Autonomy, Empathy and Transformation in Language Teacher Education: A Qualitative Study

Larissa Borges, Federal University of Pará, Brazil

Eduardo Castro, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

Corresponding email address: larissadant@gmail.com

To cite this article

To link to this article

http://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun22/borges_castro

Scroll down for article.

Autonomy, Empathy and Transformation in Language Teacher Education: A Qualitative Study

Larissa Borges, Federal University of Pará, Brazil. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3913-4642

Eduardo Castro, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8218-6205

Abstract

The complexity of language teaching and learning requires teachers to be able to reflect on their own practices, adapt to different situations, and seek solutions that may meet the needs and interests of their students (Borges, 2019; Borges & Magno e Silva, 2019). Moreover, teachers ought to make their learners' experiences more meaningful and personal in the classroom. In regard to this, teacher education should involve reflections on empathy, so that pre-service teachers can develop the ability to listen actively, welcome their students' perspectives, and put themselves in their shoes (Mercer, 2016). Teacher education should also entail reflection on autonomy, in a way that pre-service teachers can exercise their agency in their own education, as well as create conditions for the development of autonomy in their classrooms. With that in mind, this study aims to investigate pre-service language teachers' transformation during two teaching methodology courses at a university in Northern Brazil. Data were generated through teaching diaries and in-class reflections, which were then analyzed qualitatively (Saldaña, 2021). The findings indicate that pre-service teachers not only became aware of the importance of encouraging their learners' autonomy, but they also became aware of learning autonomously themselves. The diaries also revealed how considering empathy in their practices was pivotal to fostering learner autonomy in the classroom. Implications for language teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: teacher autonomy, empathy, language teacher education, teacher reflection.

Language learning and teaching are essentially relational and emotional processes (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017) that require from both teachers and students a careful consideration of how their emotions influence their behaviors, beliefs, and social relationships. Murphey et al. (2010) argue that emotional belonging precedes learning, so creating a safe environment for teachers and students to express how they feel, as well as creating positive social relationships is of paramount importance for successful learning. One can argue that this might also be the case for exercising autonomy. More specifically, in language teacher education, this involves reflection on empathy,

so that pre-service teachers can develop the ability to listen actively, to make their students feel welcomed, and put themselves in their shoes (Mercer, 2016). Teacher education should also entail reflection on autonomy, in a way that pre-service teachers can exercise their agency in their own education, as well as create conditions for the development of autonomy in their classrooms. In this article, we report on an investigation that explored pre-service EFL teachers' transformation during two teaching methodology courses at a university in Northern Brazil, considering how they experienced and promoted autonomy and empathy in this context.

Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing understanding that autonomy is a complex, dynamic and multidimensional construct which develops along one's lifetime (Freire, 2006; Paiva, 2006; Paiva & Braga, 2008; Borges, 2019). In this regard, Cooker (2013) contends that autonomy is a multifaceted construct and Nicolaides and Magno e Silva (2017) suggest that observing how autonomy emerges in individuals' trajectories may illuminate our understanding of this phenomenon.

Autonomous learners make choices about how to exercise their autonomy in different learning situations. Paiva (2006) argues that autonomy involves "opportunities, capabilities, skills, attitudes, disposition, decision-making, choices, planning, agency and evaluation in internal and external contexts to the classroom" (p. 88-89), highlighting different aspects involved in the development of autonomy as well as the versatility of contexts in which autonomy can be exercised. Similarly, Tatzl (2016) argues that autonomy emerges from the interactions between the individual and other systems, including teachers, peers, materials and contexts.

In this article, autonomy is seen as a complex dynamic system, meaning that it is both individual and social, and interconnected with other learning subsystems, such as motivation, identities, beliefs and affect. Autonomy interacts in different ways with these subsystems and in diverse contexts, going through moments of setbacks, stability and advances throughout life. Borges (2019) observed that the concept of autonomy has evolved from the individual or social dichotomy towards a complex view of autonomy that considers the mutual influence that both individual and social dimensions have in the learners' learning trajectories.

One contribution to the discussion on the complex nature of autonomy can be found in the Complex Dynamic Model of Autonomy Development (Borges, 2019, 2022). This model refers to various processes, elements, agents, and other subsystems that interact in learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, highlighting the openness of autonomy as well as recognizing the complexity of the interactions for the development of autonomous behaviors, and it illustrates autonomy as a web of relationships, engendering wide possibilities of potential interactions among all of its components. These components include learners, teachers, peers, advisors, motivation, beliefs, identities, affordances, contexts, among others. Reflection has a central role in this model because it is seen as a necessary condition for the development of autonomy of learners and teachers. A version of the Model in motion can be accessed at: https://youtu.be/ZeSMJu95fi8.

In language teacher education, it is important to shed light on reflections not only about learner autonomy but also about teacher autonomy, especially if we consider that being an autonomous learner does not necessarily mean being an autonomous teacher (Borges, 2019). In this context specifically, the trajectory from learner autonomy to teacher autonomy is not an automatic and spontaneous process, but an experience of transformation and empowerment that requires reflection and investment. This experience permits pre-service language teachers to exercise their agency, creating conditions for the development of autonomy in their classrooms.

Empathy in Language Learning and Teaching

Empathy is important for our daily relationships in diverse contexts, including in language teacher education (Mercer, 2016). Language teacher education may benefit from fostering opportunities for reflections on empathy, as pre-service language teachers can develop the ability to listen actively and carefully and to make their students feel welcomed and accepted in the classroom. They can also consider their students' perspectives, so that they can create more empathic and caring relationships as well as a more humanistic atmosphere in the language classroom.

Mercer (2016) states that "empathy is about how we seek to understand the minds and emotions of others and how we develop our relationships with other people" (p. 26). Similarly, Krznaric (2014) argues that empathy is "the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives and using that understanding to

guide your actions" (p. 7). This means that it is important to observe the other person's perspective and reflect on it in order to respond and act more empathetically. In this sense, empathy involves observation, reflection, and action (Vignemont & Singer, 2006) and, in our understanding, so does autonomy.

Mercer (2016) describes three kinds of empathy: a) cognitive empathy, the cognitive act of considering others' perspectives; b) affective empathy, the affective reaction to others' emotions; and c) empathetic concern, communicating with compassion. The author contends that these components should be combined and serve as starting points for empathetic actions.

Empathy is not a fixed personality trait, but a dynamic, context-sensitive skill that can be improved and developed over time (Krznaric, 2014; Mercer, 2016). From this perspective, the language classroom can be a meaningful context, with several opportunities for teachers and learners to strengthen, improve and expand their empathetic skills. Henry and Thorsen (2019), for example, argue that empathetic teachers center their classes on students and their experiences from outside of school in order to create connections and foster motivation. In fact, considering students' needs, likes, and identities in the language classroom may create conditions for reciprocal empathetic relationships between teachers and learners.

Rasoal et al. (2011) comment that "empathy can reduce intolerance, conflicts, and discrimination, and increase understanding, respect, and tolerance between people with similar as well as different ethnic and cultural background" (p. 2). This might resonate true for language teachers who teach multicultural and multilingual groups, as well as for those with the same cultural and linguistic background (Mercer, 2016). In our understanding, the study of empathy in teacher education can help pre-service teachers develop conflict resolution skills.

Oxford (2016) contends that "skilled language teachers are empathetic, recognizing the needs and emotional states of their students and having compassion and tender-heartedness towards them, while keeping the students' welfare in mind" (p. 18). The author further states that being an empathetic teacher can help language learners empathize with different agents involved in language learning, leading to the creation of meaningful relationships. Similarly, Mercer (2016) states that pre-service teachers may benefit from raising awareness of the potential effects of the interpersonal skills in the language classroom, since they influence classroom life, interactions and intercultural communication. Oxford's and Mercer's viewpoints highlight the

multiplying effect that empathy may have in the language classroom, with potential impact on the wellbeing of the people involved.

Oxford's (2016) description of empathetic teachers seems to resonate with the characteristics of autonomous teachers. For example, Voller (1997) describes autonomous teachers as having qualities of a facilitator, which include "being caring, supportive, patient, tolerant, empathic, open, non-judgmental" (p. 102). In addition, autonomous teachers encourage commitment, help learners overcome their learning obstacles, engages in reflective dialogue with students and negotiates different aspects relevant to the class (Voller, 1997).

In this article, autonomy and empathy are understood as closely interrelated constructs in teaching contexts because they demand from teachers the sensitivity in respecting students' learning process and understanding their decision to exercise autonomy in and beyond the classroom. Autonomy and empathy are complex, dynamic and multicomponent constructs that can be learned and developed along a teacher's career (Borges, 2019; Mercer, 2016). Therefore, language teacher education contexts may engender changes, adaptation, collaboration, negotiation, creativity, and innovation. In this paper, we report on experiences in teaching methodology courses in which pre-service teachers reflected on their autonomy and empathy as well as how to develop them in the classroom.

Background of the Study

In this section, we describe the context where the classes took place. This study was carried out within two Language Teaching Methodology Courses (LTMCs). These courses are compulsory and offered in the third year of the four-year undergraduate degree in Teaching English as Foreign Language. In the first two years, the curriculum focuses on language and linguistics courses, whereas language teaching is mostly covered in the last two years of the degree. The third year may represent the first teaching experience for some pre-service teachers.

The LTMCs are taught simultaneously in the same academic semester by the same teacher educator and aim at providing pre-service teachers with an initial opportunity for teaching a first-level English class, a free course advertised for members from the communities around campus. The study described in this article reports on courses that were taught in the second semester of 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Figure 1 illustrates an overview of the organization of the LTMCs.

Figure 1

Overview of the Language Teaching Methodology Courses
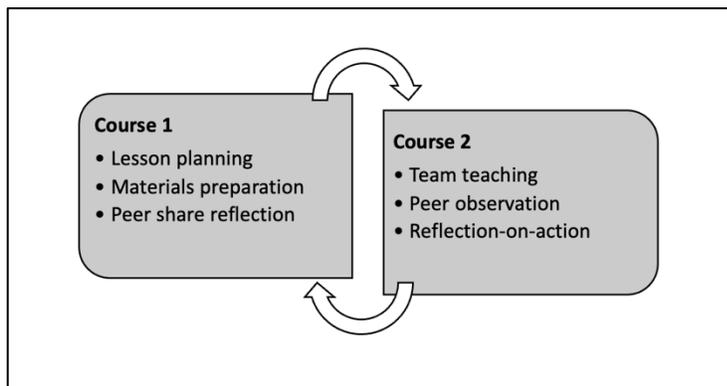
In Course 1, along with the support of the teacher educator, pre-service teachers worked on planning the first-level English course. Considering that negotiation is key for fostering autonomy (Borges, 2019; Dantas & Magno e Silva, 2008; Voller, 1997), they made decisions related to different aspects of the course, including student selection, course evaluation (assessment bands and instruments), lesson plans and preparation of teaching materials. In Course 2, pre-service teachers taught the lesson that was previously designed in Course 1. It is important to mention that they were expected to share their reflections of the classes they had either taught or observed with their peers in course 1.

The first-level English course was taught collaboratively, in pairs or trios, in a caster system. This means that, in each class, a different pair of pre-service teachers was in charge of teaching the course, while another pair of pre-service teachers observed the class to give feedback to their peers. Each pair of pre-service teachers were expected to teach two lessons over the academic semester. After each lesson, they had to write a teaching diary and create a visual representation of their teaching experience, following a prompt provided by the teacher educator. The prompt aimed at fostering reflection about their performance, difficulties found and how they would like to minimize them in the following class, changes to their practices and perceptions of teacher identity. The diary was written in either Portuguese or English, according to pre-service teachers' preferences.

The teaching diaries were part of the evaluation of the LTMCs. They were submitted two weeks after the class, in order for pre-service teachers to accommodate the feedback from their peers who had observed the class. In the diaries, they were expected to go beyond providing a

mere description of the class by reflecting on their teaching experiences, considering positive and negative self-perceived aspects, as well as examples of possible changes in their beliefs or practices.

The Complex Dynamic Model of Autonomy Development (Borges, 2019, 2022) was used as a guiding reflection tool to raise awareness of teacher autonomy and how pre-service teachers could foster autonomy in their own classrooms from an empathetic standpoint. In addition, the model also served as a tool for creating a learning community in the sense that the pre-service teachers were encouraged to provide caring, constructive feedback to their peers. Following Mercer's (2016) suggestion that teachers can be a role model for students, "allowing learners to feel the positive effects of empathy so that they in turn are enabled to empathize with others" (p. 95), the teacher educator served as a role model for pre-service teachers by attentively listening to them, considering their perspectives and experiences, involving them in the decision-making and providing a safe space for sharing their emotions, as this was the first real teaching experience for many of them.

Methodology

This classroom based qualitative research aimed at investigating pre-service language teachers' transformation during two language teaching methodology courses at a university in Northern Brazil. Specifically, it sought to describe how these teachers experienced and fostered autonomy and empathy in the classroom. The first-level English course was taught by 25 pre-service teachers, the total number of students enrolled in the compulsory LTMCs. Out of this number, 22 pre-service teachers, aged between 19 and 23 years old, consented the use of their teaching diaries as part of this study. Seven pre-service teachers were teaching for the very first time, whereas the remaining ones had between six months to two years of teaching experience in local teaching projects. All participants are referred to with pseudonyms in this article.

Each pre-service teacher taught two classes, meaning that 44 teaching diaries were analyzed. The data analysis followed the qualitative procedures as described by Saldaña (2021), illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

An Example of the First and Second Coding Cycles as Suggested by Saldaña (2021)

First coding cycle			Second coding cycle
Diary 1	*In vivo* coding	Descriptive coding	
This was my first experience in front of a class. I was very anxious and nervous about the idea of teaching something in English to a real class. However, with the involvement with my colleagues who taught with me, I became calmer, I felt more at ease, and this certainly had a positive influence on my performance teaching the class. Their presence made me happy, gave more confidence.	"First experience" "Anxious and nervous" "Real class" "I became calmer" "Positive influence" "Happy" "More confidence"	Angela says that she was "anxious and nervous" to teach a "real class" but felt "calmer" with the support "from my colleagues who taught with me". This support is described as a positive influence. In her words, "their presence there made me happy, gave me more confidence".	**1) Dealing with difficulties in teaching** a) Social factors *i) Peer support* Angela felt "calmer" with the support "from my colleagues who taught with me" "Their presence made me happy, gave me more confidence".

In the first coding cycle, each diary was firstly coded using *in vivo* coding, meaning that student-teachers' own words and phrases were used to code the data. Secondly, based on *in vivo* codes, diaries were coded descriptively. In the second coding cycle, data were themed phenomenologically and thematically to highlight participants' experiences, emotions, beliefs, among other relevant aspects, as well as to identify different factors influencing their experiences. The second coding cycle led to the organization of the data into four broad categories: a) difficulties associated with teaching, b) dealing with difficulties in teaching, c) attributions of success/unsuccess of the class, and d) change in beliefs about teaching, which are presented and discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

This section focuses on the transformation experiences that participants underwent from reflecting on autonomy and empathy as related to both learner autonomy and teacher autonomy. We particularly focus on the difficulties associated with teaching, how they dealt with these difficulties, attributions of success or unsuccess of the class, and changes in beliefs about teaching and the teacher role.

One topic described in participants' diaries was the difficulties experienced in teaching. Different factors were associated with teaching, including psychological, linguistic, managerial, and social factors. In terms of psychological factors, teachers were vocal about how some traits

of their personality (e.g., "shy", "introvert", "extrovert") could prevent them from being the teacher they had imagined themselves to be. One teacher specifically stated that her outspoken personality could minimize opportunities for students to learn (Excerpt 1), highlighting how she considers changing her attitude in order to prioritize students' time to think and engage in learning.

> (1) I've always hated silence and, as a result, I've never been good at giving students time to respond. I've always found a way to fill the silence. Today I tried to police myself to not do that, because there are students who need time to think and, with this attitude, I end up preventing them from learning (Laís, diary 1).

It was also apparent in teachers' diaries how their self-efficacy beliefs and emotions influenced their experiences and actions in class. For example, one participant expressed how she "felt desperate believing that [she] wouldn't be able to teach" so much so that she had "never felt so bad in my entire undergraduate course" (Camila, diary 1). She shared how she was putting pressure on herself by believing that she "couldn't make mistakes". She then expressed herself as follows:

> (2) Until [a] certain moment I felt I was not able to teach, but then I calmed myself and reflected that I should overcome this obstacle to not affect my group because they needed me. I had rehearsed several times, I just needed to put it into practice. My friend and I started the class (…), one supported the other, we both knew that we needed to go through that. From this experience, I realized that fear influences our practices and that I was able to overcome my fears (Camila, diary 1).

By reflecting on how she felt at that moment, it seems that this participant realized that she should be kind to herself and change her attitude towards language teaching. Excerpt 2 above also highlights the relational and emotional characteristics of teaching, as she recognized the support received from another teacher, and also considered how her own actions could affect the group as a whole. In addition, the participant noted how her emotions could influence her pedagogical actions in the classroom. Another participant expressed feelings of self-doubt as they related to becoming an efficient language teacher:

> (3) I feel like I'm losing to myself, because I can't find a way to improve effectively. Sometimes it seems to evolve, but soon after I feel like I'm the same way. I know this is a slow process that requires dedication and patience, but sometimes the wait for improvement is hopeless (Ana, diary 2).

Because teaching is an emotional and relational activity (Gkonou et al., 2020), it goes without saying that participants felt a wide range of emotions, including anxiety, nervousness, fear, enjoyment and gratitude. Some of these emotions were grounded in relationships with teachers as well as in their relationships with students. In fact, teachers took potential students' responses into account while planning the class and designing learner-centered activities, as suggested by Henry and Thorsen (2019). From the analysis of the diary data, it was evident that the teachers had empathetic concern for students.

> (4) After everything had finished, I felt happy and relieved because students thanked us very much. I left the classroom feeling happy for getting over one more day of fear, that I need to believe in myself, that I have potential (Camila, diary 2).

> (5) The interaction with the class was something that made me very happy and satisfied, I didn't feel so distant from them, and we talked about countless things, besides what was being taught at the moment (Laura, diary 2).

> (6) I was nervous about the idea of teaching, but I was able to experience a wonderful moment. After overcoming the initial nervousness, the interaction with the class gave me a feeling of belonging, I felt that this was the place I wanted to be, transmitting what I already know and learning new things. At the end a student hugged me, said she loved the class and would miss me, I was very moved and happy, almost in a state of ecstasy (Angela, diary 1).

The excerpts above show how important it is for pre-service teachers to receive a positive response from students so they can feel more confidence while teaching. Students were aware that the pre-service teachers were undergraduate students themselves, so they were supportive, encouraging, and kind. In excerpt 6, the pre-service teacher who was performing her first teaching experience mentions the sense of belonging she felt as a result of the quality of the interactions with students, similarly to what Murphey and colleagues (2010) describe in their article. The positive feedback from students and the reciprocity she experienced helped her strengthen her teacher identity.

Moreover, teachers considered how their students would most likely respond to the activities and put effort into designing engaging and motivating activities, highlighting students' roles in a student-centered classroom. They were also attentive in the classroom, observing students closely "I noticed that students were lost" (Camila, diary 1), "I approached each student and asked if it were all fine" (Lucas, diary 1). Another example can be found below:

> (7) I want to be a teacher who puts students as the focus of the class, they are protagonists in the classroom, because there is no teacher without students. Therefore, it is not only the teacher who must speak, the students must also question, participate and, above all, produce (Deborah, diary 1).

For most teachers, having the opportunity to team teach was seen as beneficial because they could count on their partner's immediate support, and being observed by other teachers was also seen as positive.

> (8) I felt calm with the support of my friends who taught the class with me. Their presence gave me more confidence (Ester, diary 2).

> (9) What contributed to this change was the classroom experience itself, as well as the feedback of my classmates. I left behind that belief that the teacher has to be the center of the classroom, and he is solely responsible for everything. I realized that in the classroom, a partnership between student and teacher is essential, so that both grow intellectually and as a human being (Laura, diary 2).

In the excerpts above, teachers share how important it was to receive support and feedback from their colleagues. This support even led to changes in beliefs about the teacher role in the classroom, as excerpt 9 shows. It was also important for teachers to give considerate, kind, and encouraging feedback to their classmates, so that the feedback could benefit the whole class and that the teachers themselves could improve their practice. Empathy also served as the basis for the feedback given by each other. This mutual respect and support seem to have created a sense of community among teachers. However, this was not the case for two groups of teachers who expressed how difficult it was to work with either (a) colleagues who already have teaching experiences or (b) colleagues who do not have teaching experiences, as excerpts below show:

> (10) One of the members of the group already has experience as a teacher, and sometimes my suggestions were turned down. This affected our activities and my willingness to offer any suggestions (Camila, diary 2).

> (11) Because I had some teaching experience, the inexperienced group members saw me as a "leader". At times, I wanted to interfere on their part, it was desperate not to be able to interfere at the time, but I understand that because it was their first experience in the classroom, they needed to go through that moment (Laís, diary 1).

(12) Thinking about it made me more and more upset. However, I took a deep breath and concluded that it was not students' fault in any way, and they did not deserve that I delivered content to them in a hurry or in a confused way (Beatriz, diary 1).

In excerpt 10, the participant talked about how the difference she faced with her peer teacher during their team teaching affected her communication and behaviors in class, avoiding sharing ideas of activities. In excerpt 11, a participant with previous teaching experience describes how she felt overwhelmed at times for being seeing as the group leader. Although she perceives herself in this position, she avoided interfering in her peers' teaching so that they could also gain experience, suggesting an empathetic attitude towards her partners. In excerpt 12, the pre-service teacher reappraised the situation by directing her focus to students, prioritizing them regardless of any potential conflict with her partner teacher. In fact, this is a common strategy for regulating emotions in the language classroom, as Castro (2021) observed in his study on language teacher emotions.

As mentioned before, in Course 1, pre-service teachers had the chance to share their reflections with their peers as well as to listen to their feedback concerning the observation of their class. This moment served as an opportunity to provide caring, constructive feedback, considering how their classmates would feel. For example, the participant from excerpt 10 describes the feedback from "observant friends" in a positive way, highlighting interesting reflections: "I realized that it's okay to make mistakes" and "it's normal not to have everything perfect." She took notes of the feedback she received from her peers and wanted to make the adaptations for the second class: "I tried to write down the critics and work on them for the second class." In this sense, reflections on empathy and autonomy may also involve the ability to solve conflicts that are common in teaching contexts (cf., Mercer, 2016; Rasoal et al., 2011). It seems that empathy in teacher education can help future teachers develop conflict resolution skills, a direction that might benefit from future research explorations.

Teachers also underwent major shifts in perspectives related to teaching, likely provoked by placing students at the center of classroom teaching. By imagining their students' experiences and perspectives, pre-service teachers realized the difficulties learners had with learning a new language, as well as how demotivating it could be for learners if they do not encourage them to do their best in the classroom. In this regard, a participant shared: "I always rehearse how to give instructions that will be used in class, putting myself in students' shoes and reflecting on whether

I would understand that command" (Deborah, diary 1). Another participant said: "I realized that teaching is relational, never one-sided, because when students smile, show interest, participate, it encourages the teacher" (Pamela, diary 1). This comment highlights the relational character of teaching and how the teachers themselves get motivated and involved because of students' responses. Feedback from students can also help teachers feel welcomed in the classroom, as this participant comments: "I found the class to be super participative and fun, which certainly helped me feel welcomed by them and at ease to teach a more fun class" (Laís, diary 1).

> (13) You gave your best in planning this class. You are not the center. Your student might be tired or bored for personal reasons that have nothing to do with you and your class. If you've come this far, it is because you are capable (Debora, diary 1).

> (14) I felt like several people in one, but all these people were me, none of them were strange to me, because they were me in different ways. And I also realized that this is how the teacher is. In a single class the teacher is several at the same time: a mediator of knowledge, a friend, a person who is proud when he perceives learning happening and strategic when something does not go according to plan (Beatriz, diary 1).

In the excerpts above, participants reflect on their actions in the classroom. In excerpt 13, the teacher recurs to self-talk in order to manage how she feels in relation to the class, indicating self-compassion and recognizing that there are different factors at play in the classroom which go beyond the teacher's control. Recognizing the unpredictable nature of language learning and teaching is pivotal for inexperienced teachers who tend to feel responsible for all that happens in the classroom, especially if something does not go as planned, as described in Castro's (2021) study. This is evident, for example, in excerpt 13, in which the participant came to the realization that at times students might feel emotions, like boredom, that are not directly related to the immediate class. In excerpt 14, the participant expanded her understanding of teacher identity by noticing different roles teachers have in the same class.

Teachers attributed the success of classes to different factors, including planning, student feedback, the ability to balance the use of Portuguese and English, social factors and comparison with previous experiences. In terms of planning, it was important for participants to be able to follow a lesson plan accordingly, which is also linked to student feedback. If students responded according to their expectations, they would feel "happy", "relieved" and "satisfied". The

following excerpt illustrates how one participant felt satisfied in planning the lesson, designing the activities, and observing how these activities worked in practice.

> (15) I loved creating the activities, slides, and lesson plan, I know it's a little tiring, but knowing that you're going to develop an activity, think about the results in a positive way and develop strategies that will lead you to mediate the knowledge in a light and effective way is very gratifying, and the result of this work is even more satisfying (Laura, diary 2).

One participant who was working in a private language school comments on how important it was for him to have the "opportunity to first create a lesson plan in group" (Rodrigo, diary 1). Because of his working contexts, he did not have opportunities to exercise his teacher autonomy "I wanted to know what it was like to teach without being attached to a franchise." Planning a whole class and being creative in designing the activities were fruitful experiences for him, so much so that having the chance "to change the lesson plan according to students' needs humanized [him] more".

> (16) Before the class, I actually felt as if I were a robot in the classroom, repeating the same things at the place I work, not being able to modify a single word from what I am supposed to talk, explaining nonsense from the books because students had paid for them. This experience made me realize that I want to work in a place where I can develop my own lesson plans and find features about myself as a teacher (Rodrigo, diary 1).

> (17) I have shown them that I am just a bridge to knowledge or, rather, just one of the ways to acquire knowledge. I always suggest apps, websites and ways for them to learn in a fun and motivating way" (Laís, diary 1).

> (18) When we planned our class, we didn't stick to using the textbook. We searched and created activities that would help students learn. When necessary, we modified the textbook exercises to better broaden the subjects addressed in our class (Deborah, diary 1).

> (19) As a teacher, I tried to go beyond the textbook. I tried to bring examples that are part of students' reality. Also, when answering the exercises, I tried to make sure that the students could find the answers for themselves (Marcus, diary 1).

Participants' reflections in the excerpts above highlight the importance of giving pre-service teachers opportunities to be autonomous teachers and learners, especially because many teachers might come from autonomy-restrict environments and tend to teach their classes according to their previous experiences as learners, as observed by Tatzl (2013). Just like a person learns to be empathetic by experiencing acts of empathy (Mercer, 2016), the same could

be said about autonomy. In this study, teachers made informed decisions from the lesson planning to the adaptation of textbooks in light of their students' needs and interests. The excerpts above illustrate that the participants exercised teacher autonomy by finding ways to encourage learner autonomy. In addition, they also suggested apps, websites and strategies so that their students could learn beyond the classroom.

Experiencing autonomy and acts of empathy can also lead to changes in teachers' beliefs about language teaching and teachers' role in the classroom. In terms of beliefs, it was evident in the diaries that pre-service teachers went from teacher-centered teaching to learner-centered teaching mindset, exemplified as in: "I think the lesson plan is like a dream where we idealize the perfect class, but in practice we need to make changes to better meet the needs of the students, because the focus is on them" (Laís, diary 1). Teacher flexibility is an important characteristic of learner-centered teaching, especially if one considers the issue of power and control as described by Voller (1997). In this sense, it seems that moving from an idealized class to a flexible one to accommodate students' needs is an indication of change in teachers' beliefs.

The excerpt below illustrates the change of two participants beliefs about the teacher role.

> (20) The classroom experience has taught me that teachers also make mistakes, because they are human beings, and this is normal and healthy. Before, for an insecure person like me, walking into a classroom and not knowing the meaning of a word was what it meant to fail, to be incompetent. Now, I can no longer feel bad about not knowing something, I don't feel incompetent if I have to check some pronunciation for a student or admit that I made a mistake (Ana, diary 2).

> (21) Today I'm at peace when it comes to accept when I don't know something. I will search it [the information] and show the answer to students later (Lucas, diary 2).

Another theme in the participants' diaries was believing that teachers should not make mistakes and should know "everything." It seems that changing the beliefs from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered classroom also led to changes in beliefs about teachers' roles in the classroom, a view that humanizes teachers, considering them people who might also make mistakes as well as learn from teaching. This change in beliefs might be a path for teachers to develop or strengthen self-compassion, especially if one considers how teachers tend to take more responsibilities in the classroom (Castro, 2021).

Conclusions

This paper has described an investigation that explored how pre-service language teachers experienced and promoted autonomy and empathy in the classroom. The findings show the relevance of reflecting and practicing autonomy and empathy in teacher education courses and practicums. The pre-service teachers demonstrated that their beliefs about teachers' roles transformed through reflection on autonomy and empathy in language learning and teaching situations, similar to what Krznaric (2014) and Mercer (2016) allude to.

The findings show that reflecting on autonomy and empathy as related to their language learner identity and experiences prompted changes in how pre-service teachers experienced teaching and considered ways to potentially build an autonomous and empathetic class. It became apparent through the analysis of participants' diaries that they showed empathetic concern for their students and peers, trying to understand their feelings and perspectives, and using this reflection to guide their choices and pedagogical actions, as stated by Krznaric (2014). In terms of the students, there was evidence of possible changes in participants' beliefs and attitudes towards the teacher's role and language teaching which led to the creation of a more student-centered lesson plan. In addition, participants expressed their appreciation for their classmates' support, feedback, and encouragement, which suggests there was a creation of a community amongst the pre-service teachers. Finally, the diaries also revealed how teachers practiced self-compassion by reflecting on the positive and negative aspects of their classes, reappraising the situations to be kind to themselves.

This paper has some limitations which also present opportunities for further research. Firstly, because of its exploratory nature, this study relied solely on teachers' written diaries. This means that future investigations would benefit from a combination of different research instruments, such as interviews, notes from classroom observations and analysis of visual data. Secondly, the study explored the relationship between autonomy and empathy. Although the findings present interesting insights for immediate practice, it would be important to explore how reflections on these constructs lead to long-term changes, i.e., how they might benefit teachers when they initiate their careers.

The findings show that participants experienced empathy in many different situations and considered their students' and peers' perspectives to guide their own actions. This means that reflection on empathy and autonomy might lead to self-transformation in terms of finding out

how to be a caring language teacher. Language teacher education contexts, therefore, can benefit from discussing empathetic and autonomous behaviors explicitly in the classroom, which might then lead to a ripple effect of positive waves of empathy at local and expanded communities.

Acknowledgements

Notes on the Contributors

Larissa Borges is an Associate Professor at the School of Modern Foreign Languages and the Graduate Program in Creativity and Innovation in Methodologies in Higher Education (PPGCIMES), at the Federal University of Pará, Brazil. She is the head of the research group CARE (Collaboration, Autonomy, Reflection and Empathy in Language Teaching) and the head of the Language Teaching Laboratory (LAEL), focused on language teacher education. Her research interests include autonomy, complexity paradigm, teacher education, wellbeing, and psychology of language teaching and learning.

Eduardo Castro is a learning advisor and a lecturer in the Self-Access Language Center at Kanda University of International Studies, Japan. His research interests include learner autonomy, advising in language learning, and the psychology of language learning and teaching. He holds an MSc in Applied Linguistics from the Federal University of Viçosa, Brazil.

References

Borges, E., & Magno e Silva, W. (2019). The emergence of the additional language teacher/adviser under the complexity paradigm. *DELTA*, *35*(3), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1590/1678-460X2019350308

Borges, L. (2019). *The autonomization process in the light of complexity paradigm: a study of the learning trajectories of TEFL undergraduate students*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] Federal University of Pará, Brazil.

Borges, L. (2022). A dynamic model of autonomy development as a complex phenomenon. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, *13*(2), 200–223. https://doi.org/10.37237/130203

Castro, E. (2021). *I feel therefore I teach: Emotion regulation of in-service EFL teachers*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Federal University of Viçosa, Brazil.

Cooker, L. (2013). When I got a person to communicate with, I got a purpose to learn: Evidence for social "modes of autonomy". *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics, 36*(1), 29–49. https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2013-0003

Dantas, L., & Magno & Silva, W. (2009). Motivação e autonomia para a formação de um novo aprendente e de um novo professor [Motivation and autonomy for the education of a new learner and a new teacher]. In R. Assis (Ed.), *Estudos da língua portuguesa e de todas as línguas que fazem a nossa* (pp. 139–151). UNAMA.

Freire, P. (2006). *Pedagogia da autonomia: Saberes necessários à prática educativa* [Pedagogy of autonomy: Necessary knowledge to education practices]. 34th Ed. Paz e Terra.

Gkonou, C., & Mercer, S. (2017). *Understanding emotional and social intelligence among English language teachers*. British Council.

Henry, A., & Thorsen, C. (2019) Weaving webs of connection: Empathy, perspective taking, and students' motivation. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, *9*(1), 31–53. https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2019.9.1.3

Gkonou, C., Dewaele, J., & King, J. (Eds.) (2020). *The emotional rollercoaster of language teaching*. Multilingual Matters.

Krznaric, R. (2014) *Empathy: A handbook for revolution*. Rider.

Mercer, S. (2016). Seeing the world through your eyes: Empathy in language learning and teaching. In P. D. MacIntyre, T. Gregersen & S. Mercer (Eds.), *Positive psychology in SLA*. Multilingual Matters.

Murphey, T., Prober, J., & Gonzales, K. (2010). Emotional belonging precedes learning. In A. M. Barcelos & H. Coelho (Eds.), *Emoções, reflexões e (trans)form(ações) de alunos, professores e formadores de professores de línguas* [Emotions, reflections, and transformations of students, teachers and teacher educators] (pp. 43–56). Pontes Editores.

Nicolaides, C., & Magno e Silva, W. (Eds.) (2017). *Innovations and challenges in applied linguistics and learner autonomy*. Pontes.

Oxford, R. (2016). Toward a psychology of well-being for language learners: The 'EMPATHICS' vision. In P. D. MacIntyre, T. Gregersen & S. Mercer (Eds.), *Positive psychology in SLA* (10-87). Multilingual Matters.

Paiva, V. L. M. O. (2006). Autonomia e complexidade [Autonomy and complexity]. *Linguagem & Ensino*, *9*(1), 77–127. https://doi.org/10.15210/rle.v9i1.15628

Paiva, V. L. M. O., & Braga, J. (2008). The complex nature of autonomy. *DELTA*, *24*(special issue), 441–468. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-44502008000300004

Rasoal, C., Eklund, J., & E. M. (2011), Toward a conceptualization of ethno-cultural empathy. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, *5*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0099278

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE.

Tatzl, D. (2013) Systemic autonomy as an educational factor for learners and teachers. In A. Burket, L. Dam, & C. Ludwig (Eds), *The answer is autonomy: Issues in language teaching and learning* [ebook] IATEFL.

Tatzl, D. (2016). A systemic view of learner autonomy. In C. Gkonou, D. Tatzl, & S. Mercer (Eds.), *New directions in language learning psychology* (pp. 39–54). Springer.

Vignemont, E., & Singer, T. (2006). The empathic brain: How, when and why? *Trends in cognitive Science*, 10, 435–441. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2006.08.008

Voller, P. (1997). Does the teacher have a role in autonomous language learning? In P. Benson, & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 98–113). Longman.