

## THE PLACE OF ACTION-RESEARCH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF MATO GROSSO DO SUL

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*ABSTRACT: The concern by researchers in the field of foreign language teaching with approaches, methods, teaching techniques, curriculum design, etc, have been changing. There seems to be a change in the focus of these investigations led to the process of professional, individual and continuing development of the foreign language teacher (Freeman, 1982). In this perspective, Gil (2005) identifies three investigative lines within Applied Linguistics, which are: reflective practices (Gimenez, 2002), beliefs (Barcelos, 1999), and the construction of professional identity (Telles, 2002). One of the possible ways to carry out such investigations in relation to teacher education in Brazil, both pre and in-service, would be the practice of action research (Moita Lopes, 1996). Action research, when implemented in pre-service education, may allow the student-teachers systematically to reflect on the conflicts inherent in the complex position between being a student and teacher, making them subjects of their own educational process. This research proposal aims to evaluate the implementation of action research in an English teacher's pre-service education course at the State University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UEMS), taking into account: (a) how student-teachers decide the areas and decisions taken during the implementation of action research, (b) how they evaluate the results obtained, and (c) how this experience can promote their professional education.*

*KEYWORDS: English; teacher education; action research.*

### 1. Introduction

The concern by researchers in the field of foreign language teaching with approaches, methods, teaching techniques, curriculum design, etc, have been changing to a focus of investigation led to the process of professional, individual and continuing development of the teacher through the reflection on what actually happens in classroom (Freeman, 1982). So, instead of carrying out investigations *for* the classroom, the tendency would be to carry out research *in* the classroom (Wallace, 1998).

In the current research scenario of foreign language teacher education research, Gil (2005, p. 174) outlines three broad investigative lines within Applied Linguistics, which are: 1) teacher education and reflective practices (Cavalcanti & Moita Lopes, 1991; Bartlett, 1990; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Moita Lopes, 1996; Gimenez, 2002); 2) teacher education and beliefs (Barcelos, 1999); and 3) teacher education and professional identity construction (Telles, 2002; Freeman, 1992).

This research proposal is characterized, then, for a reflective as well as investigative perspective of the English teacher's pre-service education at the State University of *Mato Grosso do Sul* (UEMS), particularly with regard to curricular components that may enable the implementation of innovations through opportunities of action-research practice as a result of teaching practices during the practicum of *Letras Português/Inglês* course.

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In order to propose the implementation of action research as a practical curricular component for the previously mentioned course, it would be necessary, first to carefully analyze the course's pedagogical project, as well as the syllabi that orient the English language disciplines, dealing with this issue in the pre-service education of these future English teachers.

Currently, the *Letras Português/Inglês* course at UEMS is at a moment of transition between the former 2004 pedagogical project and the establishment of a new one, proposed for 2010, although it is possible to notice that the issue of research was already mentioned in the 2004 project, when discussing the contents offered by the course. According to the document,

O curso contempla, nesse projeto pedagógico, conteúdos que objetivam desenvolver a consciência crítico-reflexiva do futuro profissional para agir em uma sociedade diversa e dinâmica e em constante processo de mudança, tendo na pesquisa um dos instrumentos para investigar e analisar a realidade do mundo em que vive e as exigências do mercado de trabalho. (p.7)

However, by reading the orientations of the disciplines offered by the 2004 pedagogical project, one can notice differences between the English disciplines and the Linguistics ones in regard to the role of research in pre-service language teacher education. While in the English disciplines the expected activities are directed basically to the teaching of the language, in the Linguistic ones they are led to the analyses of linguistics and literary texts, field research, interviews for collecting linguistic materials, among others.

Although the 2004 pedagogical project makes some references to the importance of research in pre-service education, there are no indications of how to implement research activities in the syllabi of the English disciplines, which places emphasis on the development of communicative and linguistic skills in the target language. Also, in the English Practicum syllabus, where the practice of research might have been implemented, it is clear that its focus is theory transmission, as can be seen below:

O objetivo da disciplina é apresentar as principais teorias relacionadas ao processo de ensino/aprendizagem de Língua Estrangeira no que se referem aos estudos da Linguística Aplicada, além de propiciar ao futuro professor o relacionamento de tais teorias com a realidade escolar brasileira no sentido de que o professor em pré-serviço faça a conexão da teoria com a prática lida e discutida em sala de aula. (p.66)

In 2009, a reformulated pedagogical project was proposed for the UEMS *Letras* course, which had as its most important innovation the BA in Linguistics and Literature, and the inclusion of Spanish in its regular course. With the BA degree, the Institution expects to develop researchers in the area of Linguistics and Literature that can promote an intervention in order to improve the teaching of Portuguese and Literature in the State of Mato Grosso do Sul" (p.13), although it does not take into account the foreign languages offered by the regular course.

According to this reformulated pedagogical project, which has being implemented since February 2010, the course should be based on "the pursuit of research and teaching, conceiving in the education of the students the necessary interface between being a teacher and researcher" (p.14), allowing them to overcome the status of teachers as content reproducers only.

The new pedagogical project makes just one reference to Applied Linguistics in its very introductory text and presents the possible relation with pre-service education of foreign language teacher. However, there are no other references in the document in relation to the implementation of research anywhere else in the text, as can be seen:

Há uma visão crítica e atualizada das perspectivas teóricas adotadas nas investigações de Lingüística Aplicada voltada ao ensino de línguas, e uma preparação profissional atualizada de acordo com a dinâmica do universo do trabalho, incluindo a utilização dos recursos das diversas tecnologias disponíveis ofertadas pelo curso. (p.24)

In relation to the English syllabi, there is a noticeable difference between the specificities of the two first years of the course and the last two ones. The focus of English I and II disciplines is the language itself, developing linguistic-communicative skills as well as preparing the student-teacher to actually teach the target language (p.71).

In the last two years, in the English III and IV disciplines, there is an indication of developing an investigative attitude based on the principles, techniques and methodological procedures of the research process, as well as providing the student-teachers with the necessary knowledge for their professional development. Also, in the discipline of English Practicum, the research can be seen as “favoring the education of a critical-reflective English teacher” (p.74).

When reading the 2004 and 2010 pedagogical projects, one can realize that there is an apparent bias of the practice of research in the latter project. This practice is more developed in the disciplines of Linguistics and Literature, while for those related to English language, its implementation is still regarded to the reading of research reviews, but without empirical practices as a curricular component.

After these initial assumptions, this research proposal aims to evaluate the implementation of action research in a pre-service course for future teachers of English at the State University of *Mato Grosso do Sul* (UEMS), and in order to achieve that, three research questions are asked, as follows:

- (1) To what extent do the student-teachers decide the areas of intervention and the decisions made during the implementation of the action-research projects?
- (2) How do they evaluate their results?
- (3) How can this experience help promote their professional education?

### **Significance of the Study**

Research when implemented in pre-service education may enable the student-teachers to reflect on the conflicts inherent in their position between being a student and teacher. Another reason for carrying out this study is the opportunity to build knowledge in the area of English teacher education in the state of *Mato Grosso do Sul*, besides the development of a curricular proposal that may offer opportunities for upgrading, implementing innovations and proposing investigations.

Also, there is the possibility of involving the teacher-educators at UEMS working with the English Practicum, offering them an opportunity to take into account the implementation of action-research with their pre-service students, combining theory and practice as a curricular component. Finally, this research proposal could open up a wider range of possibilities for investigation at schools and universities in the state of *Mato Grosso do Sul*,

both as objects of research and expertise construct in the area of English language and teacher education.

## 2. Review of Literature

In the context of foreign language teacher's pre-service education in Brazil, the classroom has been predominantly a place of teaching and very rarely of research. Cavalcanti & Moita Lopes (1991) believe that this is due to at least two major factors: teacher education indirectly focused on teaching and the lack of research tradition in the universities with regard to the area of teaching and learning languages.

Foreign language teacher education courses in this country ideally emphasize the development of the student-teacher's proficiency, and generally only one year is dedicated for the teaching practice itself in the form of the Practicum classes, and worse, this discipline, in most cases, does not reflect on practice, being restricted to a set of activities for the classroom. For Cavalcanti & Moita Lopes (1991), this attitude should be seen as the embryo for research activities and should occur throughout the student-teacher's educational time.

Moita Lopes (1996, p. 184) suggests that the student-teacher should get involved in critical reflection about his/her own work, rather than just being an executor of methods and techniques. He claims that an involvement with an attitude of research could generate this critical reflection. In this perspective, Moita Lopes (1996) defines action research as a type of research done by people in action in a particular social practice in which results are continuously incorporated into the research process, providing new research topic, so that teachers and researchers are always working on the production of knowledge about their practice. (p. 185)

After presenting some aspects about the relevance of action research in language teacher's pre-service education, two other concepts will be developed: innovation and curriculum. These concepts are relevant for this research proposal as a basis for a reliable analysis of the data to be collected. Thus, it is necessary to understand what an innovation is, and its relation to curricular components.

There are several definitions for innovation. Nicholls (1983, p. 4) defines innovation as "an idea, object or practice regarded as new by an individual or individuals, which should provide improvements in relation to a certain goal, which are fundamental in nature and designed and / or deliberate". As for Cook (1994, p. 16), "innovation is understood as a change that introduces something new, i.e., the introduction of an element or a setting that was not, or did not exist before." By observing these settings, one can notice that an innovation is usually regarded as something planned, either by internal or external agents (Germaine & Rea-Dickens, 1995).

An innovation may be presented as a bottom-up or a top-down process. As a bottom-up process, the innovation is proposed by the members of an institution. This occurs when these members find a problem or an issue and decide to change it somehow. In this context, "teachers can act with or without the help of external agents of change" (Markee, 1997, p. 67). On the other hand, the top-down process takes place when an innovation is introduced by an external agent of change, "particularly an innovation that involves a large-scale curriculum reform" (Waters & Vilches, 2001, p. 125), as the case of state or national guidelines for the teaching of foreign languages.

After presenting some aspects related to innovation, it is necessary to make some comments about the curricular issue. When considering the classroom as a context of multiple realities, Britzman (1989) highlights the existence of three curricula: the explicit, implicit, and null. The explicit curriculum encompasses the traditional notion of program content, defined

as "the officially selected study course" (Britzman, 1989, p. 149). With regard to the student-teachers, one can say that they are confronted with two explicit curricula: the *Letras* course's curriculum and the one of the schools where they will carry out their Practicum.

The implicit curriculum, in turn, represents the learning process itself, involving the values and knowledge of the student-teachers, and the rules of interaction in the classroom. It is also possible to observe these implicit curricula during their Practicum, in the role of student-teachers and of the students of the classes where the Practicum takes place.

The third curriculum is the null one, representing "the silence of the official curriculum" (Moreira, 1998, p. 13). The student-teachers face once again this doubling, since they need to operate in contexts where knowledge is sometimes neglected in two different institutions. Thus, it becomes clear the need for a space for the student-teachers not only to discuss such issues, but also to try to understand them and solve them through self-reflection.

By taking all this into account, one can expect that an appropriate pre-service education in the area English teachers should provide greater opportunities for this reflection, based on Applied Linguistics' studies, since this science informs and forms the teacher to detect the practical issues that will be studied in research projects through an adequate body of theory, and may offer alternatives to curriculum planners concerned to language teacher education and other professionals in the language field.

### 3. Methodology

This research proposal will be carried out from a qualitative perspective, in the form of an interventionist research. Interventionist research is grounded in action when refining, testing, illustrating or constructing theory (Jonsson and Lukka, 2005). It aims to uncover the "theory-in-use" rather than the "espoused theory" (Argyris *et al.*, 1985) held by the subjects. As the name indicates, interventionist research means the researcher directly intervenes in practice, usually as part of a mixed practitioner-academic team effort to change a current situation or solve a problem.

The context of this research proposal will be the *Letras Português/Inglês* course at the State University of *Mato Grosso do Sul*, at *Campo Grande*'s campus. Its participants will be the senior students of the course who are taking up their English Practicum. Approximately 40 students are regularly enrolled in this discipline, where they must develop their practicum projects in public schools in or around the city of *Campo Grande*, since some of them come from neighboring cities.

To make up the group of participants for this research proposal, the student-teachers will be invited to take up in fortnightly meetings in order to discuss matters of interest to the investigation. These meetings will take place on different days and schedules of their Practicum classes, being characterized as an extra-curricular course. It is expected around 10 participants for this proposal.

It will be explained to the student-teachers who wish to take part in the research proposal that the purpose of the meetings is to discuss and further implement the practice of action research during their Practicum. They will also be told about the organizational aspects of the meetings, and in relation to the researcher, although being the current English Practicum teacher of the course, for this proposal he will take the role of an inner context researcher, as proposed by Gil (2005).

The development of this research proposal will comprise different stages, corresponding to its research questions. First, as already mentioned, fortnightly meetings will be held in order to discuss relevant issues to the investigation, such as the foundations of action research, besides verifying how the student-teachers decide on the areas for intervention and the

decisions taken during the implementation of their projects, and how they evaluate their results. The meetings will be video/audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The transcriptions will be concentrated on the most relevant parts of the meetings regarding the objectives of this proposal.

Second, after the completion of their action-research projects, the results will be analyzed from the student-teachers' English Practicum reports, attending the general objective of this research. Finally, the student-teachers will answer a questionnaire so that the researcher may understand to what extent this experience can promote their professional education.

As can be seen, the instruments for data collection involved in this proposal include reports written by the student-teachers, the audio-video recordings of the meetings, besides the application of a final questionnaire.

By using the reports, the researcher aims at helping the student-teachers to view their actions through the process of description of the practice and interpret it in the light of teaching and learning theories, therefore, criticize it and rebuild it (Smyth, 1992).

The meetings aim at creating collaborative spaces for student-teachers talk and negotiate their desires and needs in the analysis and interpretation of their actions in the classroom. Finally, the application of the questionnaire has the objective to see how the experience with the implementation of action research during the English Practicum may have contributed to their professional education.

#### 4. Expected Results

By carrying out this research proposal, it will be possible to trace an outline of *Letras Português / Inglês* course at the State University of *Mato Grosso do Sul* when implementing an innovation, in this case, action-research as an important part of their Practicum.

This proposal also expects to develop an English teachers' pre-service education that takes into account the specifications of each reality and the knowledge and experiences that these student-teachers bring into their practices, leading to a reflection on the curriculum offered by *Letras* course at UEMS.

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