Focus on Learning: Reflective Learners & Feedback

* * * On the Internet * * *

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Discussing Reflective Practice

Reflecting simply put is the act of thinking about something while seeking a deeper level of understanding. Reflective practice is applying this thinking systematically by making questions, collecting data and analysing it in order, not to prove something, but to comprehend and act upon reality. It is also an ongoing process that involves everyone, not just the teacher. Farrell, for example, says that "reflective practice is not isolated introspection; rather, it is evidence-based, in that teachers need to systematically collect evidence (or data) about their work and then make decisions (instruction and otherwise) based on this information. Reflective practice, then, is a compass that allows us to stop for a moment or two and consider how we can create more learning opportunities for students" (2012, p. 15).

The purpose becomes clear when we define it in theory, but in practice teachers face many challenges within and outside themselves, making it most difficult to implement reflective practice without reflecting on the context in which they find themselves. Therefore, it is understandable that many teachers find it difficult to take full advantage of reflective practice as it is time-consuming, daunting for novice teachers and requires a high level of autonomy and self-esteem from the reflective teacher. Moreover, reflective practice doesn't seem to be promoted as it should because it would encroach on teachers' time in class if reflective hours were considered as part of the teaching process.

Because of that, I myself decided in 2012 to pursue and implement reflective practice systematically rather than informally. Accordingly, I decided to start with these typical teachers' misconceptions in mind:

- If the material has been used by others, it must be good. It worked for them, it will work for me.

- Keeping a reflective journal takes loads of time which I don't really have.

- I think the lesson was successful, they all seem to enjoy it.

It is common for teachers to prefer using ready-made materials, not see the point of keeping a reflective journal, and more often than we would like to acknowledge, measure success through the number of smiling faces they have in class. By this I mean, in order to discover if the lesson was truly successful teachers sometimes assume that students need to be smiling. They might therefore neglect the learning aspect through emphasis on the affective aspect. Teachers should create activities that will make their students happy but not at the expense of learning.

The three points mentioned above were at the core of my quest in pursuing understanding of what was going on in my own classes. I was guilty of all the above myself. But by reflecting on these three statements, I realized that they leave no room for reflective practice to start with, either alone, with other teachers, or with the learners themselves. Reflective practice naturally makes us question what we believe, but I had no doubt that these three questions could also open an array of possibilities, so I started blogging with the help and encouragement of other bloggers whom I consider to be my mentors.

Even if reflective practice is positive in nature, it can be also daunting and frustrating when you are doing it alone, even if you have years of teaching experience. It's daunting because reflective practice calls for us to look at the matter from different perspectives, and often we have only our own perspective to work with. If we are lucky we might see two. That is often the case when teachers are asked to analyse their own class transcript. Recording classes (audio or video recording) provides a lot of data on what is going on in class and it gives us accurate information of what teachers and students say or do. But after recording and transcribing, the data has to be analysed, otherwise reflection will not take place. Fanselow (1987) suggests that we don't need to transcribe the whole recording which surely would take hours, but that just a few minutes of it should be enough for us to be able to see what really goes on in order to help us explore teaching and learning with other teachers and/or learners; hence the importance of not going through reflective practice alone.

Figure 1. Reflecting, from Bard (2014)

Receiving and giving feedback

It seems that most of the time the difficulty in systematically implementing reflective practice comes from feedback that teachers have experienced. Teachers often find it hard to receive feedback in a positive way even if the feedback aims to be constructive, especially from supervisors due to their different positions in authority and the roles they occupy. Supervisors often see their jobs as assessing the quality of the teacher's practice according to the parameters given by their employers, rather than guiding the teacher to excellence through exploration. Therefore, when the two do not sit as equals where both teachers and supervisors are learning from each other, the task of analysing the situation from different perspectives and seeking alternatives is not only challenging, but prone to fail.

If with a supervisor, the teacher feels threatened; with students, the teacher feels powerful. It's a cycle that has to be broken before anything productive can come out of it. In order to make things productive, the parties involved need to feel that what they say or think will not be judged. Being judgmental in our comments is what makes things go sour and prevents us from looking at the situation with fresh eyes. Teachers and students need to feel respected and guided through the discussion, not assessed on what they say, think or do. Although this is a starting point toward engaging teachers and

students in reflective practice, the most difficult aspect is to put dialog at the heart of reflective practice.

When power comes into play, teachers feel they can lose their jobs and students feel that they can be punished for having an opinion. Students freely share with their classmates what they think of the lessons and the activities, but they might not dare to say such things in front of the teacher, if the teachers appears offended by an honest account of the day made by the student. When students feel they have nothing to fear but in fact they are contributing toward the class's being meaningful and productive to them, they will try to be careful to select their words in order not to hurt the teacher's feelings. Students can also be considerate and caring when power is not at play. Teachers and supervisors should lead by example, by choosing their words carefully and avoiding judgmental feedback and not classifying things either as good or bad. Even if one does not like an activity or prefers one skill over another, supervisors, teachers and students alike should work in an atmosphere where feedback is respected and where they feel they can share reasons to help prevent each other from making certain mistakes over and over again.

Breaking the cycle

Blogging and social media: Finding the place to engage in Reflection

I had tried before to implement reflective practice on my own but I failed. I had always kept a notebook where I would write my thoughts before and after the classes. I would also note down things I thought I needed to improve and I recorded students behavior, but I never dared to share it with anyone else. Trying to do it alone left me with only one perspective. So I tried to have conversations and listen to other teachers, but they tended to react judgmentally to what happens in class. In order to break the cycle, I had to change my way of listening and reacting to other teachers.

However, at that point I didn't find anyone who was going through the same changes as I was until luckily I discovered that Internet could give me much more than just articles and blogs to read. Although breaking the cycle as a personal quest wasn't easy, connecting to teachers around the world helped me improve on a daily basis my own discourse and implement not only reflective practice but a different way of talking about teaching itself.

I had spent years following Scott Thornbury's website and blog (http://www.scottthornbury.com/) when in 2012 I learned that he together with others had founded iTDi, the International Teacher Development Institute (http://itdi.pro/itdihome/). iTDi is an international online institute that offers teachers around the world who cannot attend conferences and courses the chance to develop their teaching and language skills without leaving their homes. The idea has always been to support teachers and help them develop authorship by giving them a place to reflect and voice their experience, ideas, and beliefs, and to encourage dialogue through the online community. As I am one of those teachers who can't afford to travel to anywhere and lack opportunities for face-to-face courses in my city and region or even access to a

nearby association, I eagerly joined them as soon as they started, making me one of the first members of the community.

The iTDi team of directors, associates and mentors have always been a great support for me *IN* and *OUT* of iTDi as iTDi's borders go far beyond the website. By December 2012, I was quite involved in the community and making connections with other members such as the Program Director, Barbara Sakamoto (http://www.teachingvillage.org). Barbara became a mentor to me and eventually invited me to step forward and mentor other teachers. I had started blogging even before then, but the tone of the very few posts I had made was so judgmental that it could lead to misinterpretations of what I was trying to achieve with my blog, the pursuit of professional development. Barbara helped me to assess the quality of my reflections and to decide to start all over again.

It was also through the iTDi community and courses that I was able to improve my English and my ability to communicate with other teachers. I enrolled in the English for Teachers (EFT) courses at iTDi (http://itdi.pro/itdihome/courseEFT.php) which aims to raise the English level of participants through increasing confidence in using English in the classroom, and also in using English for professional development. I also had the opportunity three times in the past couple of years to take courses with John F. Fanselow through iTDi Live Advanced Courses, which helped me move forward in my reflective practice. The first two courses were called Breaking Rules (http://itdi.pro/itdihome/breakRules2.php) and More Breaking Rules (http://itdi.pro/itdihome/breakRules.php). These courses, focused on our understanding of why we repeat the same habit over and over again mostly automatically without even noticing we do it, and how to break the cycle by recording, transcribing and analysing, The courses also addressed the importance of making small changes in order to understand those actions and their impact on our teaching and on our students' learning, and made us reflect on our beliefs by discussing common beliefs and practices and suggesting alternatives for us to experiment with. The third course was called Contrasting Conversations (http://itdi.pro/itdihome/john.php). In this course, we were shown how to start conversations with other teachers that challenged us to question our assumptions. It was through this course that I contacted a local teacher to help me to analyse my class transcript together instead of alone. The ideas from Fanselow's courses not only improved my discourse but also my practice when it came to dialoguing with others, especially with learners.

With the objective of finding a neutral ground where I could discuss what I was doing in class, I invited bloggers to give me their point of view by commenting on my blog and also to question me. I started participating in other blogs as well by becoming an avid reader and commenter. Freire (2005) urges us to not be afraid to unveil reality as the aim should be to transform it. Thus unveiling in Freire's perspective occurs through listening and confronting reality itself so that we can see positive changes in the world unveiled.
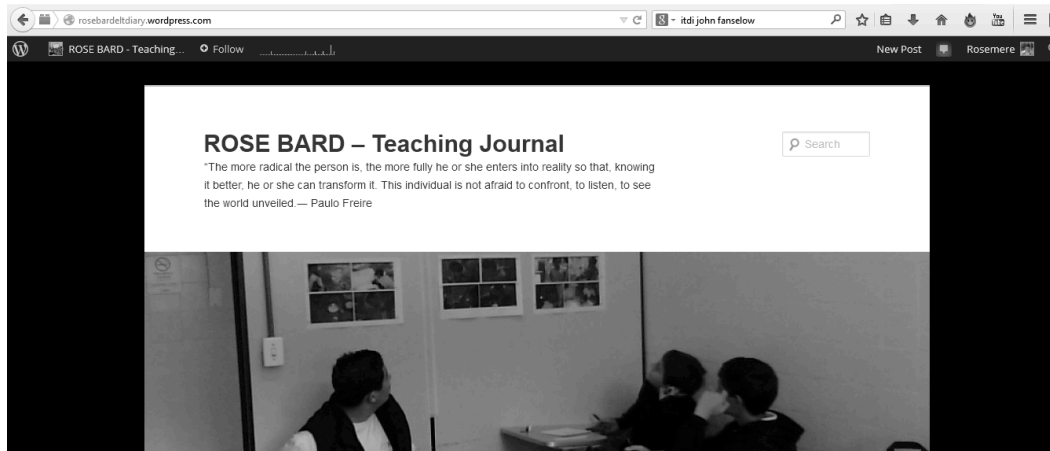
Figure 2. Teaching Journal, from Bard (2014)

Consequently I've become much better at writing down my post-lesson reflections based on data collected in class from observation, and by recording and reading students' feedback. My blog has also become a great place for reflecting with others, and it did not take as much time as I thought it would. The conversations that followed the posts frequently gave me alternatives to experiment with. By reading other teachers' blogs, I also developed my own language skills as a non-native teacher and became more aware of teachers' discourse. Moreover through the blogosphere I could find that the number of posts expressing concerns similar to mine was increasing and therefore my list of alternatives to explore increased accordingly. As my confidence increased, my participation in social media did too. As a result I became a mentor at the iTDi community (http://www.itdi.pro/itdihome/mentors.php) in the beginning of 2013.

I have also participated in a number of on-going conversations regarding my profession and practice on Twitter and Facebook. For example, I became a moderator of BRELT this year – one of the largest groups for Brazilian Teachers of English as a Foreign Language on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/groups/brelt/). On Twitter, I started connecting to other teachers and developing my personal learning network (PLN). At first I found it difficult to convey my thoughts with so few characters allowed, but as I became more active on Twitter I started participating in conversations as they appeared in my Twitter feed, and also whenever I could at #ELTChat (http://eltchat.org/wordpress/eltchat-summaries-index/), a long-running conversation on Twitter that takes place through the hashtag #ELTChat every Wednesday.

On Facebook, we can connect to other teachers too. There are a number of groups where we can discuss topics and we can follow pages from various teaching associations, publishers and events that help us keep updated. We are also able to get updates from what other teachers are doing in their own schools and classes and also for professional development. The updates and discussions are rich in content and support so we don't need to feel isolated when we have a new idea or face struggles; we always have someone from the teacher community there for us. I can't mention how many times I

have contacted teachers from different countries to help me assess a project or responded when they requested similar help.

Using online tools to mentor and be mentored

Teachers often find themselves in geographically or academically isolated situations. For such teachers, Internet can be a crucially important way to connect and find colleagues to discuss critical issues with. One such contact for me was Vicky Loras, whose blog I became acquainted with while participating in the iTDi community. When I read that becoming a mentor, reflecting more and more and using the internet were her goals for 2013, I didn't hesitate to contact her and ask her to mentor me. My aim was to improve my oral skills in presentations and Vicky gladly spent many Sunday evenings on Skype sharing her time with me. I was eager to discuss my beliefs and practices and what was going on in my classes with someone on a regular basis. During our sessions, Vicky would take notes and share them with me through a Google document. She never really assessed me on my oral skills, but she devoted time to listen to me and to support and encourage me in decisions which were in consonance with the philosophy of teaching that we both shared and were modeling for one another — applying reflective practices to enhance students' learning.

Figure 3. Journey of self-discovering, from Bard (2014)

Learning is the journey of self-discovering

Paulo Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that teaching is not so much the act of transferring knowledge, but the act of creating opportunities for it to be produced or constructed (Freire, 2005). Through these opportunities we become more self-aware of what we know, make new connections, and are able to construct and produce new language knowledge as well as knowledge about ourselves. For that, students also need to have the space to reflect on what they are doing *IN* and *OUT* of the classroom. In order to redefine paradigms such as the change in power play in the classroom and for students to take ownership of their process of learning, we have to change our own view of teaching.

Banking Education, a term coined by Freire (2005), is the type of education where teachers just deposit their knowledge on students without taking into consideration the individuality that is present in class. As each individual perceives things in a different way, they also learn at different speeds and at different times from one another. Paulo Freire was strongly opposed to this model of education, and in *Pedagogy of Autonomy* (Freire, 2008) he writes about the kind of mindset teachers ought to have in order to practice teaching; i.e. seeing learners as co-constructors of their own learning process. In his view, humanising teaching is looking at the situation from the point of view of the people who are in the room. How can we actually take students' points of view, ideas, wants and interests into account when preparing lessons without actually dialoguing? Taking all these beliefs with me to my own classroom, I decided to create the space that was missing for reflection, with the help of my learners.
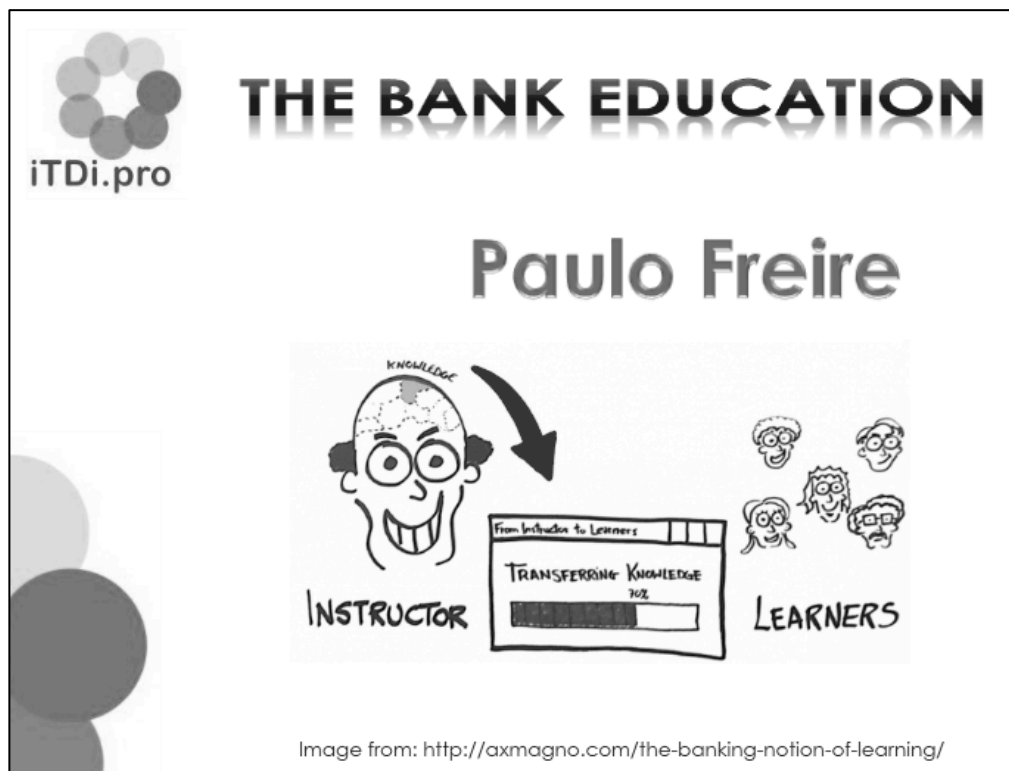

Figure 4. Bank Education, from Bard (2014)

How do learners become more responsible for their own learning? Scharle and Szabó (2009) suggest that there are three phases we should consider when developing learners' autonomy: Raising Awareness, Changing Attitudes and Transferring Roles. The process according to their research should be, "First, learners have to become aware of the difference their contributions can make, and of the nature of language learning in general (Raising Awareness). Second, they need some well-structure practice in their new attitudes as responsible learners (Changing Attitudes) so that, in the third phase, they will be ready to take over some roles from the teacher and enjoy the freedom that comes with increased responsibility (Transferring Roles)" (p. 1).
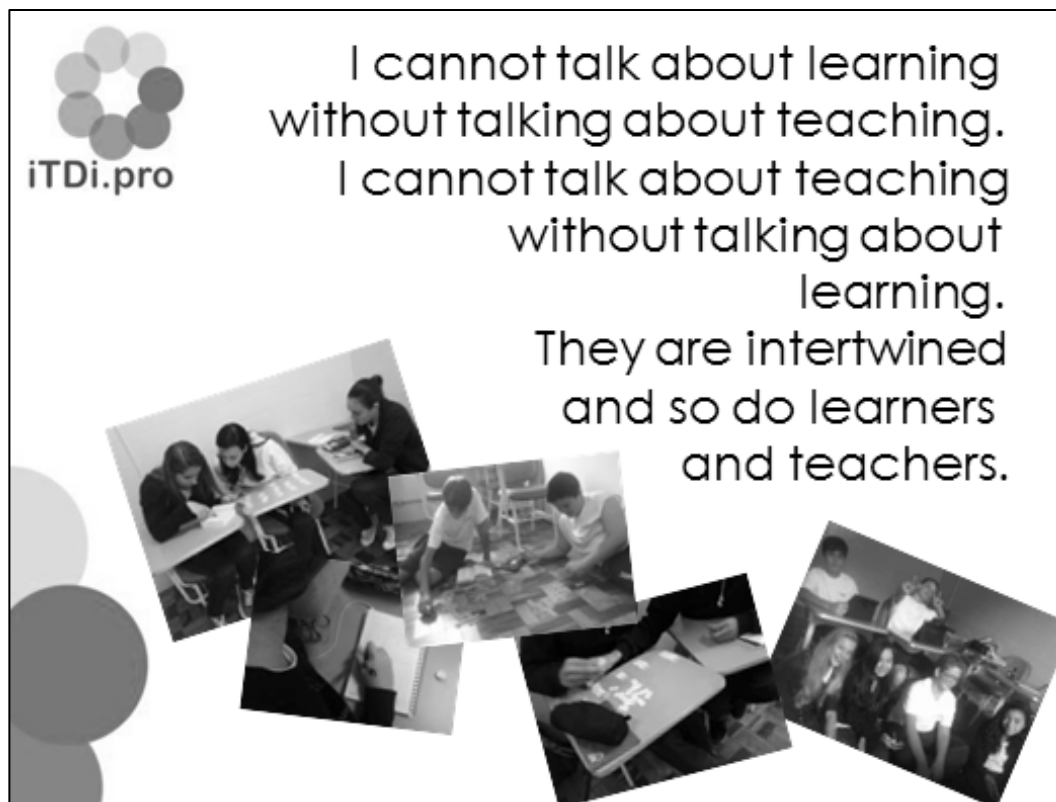

Figure 5. Learning and teaching, from Bard (2014)

Considering the phases discussed by Scharle and Szabó, I came up with the following model to apply throughout the year with my most recent classes of 9th grade students. The model was to start with simple questions, move on to self-assessment, and in this process arrive at the target of continuous reflection.

I started the term by asking them simple questions throughout the first and second bimesters. As they became used to thinking about what was going on in class, I created a self-assessment tool for them at the end of the first bimester (Appendix 1). The self-

assessment focused on their reflections on participation in class and in homework. The idea was to make it a starting point for discussion and get us to reflect on the role of homework and the activities given so far. As the first bimester was a time to get to know each other and prepare for the following bimesters, the previous two steps were crucial. For ongoing reflection to occur, we need to raise their awareness of the importance of reflecting on what we do and want from our educational processes.

Figure 6. Implementing, from Bard (2014)

As the first phase was raising learners' awareness, in every class I made sure I had at least one question that caused the learners to reflect on the quality of their activities and learning. Then, by taking their answers into consideration, I made small changes in the way I conducted the class, and then evaluated those changes with them again. After a while the students started naturally noticing that what one of them thought might be different from what the others were thinking, and they started giving reasons and testing their own hypotheses in observing their own language progress. Of course the role of the teacher was very important at that point, in mediating the conversations and asking questions that made them think and find the answers if any by themselves. In addition to promoting the understanding that there is more than one answer sometimes, and that is ok, the students found that investigating reality was enjoyable, and playfulness happened.

Playfulness is a concept that Fanselow uses frequently which is the antidote of being judgmental. It took me almost a year to get rid of my judgmental side and see alternatives in acts of play and joyfulness. Consequently, I also try to help my learners. move from being judgmental to indulging in playfulness.

In Appendix 1 (the instrument of self-assessment meant to help students identify the areas where they needed improvement to become even more successful as language learners, but moreover to reflect on the actions and attitudes they had had so far) students were asked to reflect on their participation and homework. As homework in our school is compulsory, learners feel that they simply have to do it. But the tasks are linked to classroom objectives, so not doing it affects class participation. When one of the students commented that it was hard to remember how many times they did this or that, we agreed to use a table to register their participation and thoughts as the weeks went on (Appendix 2). At some point I had started calling their assignments "missions", dropping the term 'homework' completely, an idea I got from Shelly Terrell (2014).

Raising Issues, Finding solutions

Figure 7. Action Plan, from Bard (2014)

In order to decide what instruments to create, I used the model shown in Figure 7. Instead of action-research, I call it action plan; a plan to simplify the process I find much more learner-centered because it gets my students involved in the process of

investigation. As can be seen in the diagram, I identify the challenges we are facing and then I introduce these into the classroom for discussion with the learners more than once in the process. Most of the time this is done in a very casual and informal way. This creates a cycle where what we are doing in class is constantly evaluated and re-evaluated.

For instance, one of the challenges I usually face with teenagers is getting them to do homework. So at the beginning of this year, we started discussing this and by reflecting on their responses, I discovered that in the end they didn't mind doing it as much as I thought, but they wanted something that was more relevant to their needs outside the class and more enjoyable than before.
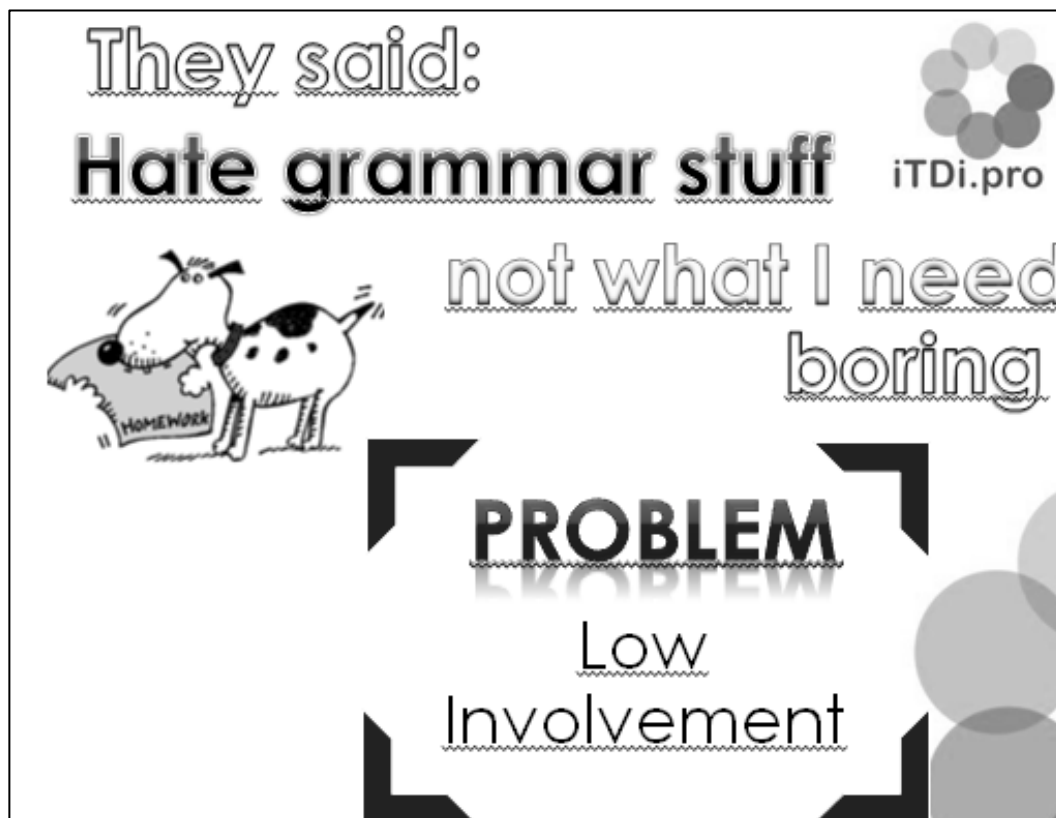

Figure 8. Problem Low Involvement, from Bard (2014)

So, using reflective tools increased participation in homework, especially if the homework interested them. I also created a place where I normally post a summary of each class with videos and audio files and instructions for the missions as needed (http://missionboardudi.pbworks.com/). Creating missions that are closely related to activities they do outside the class and using the Mission Accomplished Table provided me with a better idea of who my learners are and what kinds of activities they are willing to participate in *IN* and *OUT* of class.

Students want to have a voice, a say in what they are doing. In our last project of the year, our "Extensive Reading Project", I am putting into practice the third and last phase, transferring roles (Scharle & Szabó, 2009) where after 7 months they are ready to take over some roles from the teacher and enjoy the freedom that comes with increased responsibility. They are not just doing the activities, but evaluating them and changing them as the project goes. We called this democratic lesson planning.

Lessons learned so far: Conclusions

It can be very difficult for the teacher to let go of control of the learning process, but we ought to believe that our learners, namely teens and adults, are capable of managing their own learning as long as they have the instruments of reflection that will help them compare what they ought to be doing with what they are actually doing. Making sure that they have choices, even if it is something very simple, can be a huge step for them, as they are not used to being able to contribute to the class plan. Giving them choices does not mean that teachers will lose their purpose in class. Teachers can be much more than just the conveyor of knowledge. Instead of transmitting knowledge only, teachers will become mediators "with the aim to develop learners' abilities in order to promote autonomy" (translated by the author from Tebar, 2011, p. 74).

Teachers must make sure, however, that when their students are given choices, they have the time to reflect on them, as well as on their actions and their consequences. It is important to discuss with learners the consequences for not doing something, but never by lecturing them. Let them reflect on it themselves. Teachers ought to learn to formulate the right questions and give their learners enough space to discuss and arrive at answers.

Therefore, discussing with learners is really important. Together we can come up with alternatives ourselves. This is paramount for teachers because by listening we learn what they think and how they came up with that way of thinking because they often know what they don't like, but don't know how to change it. Thus, promoting dialogue in the class is crucial.

Feedback, nonetheless, becomes more than teacher response to students' tasks; it entails turning into ongoing conversations matters that emerge out of necessity or as they arise in class. What is important is our conclusions, ideas, and guidance that we offer to one another with the aim to improve, enhance or make something better. The same should be applied to teachers. When teachers work together and towards professional development they should sit as equals and promote a better understanding of their practice. In fact, I would say that it is by doing this with one another that we learn how to do the same with students.

In the end, we come to realize that each one of us learns in our own way and there is really no magical formula for teaching or learning. The importance of reflection is that getting to know ourselves is just as important as trying to understand others.

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Appendix 1

Instructions: Check the option that is true for you.

A- Participation:

1- I _____ contribute to the activities when they are in group.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

2- I _____ engage in the activities in pairs.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

3- I _____ focus when the teacher is explaining something.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

4- I _____ do the activities on my own attentively.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

5- I _____ pay attention when the teacher is talking.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

6- I _____ pay attention when my classmate is talking.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

B- HomePractice (Weekly Missions)

1- I _____ access the links that the teacher posts in SATC's Portal.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

2- I _____ read the instructions for homepractice carefully.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

3- I _____ bring the activities that the teacher asks for completed in the next class.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

4- I _____ do the activities attentively.
( ) Always ( ) Usually ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not usually ( ) Never

What grade would you give yourself? _____

Suggestions or your thoughts here:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix 2

Mission Accomplished? Yes? No? Why not? Did you like doing it? What did you learn/practice in the past week?

Date	Yep	Nope	Comments:

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