

***Remarkable Experiences in a Narrative Memoir of a Student of Portuguese/English Teaching Practicum from the School of Education at UFRJ***

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The European Conference on Education 2014  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

From a sociointeractional perspective of discourse, this research aims at investigating the written narrative of a student of English and Portuguese Teaching Practicum from a Letters undergraduate Course at UFRJ (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), in which she displays some of her remarkable experiences in the supervised apprenticeship at school. Through an analysis that considers the production of narrative as a discursive, dialogical and ideological process, this research may help us understand some of the experiences described in light of expectations and frustrations of the student in the supervised practicum course. It can also help us reflect upon strategies that can contribute to the education of future language teachers for acting in different areas of teaching and learning. This research points to the need for a dialogical construction of knowledge, for the development of bridges between the university and the school in order to cater for the open dialogue with all subjects involved in the teacher training process.

Keywords: Foreign Language Teaching Course, Teacher Education, Education, Narrative Studies, Discourse Analysis.

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## **1. Introduction**

A central objective of the research developed here is to produce reflections upon the work of teacher education developed in the course of Letters at the School of Education of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ, henceforth). The analysis of these experiences can help us develop approaches related to the construction of teacher knowledge that constitutes a more comprehensive teacher education process, one of more humanistic character and one that enables undergraduates to better prepare themselves to deal with the challenges of our times and future.

This research has as one of its tenets the perception that teacher education is something that should be constantly reflected upon in interface with multiple teacher education contexts. As pointed by Goodwin (2000) and Bastos (2010), we understand that the process of teacher education can only occur in an interaction in which there is a dynamic and reflective collaboration. Undergraduate teacher education is then configured as a complex area that encompasses the construction of different knowledge necessary for teaching practice, so the narrative analysis brought here seeks to address different experiences of a student-teacher, trying to understand the different elements at work in her education process. In this research, we seek to better understand these experiences that work as major milestones in the teacher education process. A remarkable experience, however, cannot be understood outside its larger narrative, as posed by Josso (2004). Thus, a discursive and socio-interactional approach to narrative studies in interface with studies on teacher education, can contribute greatly to the development of a proposal for extensive training.

## **2. Teaching degree and supervised apprenticeship of language students at the College of Education at UFRJ.**

The undergraduate teaching degree in Languages at UFRJ is a partnership between the College of Letters and the School of Education, where the latter is responsible for the pedagogical training. This training consists of the study of several courses, including a Teaching Practicum component and supervised apprenticeship. In the practicum course, we work specifically with the Special Didactics of Foreign Languages and Brazilian Portuguese as a first language and their respective Practicums and supervised apprenticeship in regular schools.

## **3. Memoir as a narrative genre of personal experience.**

In this work, we deal with the memoir of formation, which is constituted of a written narrative about a particular process of constitution of someone's professional trajectory. In this research, the memoir is part of an extensive work on teacher education in which the memory of the teacher in training is valued and promoted as something important in his/her education, just as pointed out by Reis in previous research,

Memory plays an essential role in the construction of autobiography, since the narrator and protagonist not only "reconstructs" the facts of his/her life story, but also justifies them with meaning and coherence that provide a specific meaning to his/her existence in the world. (2012, p. 41)

The memoir is a discursive genre composed of narratives that have characteristics which approximate it to the canonical narrative as described, for example, by the seminal studies of Labov & Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972). It is accurate to say that the memoir is composed of a chain of events that relate to a specific theme (the experience of a person in a supervised apprenticeship), since the author revisits several events that contribute to the construction of meaning of his/her trajectory within a particular profession. The memoir is constituted as an array of choices and constructions of meaning.

We consider that the production of narratives, either oral or written, is configured as a discursive, ideological and dialogical process (cf. Bakhtin [1929] 1997), which comprehends that its production is always related to social issues. It is therefore a text interwoven by social positions that are constructed from the perspective that the narrator has to account for the task of writing and reflection on his/her own experiences.

#### **4. Perspective of analysis**

This research can be characterized as a case study. We privilege narrative studies tenets to develop the analysis. In a previous research, Santos (2013, p. 24) had already pointed to the importance of narrative studies in developing understandings about various aspects of social life since one of the central elements in narrative studies is

(...) the perception that people use narrative not only to (re) construct past events, but, among other objectives, to ensure that such events are interpreted in accordance with the desired representations. We narrate so that the stories are appropriate for certain goals.

This work of (re)construction, made possible by the narrative, is a work to promote the memory of experience, and also it is a work of construction of the identities that the narrator wants to assign to him/herself and to those with whom s/he interacts. Thus, constructing narratives is a situated performance since, under Mishler's view (1999, p. xvi)

(...) narratives and other discourse genres, are social acts. In speaking, we perform our identity (Langellier, 1999) making a "move" in the field of social relationships (Labov, 1982). This pragmatic view of language highlights what we are doing as social actors in selecting and organizing the resources of language to tell our stories in particular ways that fit the occasion and that are appropriate for our specific intentions, audiences and contexts.

Supported by the perception brought by Mishler, our data analysis is based on a methodological approach that considers narrative studies as the study of action, and the study of an individual's performance and its circumstances.

#### **4.1 Context of the research**

We use material produced by a student-teacher (whom we shall call Beatriz) as one of the final requirements of the course of Teaching Practicum of Portuguese and English.

The Teaching Practicum is one of the final subjects of the course for the undergraduate degree in Letters and it is a subject offered by the School of Education, covering both weekly meetings with the professor responsible for the Teaching Practicum at the School of Education, as well as meetings with the classroom teacher in the schools.

It is important to note that the school in which she developed her apprenticeship is a state vocational school for preparing teachers at secondary level to work with children in primary schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The school has 85% of its student body made up of girls and 15% of boys. The report shows that the school has similar difficulties to those described by other students in other memoirs which reflect on their apprenticeship experiences in other contexts of Brazilian public school.

## **5 Analysis of a written narrative<sup>1</sup>**

We divide this section into four parts in which we analyze different excerpts of a single memoir. In our analysis we focused, mainly, on the question of expectations brought by the student-teacher in her memoir, her description of the coexistence with colleagues, students and teachers, her view of the work done in the classroom at school, her evaluation of the apprenticeship process and her perception of the realization (or not) of her initial expectations.

### ***a) expectations and first impressions.***

In this section, we analyze two initial excerpts of the student-teacher memoir in which she first writes about her expectations at the apprenticeship at school and then with the contact with her mentor teacher at school.

#### **Excerpt 1: “Before beginning.”**

Before beginning my apprenticeship, my expectations about the experience were not very good. I had never attended a class, nor been in a public school before. I imagined I would find a school that would confirm the stereotype I had of public education; a precarious school, in a bad state, no limit and bad-behaved students, dissatisfied absent teachers. I found some of these elements and felt difficulty in dealing with them, but I can affirm a good part of those and of my preconceptions were put down from the start by their welcome.

In the passage above the narrator describes her expectations about the beginning of the apprenticeship, placing it under the congruence of the most common stereotypes reflected in our society and reconstructed in the micro context of discursive production (“*I imagined I would find a school that would confirm the stereotype I had of public education; a precarious school, in a bad state, no limit and bad-behaved students, dissatisfied absent teachers.*”). Beatriz recognizes her difficulty in reframing these stereotypes, but in repositioning them from the starting point element of the “welcome”, she initiates an important experience, which will help in her discursive construction of her initial professional positionings. This evaluation is important, so

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<sup>1</sup> We made no changes in the original text and, in order to provide anonymity, we assigned an alias for the narrator and omitted the names of institutions.

that Beatriz can start constructing new perspectives for her supervised apprenticeship. Her willingness to revise stereotypes seems already to provide for the construction of a new perspective on the apprenticeship, not one in that she already knows the outcome, but one in which she is still constructing meaning.

It is important to note here that in the micro context of writing, her statement about the “welcome” (“*but I can affirm a good part of those and of my preconceptions were put down from the start by their welcome*”), is extremely important to mark the initial turning point, and transformation of her perception, which is an interesting evidence of the narrator, who demonstrates her willingness to make the apprenticeship into a significant moment, and a benchmark for the construction of meanings and diverse reflective positionings that are still to come.

Her statement that her preconceptions were put down, is also important because it points to the final outcome of her memoir and shows how its textual construction is governed by its sense of ending (cf. Ricoeur, 1980, p. 180). We work here with the perception that, in the analysis of a narrative, we should perceive more than a sequence of events. In this regard, Mishler (2002, p. 98) has shown that, for example, in a narrative

“(…) the temporal order is not enough, especially if we want to make a greater distinction between sequences of events that are merely lists and sequences that are stories. That is, a narrative should be more than one thing after another.”

Another important element is that this claim is often in sharply contrast with the initial disposition with which many undergraduates arrive in our course: complaining and generally unwilling to undertake a course that demands time and attention for them to become teachers.

### **Excerpt 2: “English teacher vs. Portuguese teacher”.**

My contact with the English teacher was excellent. She was very understanding, flexible and friendly. She was always willing to learn something with us – trainees and to listen to what we had to say. She asked for our opinions for many times to solve some problems in the classroom and asked questions about the planning of lessons. I felt very satisfied I could help her. I realized that the apprenticeship did not have to be that boring moment in which we sit in the back of the room, making notes and then you home with the feeling that your presence there made no difference. The Portuguese teacher was always very helpful, but not as flexible and accessible as the English teacher. I believe that because the English teacher was almost as old as I was, it made it easier for me to get closer to her.

In the above excerpt, Beatriz thematizes her contact with her mentor teachers at school. Here, what stands out is the contrast between the English teacher and the Portuguese teacher. The student describes her relationship with the English teacher as satisfactory and positions the Portuguese teacher as being “*always very helpful, but not as flexible and accessible as the English teacher.*”

Beatriz evaluates the first contact as “excellent”; then she relates the professional contact of a personal identification (*She was very understanding, flexible and friendly*). She also features elements of collegiality (positioning her and the teacher as fellow teachers who learn together), even if she mitigates her initial position as an “apprentice”.

Then Beatriz evaluates this dual positioning, not only regarding the relationship between apprentice and teacher-mentor, but also with regard to her own apprenticeship (*I realized that the apprenticeship did not have to be that boring moment in which we sit in the back of the room, making notes and then you home with the feeling that your presence there made no difference*), redimensioning her previous conception of the apprenticeship from a new identity construction presented here.

She also reshapes the co-construction of positioning from the small age difference between herself and the English teacher mentor. Her positive evaluation of the age proximity demonstrates that she discursively constructs that a relationship with another person of the same generation is something that exerts a positive influence on the construction of a professional position that combines personal relationship and professional identity.

On the other hand, she positions herself being farther from the Portuguese teacher, (*“The Portuguese teacher was always very helpful, but not as flexible and accessible as the English teacher”*). Here, the question of personal relationship is constructed in a distance and the positioning is not similar to the previous one. It is worth adding that this is not an element that can be ignored, since it is the only reference to the Portuguese teacher in the whole memoir, showing a performing positioning towards the construction of a professional identity that leans towards the teaching of the English language.

**Excerpt 3: “The students scared me in the beginning.”**

The students scared me in the beginning. There was no limit for their behavior. They often disrespected the teachers and rules and regulations of the school about the uniform. As the girls wore skirts well above their knees, the boys’ ties disappeared. The language among students was full of swear words and name-callings.

The experience described reaches out to her former beliefs, which leads Beatriz to confront them with a reality that seems to confirm her initial predispositions. This confirmation, however, does not generate a naturalization of the negative aspect of the school; on the contrary, her narrative seems to point to an estrangement, a non-conformism with the reality that presents itself. Her initial strangeness (*“The students scared me in the beginning”*) does not block her; it instead takes her to an exercise of trying to understand the complex behavior of the students.

**b) The students.**

In this section, the narrator talks about her relationship with the students. Both the narrative construction of the relationship of the student-teacher with the school students, and her descriptions are characterized by being important elements for an

understanding of her experiences as an apprentice and her experience of professional training in a broader sense.

**Excerpt 1: “they respected me a lot.”**

Some teachers seemed pleased with their work and others did not. However, everyone complained about the behavior of the students. My contact with the students, unlike the one with teachers, was very good. They respected me a lot and I tried to answer questions that arose in class, but which, due to their shyness or the end of class time, were not clarified.

In the above excerpt, the student-teacher describes her contact with the students as being good and positions herself as a person who supplied them with information that was not provided by the teachers. In this construction, Beatriz takes for herself an autonomous and authorial positioning. The construction of her relationship with the students based on the mutual respect gives her “authority” in the context of the classroom, even if, institutionally, she was positioned as an apprentice.

**c) “the most remarkable situation in the school”**

**Excerpt 1 “The new students rebelled against the teacher”**

“The most remarkable situation in the school happened in the English class. The English teacher was new at the school and that was her first semester with the classes. The problem arose during the first test. The new students rebelled against the teacher when they realized there was no translation for the test questions. There was a lot confusion, including scenes of disrespect and swearing. The students attacked the teacher saying they didn’t know English and questioned how they could do a test only in English. Some shouted: “This is an absurd. How come? Now I’m gonna have to enroll in an English course to understand English at school. You kidding!”

In this extract, Beatriz describes the most remarkable moment of her teacher apprenticeship, a conflict in the classroom, between the English teacher and the students, due to an apparent change in the evaluation undertaken up to that moment. She uses both the reported speech (*The students attacked the teacher saying they didn’t know English and questioned how they could do a test only in English*) and the direct speech to give life to the voice of the students (“*This is an absurd. How come? Now I’m gonna have to enroll in an English course to understand English at school. You kidding!*”).

The conflict demonstrates a very complex issue about foreign language teaching in many schools in Brazil, which reflects the undervalued position of the foreign language in the curriculum of the schools. This is a fundamental issue of foreign language teacher education in our country, with complex, ideological, political, economical and educational background. It is worth stressing that these are common issues raised and reflected by several students enrolled in our courses at the School of Education, in memoirs, as well as in oral discussions in class.

**Excerpt 2: “there was no reason for such a lack of respect and politeness.”**

The coordinator received numerous complaints from the students and set up a meeting with the teacher to understand the situation and the problem that had been established. I was with the [English] teacher when the coordinator addressed [her] in the staff room referring to what had occurred. I defended the teacher confirming that there was no reason for such a lack of respect and politeness. The students had no reason to act that way, because, even if they say that they were accustomed to translations because that was how the teacher of the previous year used to work, every exercise and test proposed by the current teacher never showed translations and the students never complained about this fact (neither to the teacher nor to the coordinator). Additionally, all commands of the questions had been worked previously. Commands like “write true or false”, “answer the questions”, “complete”, “fill in the blanks” were much worked upon during previous exercises. I realized that the students wanted to destabilize the teacher and create turmoil. Unfortunately, they succeeded. The teacher was very upset with the reaction of the students and decided to take a radical and inflexible fighting stance, which ended up by intensifying the feeling of rebellion of the students.

Beatriz describes the intensification of the instituted conflict positionings, showing in detail the issues that led to the conflict of the actors (teacher and students) in that context. She shows how the situation intensifies, which makes the classroom to be framed as a battlefield (*“the students wanted to destabilize the teacher and create turmoil. Unfortunately, they succeeded.”*). The narrative describes how students positioned themselves in “rebellious”, which is antagonistic to the positions assumed by the teacher (*“The teacher was very upset with the reaction of the students”*).

In this excerpt, it is important the construction which the narrator makes of herself as someone who interacts with the coordinator in defense of the teacher (*“I defended the teacher confirming that there was no reason for such a lack of respect and politeness”*). This attitude demonstrates her construction as someone who is active in her processes of professional formation and that aligns herself with the perspective of the teacher and of the institution.

**Excerpt 3 “(...) it seemed we were entering a battlefield.”**

Every time we entered a class, in fact, it looked like we were entering a battlefield. The students didn't collaborate with anything, not even with silence or with a willingness to do the activities. I slowly talked to the students and explained the attitude of the teacher and questioned them. The coordinator then listened to the teacher and stood by her. I also talked with the teacher and told her that if she also kept that irreducible stance saying that she would never change and that they would have to get used to it, the students would rebel even more. It was necessary for her to initiate a position of conscientization of the students (if she really wanted to continue with the tests without translation). It was important to show that if they were able to perform an exercise without the aid of the translation of the sentence they would also be able to take the test.

In this extract, amid the conflict, Beatriz begins to construct to herself another positioning, an in-between space. When she describes herself talking to students and, later, also with the teacher, she constructs her action as conciliatory, trying to reframe the conflict and restore the order in the institutional location of the school sphere. She positions herself as an experienced professional who observes the events, reflects on the need for changing and acts to resolve the conflict.

#### **d “It was worth it!”**

In this last section, we analyze excerpts in which the author evaluates her experience at the apprenticeship at school. As a canonical element, the final chapter of a narrative seeks to bring back to the moment of production of writing a positioning that is often singularly positive about the experience on focus. The narrator here also takes this approach to construct a position in accordance to her expectations and reflections on the process of learning and apprenticeship.

We analyze the two extracts below jointly, since they seem to denote elements of the evaluation of the experience in a complementary way. The two passages bring, however, peculiarities. While in the first excerpt, the narrator evaluates the apprenticeship experience and how it became “*rewarding*”, in the following excerpt, she seems to adopt a more holistic perspective on the apprenticeship (“*The apprenticeship is a very valuable opportunity, because it is the moment we have to face the classroom with a different perspective*”), projecting the experience as something important for her professional future.

#### **Excerpt 1: “My experience in the apprenticeship was very gratifying”**

My experience in the apprenticeship was very gratifying and productive. I learned a lot with the teachers and also with the students. What I liked most was the sensation of being able to help and somehow make a difference in the teacher’s classroom. Still, in this sense, I could also undo certain myths and preconceptions regarding public schooling. The union of the students, and their sense of friendship called my attention.

#### **Excerpt 2: “The apprenticeship is a very valuable opportunity”**

The apprenticeship is a very valuable opportunity, because it is the moment we have to face the classroom with a different perspective. It is possible to analyze the relationship of the students from a different perspective and understand the environment of the classroom and its specificities which, sometimes, from a broad perspective, goes unnoticed.

These two excerpts have important evaluations from Beatriz, since she reflects on issues that she considers important for the development of the challenge that constitutes the teacher education and the construction of knowledge enabled by this experience. She constructs her apprenticeship as a space in which she had the opportunity to exercise her creativity to transform experiences and specific events (some negative) in some kind of formative learning for life. In this sense, the two extracts bring a new perspective on the experience constructed by Beatriz. They reflect an end already pointed out at the beginning of the story. They are also part of

the positionings constructed along the story for the existence of her own act of narrating her process of apprenticeship. It is the story in its configurational sense, as mentioned by Ricoeur (1980); it is the double arrow of the time Mishler (2002) as tells us; it is the reportability of experience with its outcome, as indicated by Labov (1972); it is the embodiment of the training, as points out by Goodwin (2000) and Bastos (2010).

## **6. Final considerations and limits of the present research**

By analyzing the experiences of a student-teacher in her apprenticeship through the narrative construction present in her memoir, we had the opportunity to see how she discursively constructs her own student-teacher identity amid different experiences of her supervised apprenticeship. We have seen that her experiences are constructed in order to give coherence to a formative process that makes sense to the reader, but mostly to herself.

In proposing the use of the memoir of teacher practicum as part of a project of initial teacher education and supervised apprenticeship, we realize that this hybrid genre reveals important contributions. It can provide a qualitative shift in teacher training, since it provides the student-teacher the reflection about the significant moments of this experience, while contributing to a more humanistic process of the teacher apprenticeship. The narrator brings into the training her own historicized perspective, her own identity positionings put into action, not only in the micro context of written production, but also constituted from the very performance at the macro institutional context of the shared action among the various actors. The memoir also provides the necessary reframing between theoretical reflection and reflection from the practice, as we could perceive from the analysis undertaken here.

The narrator was able to put into action a link between theory and practice, at different moments, when she reflects perceptively about the events reported and positionings constructed to solve the dilemmas of her expectations, stereotypes, beliefs, teacher-student relationship, conflicts and the very positioning of the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the space of the public school in Brazil.

In a much relevant way, the narrator demonstrated her own initial construction of identity and career choice in providing elements for reflection in action and about the action (cf. Schön, 2000) and positionings of change and social transformation (cf. Giroux, 1997). Her textual production leads us to the perception that the memoir of training is not just an interesting object of research to better understand the work of teacher training, but can be mainly an important tool in a teacher training that encompasses both practical (which refers to the content) as well as humanistic dimensions (referring to how to construct knowledge about the content) of the teaching profession.

As this paper is methodologically configured as a case study, the final considerations reported here should be considered from the perspective of the interpretative limits of this methodological apparatus. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that, although we present a comprehensive analyses, it should not be taken as the only interpretative possibility. Thus, this research has a procedural characteristic that

should be further developed in order to contemplate different data and categories of analysis.

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