Roberta describes experiences and adaptations she makes in the activity: 0:03:14- *I thought it was too much vocabulary all at once, wasn’t it? Because if they are seeing the house, parts of the house. “I have introduced an exercise in the middle, I don’t even have it here, but it’s a little sheet, it is focused in one part of the house...”*; *“I have taken the book, right? I have taken it from a book”*. So, *in the kitchen and in the laundry, and then there was a stove, those little things, right? And even another vocabulary of some words that are more common, like (NE), right? Those things, right?*

Focusing on local-context-object-content in Roberta’s argumentative practice, we identified a movement of the voice of the students by the teacher as a way of endorsing the insertion of other activities and resources in the action of teaching. The elements of connection in her argumentation are guided by the reasoning of actions and practical adaptations (LIBERALI, 2013). Even though lexical choices regarding the adaptation of activity, from common and practical sense, constitutes an imprecise meaning of what and how the teacher adapts, we noted that she plays the role of the agent in the teaching and educational context by creating and sharing activities that are compatible with students’ levels of learning.

The reflections and actions exposed by Roberta and Talita, who come to dominate and exchange speech turns in the process of meaning negotiation of the “parts of the house” activity, are based on pragmatism and practical sense. The argumentation they develop, as we illustrate in sequence, has the characteristic style of the internally persuasive discourse, with open questioning by the end of their speech, indication of overture, speech exchange and turn taking with authentic and individual lexical coloration marked by the discursive intonation and depreciative expressions of evaluation, with a strong emotional charge that denotes adhesion to what is said: Roberta-0:04:17- *But then, for example, in the first version, the page is very confusing. That is what I was going to say. So, there are numbers that the child doesn’t know, for example, whether it is a bed or the bedroom/ Talita-0:04:30-: [simultaneous speech] Oh! Yes... Wow! This exercise is difficult, guys! What a cruelty, huh?/ Roberta- 0:04:35- A strange place for a child. So, the child does not know what it is, and even ourselves... I have done everything beforehand/ Talita-0:04:36- [simultaneous speech] I have done it beforehand too/ Talita-0:04:49-[interrupts Roberta’s speech] I have got a lot of them wrong, because of these numbers.*

The argumentation is sustained by the practice experienced. By reporting teaching acts, Roberta and Talita project a discursive *ethos*, a self-image (LIBERALI, 2013) of experienced teachers because they put the activity to practice. For this reason, they express confidence when talking about it. Although the activity evaluations happen with common sense lexical choices and linguistic repertoire, Roberta and Talita play the role of “reasoning masters” (LIBERAL, 2013) in the context of meaning negotiation regarding the “parts of the house” activity, through the way they hold their positions and direct the (re)configuration of the activity in focus. They react, justify and explain the reasons for the adaptation of the activity, pointed out by them and also by teacher Miriam.

Even though Talita and Roberta frequently seek for the group’s opinion about what they say, utterance mechanisms such as intonation and voice tone, accelerated speech rhythm with turn taking from Roberta by Talita, emotional involvement, expressed by the use of adjectives and descriptive evaluation expressions, characterize the report on classroom experiences of these teachers as an authoritative discourse. Their teaching practice experiences constitute “strong bonds of widely accepted frameworks” (MATEUS, 2013, p. 14) and, hence, they both dominate speech turns; and the silence of the other teachers is established by the meaning negotiation regarding the “parts of the house” activity

We comprehend silence as a discursive aspect that is funded as well as fundamentals (ORLANDI, 1995) the meaning of Roberta and Talita’s words; as a locus that attributes validity e veracity to the argumentation developed by the “reasoning master” teachers that profess and express the practices they experience with the activity being analyzed. We suppose that *no answer* and *null participation* mean and constitute answers with multiple meanings: fear of speaking, insecurity regarding hierarchical and power relations, distancing between experience of some and lack of experience of others, alienation of the learning process (LEONTIEV, 1978), in toher words, the lack of personal investment in the main activity and involvement in parallel activities, discouragement, frustration and other senses generated in the concrete and subjective conditions that constitute the teaching practice. This understanding implies also that the silence creates a weakening of voices and constitutes an assumption of the existence of an “implied participation contract” (LIBERALI, 2013), in which authoritative discourses, constituted by experiences and shares, prevail in meaning negotiation. In this movement, the internally persuasive discourse loses space to authoritative discourse and, in the condition of experienced teachers, Roberta and Talita come to play the role of spokesperson of teachers that do not express opinions and do not react to the speech.

With the intention of analyzing the learning process in a longitudinal movement, we directed our attention to the argumentative practice in the educational

meeting on 2013, November 8th, in the interactional sequence duration from 1h48m to 2h11m of the audio recording. The recovery of meaning negotiation developed on 2013, May 5th by teacher Roberta reaffirms her discordance with the activity: Roberta – 1:50:41 – *Well, what I have noticed is that **this activity is too long**. It is an activity that is **too long** to be an **initial activity** because when you introduce new information **with too much vocabulary** and then you ask them to do an exercise, it is **complicated**.*

Teacher Roberta then starts conceptualizing the “parts of the house” activity as “initial activity”, standing up for the idea that the “parts of the house” activity cannot be considered an “initial activity” in the *Host Family* didactic material. This lexical choice shows that Roberta takes into consideration the types of activity that are part of the material in relation to the level of learning of the students. Concepts of “initial activity”, “main activity” were addressed in the formation of the DAEIC project on 2013, September 20th, interactional sequence “analysis, classroom routine”, conducted by Professor Denise Ortenzi, in the excerpt from 0:35:55-1:07:17, based on Cameron’s (2012) discussion. We are going to analyze one excerpt where it is highlighted Professor Denise’s texturing, in the data group 2, recovered by teacher Roberta, in the Londrina Global Project meeting: 0:39:17-0:40:41- *So, these ones could be in the more expanded part of the class, right? Which one is **the main activity**, a **core activity**, a game, for example, or is it a **faster activity** to introduce the class, or is it a **core activity**? Which activities you have to perform in order to get your student to do what you want them to do, you can take one, two or maybe even three until the main activity that I want them to do, right? And then the conclusion, the goodbye, right?*

The argumentation developed by Professor Denise explains the types of teaching activities in relation to the planning steps of an English class for children, which are, respectively: introductory activity, core activity, and conclusion. The Professor relates the introduction step to faster activities, considering the objective of establishing the beginning of an English class. The core activity, by the argumentation developed by Denise, could demand several activities/lessons previous to them, performed in a sequence that develops students enough so that it enables them to perform the core activity. The content of this speech is also recovered by Jozélia in the argumentation regarding the “parts of the house” activity, on 2013, November 8th: 1:52:50 – *Well! What Roberta has said, I keep remembering **the meetings with Denise and relating it to ours**. Then, as you can see, the relation between what we are seeing in the project meetings and what we have been doing, **I could build a bridge now**, I don’t know. **What can you relate?** Silence...*

Jozélia’s final speech recovers teacher Roberta’s voice with the intention of bringing up the formation content of DAEIC project. According to the analysis of the relation between content, context and roles played in the enunciative setting,

we could identify external shapes of formation content of DAEIC project in this speech. These shapes are reaffirmed by the questioning, aiming at identifying if the teachers had the same perception of the coordinator, in other words, if it is established the relation between formation contents of DAEIC project with the development of activities for the didactic material from Londrina Global project. As a peculiar way of constituting meaning, the metaphorical construction “build a bridge” makes clear the need for the coordinator to establish bonds between the content of that formation for the meaning negotiation of activities developed by the teachers. We suppose that the lack of answers during 1 minute and 10 seconds could represent that lack of comprehension of the question and/or the difficulty and lack of establishing the relation between the objects asked. The inquisitive argumentative practice of coordinator Jozélia creates a participation space and, at the same time, stabilizes and strengthens the content and the formation developed by DAEIC project.

We suppose that this questioning discursive practice pervaded by power relations, which in turn are marked by social roles and positions of the enunciator (coordinator Jozélia) and of enunciated speech (from coordinator Denise), constitutes the authoritative discourse, veiled as internally persuasive discourse. The discursive movement that articulates and recovers meaning constituted in the continuing education meetings of DAEIC project seems to promote expansion of the comprehension of the “parts of the house” activity by Roberta and Jozélia, as well as resistance and theoretical-methodological tension in the way of conducting the activity, since some of the teachers had and shared experiences and practices, with implicit theories, that constitute strong professional frameworks.

We comprehend that the expansion-resistance movement in the meaning negotiation setting regarding the activity in focus comes from a confrontation of authoritative discourses of distinct kinds (constituted by the “reasoning masters” – experienced teachers) and authoritative discourses (constituted by a knowledge that is permeated by hierarchy and power relations). We believe that there is space for positioning and multiple finishings in the process of meaning negotiation and for the development of an expansive learning. The linear discursive style that tries to maintain present formation contents of DAEIC project is confronted by the way teachers had been developing activities for teaching materials. Argumentation, counter-argumentation and internally persuasive discourse lose space to silence and to the reaffirmed participation, of the same teachers that perform an authentic discursive coloration in the recovery of their colleagues’ voices, and of the questioning, the ways of making meaning and pointing out adaptations of the activities; and, on the other hand, it represents the authoritative discourse in defining the external shapes and configuration of the “parts of the house” activity.

Final remarks

We believe that the formation of DAEIC project is pervaded by issues that are distinct from the issues that pervaded the formation of LG project, in which learning takes place in the close relation between shared experiences. We characterize the learning process developed by the meaning negotiation of the “parts of the house” activity as a creation, exchange, and hybridization movement between different cultural contexts and patterns of professional competence, made clear by the agency performed by the teachers in the shared process of adapting the activity.

We comprehend that the constitution and the predominance of authoritative discourses takes place in a close relation to the social practices that compose them, and that, in turn, it impresses an external shape of the way the negotiation activity is set. Those discourses are derived from the social roles and places held by enunciators, by shared professional experiences that compose the external shapes of authoritative discourses that are a result of practice acting as a centripetal force that fosters and strengthens the learning process reported by the teachers. Those forces are confronted, in the process of meaning negotiation, by centrifugal forces that introduce new ways of (re)signifying. Thus, expansive learning, as a process that leads to the formation of knowledge and theoretical concepts, is pervaded of theoretical and methodological clashes that are made clear sometimes by the pictorial discursive style, sometimes by the linear style. We comprehend the expansive learning, in this field of forces, as a creational and transformational process of a culture marked by conflicts that potentiate change in the way of planning, creating, conceptualizing and signifying teaching activities. Contents and learning processes developed by DAEIC project do not assure the transformation of practices and teaching activities of the community, but it represents centrifugal forces that destabilize and question the *status quo* of actions and shared practices.

The process of meaning negotiation and learning has, on the other hand, “centripetal forces” (BAKHTIN, 1997) that, through beliefs and shared consensual acts, maintain and crystallize conformity zones, which maintain the continuity of existent practices, learning processes and knowledge. The silence that is funded and fundaments meaning in the negotiation process of the activity focused in this study can be placed between centripetal forces; and its presence can be closely related to the lack of establishment of connections between the content of formation developed by LG and DAEIC projects’ formation.

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