Staging pedagogy for autonomy: two plays

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1 Putting pedagogy centre-stage (Flávia)

Keeping the concerns of learners and teachers on centre-stage seems a rather obvious ideal to pursue within the field of learner autonomy. However, this has not often been the case. In our efforts to understand and develop learner autonomy, teachers have frequently been kept backstage or assigned minor roles. As a result, research has become detached from the real life of schools, and these are still largely envisaged as ‘infected’ places where ‘pure’ ideas are contaminated. (Vieira 2006)

As Tripp says (1989:14), “teachers are amongst those who are ‘studied down’ upon”, and one of the most pervasive effects of this is that most problems tackled by research are not posed by teachers, but by academics. This surely undermines the social relevance of theoretical discourse, no matter how progressive and liberating it may sound.

What do we know about how language teachers develop learner autonomy in schools? Benson’s review (2001) suggests that teachers are

1 Writing a text collaboratively was here understood as making the most of each author’s voice according to a negotiated structure and argument. We believe this adds authenticity to our writing and mirrors the responsibilities we had in the process of producing the text. Therefore, we leave our names in the different sections, which were shared among us and revised accordingly. Shortening the original reports written by Antonieta and Clara (section 2) so as to keep within the word limit was our biggest challenge. Having worked together before in several projects concerning pedagogy for autonomy and sharing a common view of education were the factors that facilitated our collaboration most.

2 Two plays on pedagogy for autonomy

2.1 Play A – Using a portfolio as a learning tool (Antonieta)

2.1.1 The set

Since 2003, teachers of English in upper secondary schools have had a new syllabus which proposes a portfolio as a tool to promote learning awareness and self-assessment. On the other hand, teachers have also been informed about the Common European Framework of Reference
for Languages and the European Language Portfolio. These documents highlight the value of the individual portfolio as a learning and assessment tool that fosters learner awareness and responsibility - the basis of pedagogy for autonomy.

2.1.2 The sIage-mgranger

As a teacher of English in upper secondary school for thirty-three years, I have experienced a lot of change in my job, mainly as a result of the educational changes brought about by the 1974 political revolution. The democratization of schooling raised new challenges as students now came from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, with different aspirations and levels of commitment to learning. Underachievement and indiscipline increased, and teachers were no longer expected to "produce" passive and obedient citizens. Critical thinking and active citizenship became crucial educational goals.

When I first heard of pedagogy for autonomy in the early 90's, I immediately felt interested as I had always been concerned about improving student motivation, involvement and responsibility in learning. I thought it could be the key to our problems. In 1993 I participated in a course run by Flávia which included an action research project to promote learner autonomy. A year later I attended another course on humanistic education, animated by Adrian Underhill (Hastings, England), where I learned that true respect, awareness and a genuine wish to help students are fundamental if we want to give them the space and the opportunity, when they are ready, to control the direction of their own learning process. These two courses were a turning point in my career. From then on I became more reflective and eager to experiment with new practices, and I have been involved in other initiatives related to autonomy, which include setting up a Learning Centre in my school in 1996, becoming a member of GT-PA2 in 1997, and running several in-service courses as a teacher-trainer.

In my classes I have tried to make objectives and assessment criteria transparent, to negotiate rights, duties and decisions, and to create a good learning environment based on mutual respect. In my effort to foster learning to learn and self-assessment competencies, I have developed a set of grids with open-ended questions to enable students to reflect on language learning strategies, as well as problems and plans to overcome them. In fact, these reflections were a kind of self-assessment portfolio, so when I read our new syllabus I immediately embraced the idea of portfolios.

2.1.3 The plot and the actors

After reading a few articles on portfolios, I started using them in 2003/04, and I have made some improvements ever since. In 2004/05, I proposed using them to all my students in the 10th and 11th forms (about 90 with intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of English). The classes were very heterogeneous in terms of language ability, but I believe that portfolios are the best way to individualize learning in this context.

The framework we adopted (see Table 1) articulates my own convictions about the value of learner awareness and responsibility with ideas from European documents.

The Dossier is the most important part of the portfolio, and I often monitor students' reflections so as to help them improve self-assessment skills and check if the activities they decide to do are appropriate to their needs. We also conduct regular conferences to clarify any doubts, help them organize their materials and be more specific in their reflections.

Portfolio accounts for 20% of the students' final mark. They are not assessed for language correctness or the quality of writing, which avoids students having their work done by someone else or copied from the Internet, and also encourages a positive attitude towards errors. What is important for me as a teacher, and what we assess, is the appropriateness of the students' choices to the problems they diagnose, the depth of their reflections, evidence of their learning effort, and their commitment to overcoming difficulties and becoming more proficient. Assessment criteria (see Appendix A) are used for self/peer-assessment at the end of each term.

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2 The GT-PA (Grupo de Trabalho - Pedagogia para a Autonomia/Working Group - Pedagogy for Autonomy, coordinated by Flávia) was set up in 1997 as a learning community where teacher educators/researchers and school teachers explore the idea(s) of pedagogy for autonomy. Pedagogical inquiry is a major component of the work of GT-PA.
value on good marks, and although they recognize the importance of educational gains, only marks seem to justify all the effort. This is part of a culture that is difficult to change.

2.1.4 The backstage and the audience

I have not received any particular support for working in this way, except for informal discussions with Flávia and some colleagues. Nevertheless, both my students and I have frequently assessed its results and consider it to be valuable for developing awareness and responsibility. I have asked parents to check their children’s effort by looking at their portfolios, and some of them have also placed a high educational value on this type of work. On the other hand, many colleagues at school have shown an interest and I have been asked to run a few training sessions for them, where I had the opportunity to describe my experience and point out its results, advantages and constraints. Some of them fear the heavy teaching load, but many others have stated their intention to try out something similar, which seems wonderful but also raises a difficult question: will learners be able to develop portfolios for all their school subjects?

2.1.5 The review

Based on the results of the experience, I strongly believe that this kind of portfolio is an extremely useful tool to promote learner autonomy as it

- enhances effort and commitment to out-of-class learning;
- raises awareness of learning processes and outcomes;
- makes learning more meaningful and effective;
- makes teaching more effective and responsive to learner needs;
- encourages collaborative assessment;
- makes the learning processes and outcomes more transparent to teachers, learners, and parents.

The students’ reflections show that it is a valuable tool for developing their autonomy, both as language users and language learners. Their major problems are a lack of reflective habits and time management. However, they recognize that the learning gains are well worth the effort.
The portfolio was very useful because it helped me to reflect on my work, to identify my difficulties and at the same time to reflect on them, in order to try to find activities which would help me to overcome them. (Ana Filipa)

I have to admit that at the beginning of the year I didn’t like the idea of making a portfolio. However, as time went by, I did it, and now I know, I’m aware that if there was no portfolio I wouldn’t know as much as I do now, because the portfolio was a good way of making me work harder and better. (Luís César)

At the beginning I thought that making so many reflections would be extremely boring, but later I realized that it is very useful in order to identify and correct our mistakes, allowing us to overcome many of our difficulties. (Ana Luisa)

I think that, although the making of the portfolio was very hard work, it was very important to my learning because I could feel my progress. (Renata)

I have never thought that the reflections we make after each task were a waste of time. In fact they help each one of us to understand what prevents us from having higher grades at English and make us study with more commitment to overcome those difficulties. (Marta Sá)

Since the preparation of this type of work is not usual in secondary schools, the preparation of this portfolio brought, at the beginning, some constraints as I didn’t have the habit of analysing my performance regularly and deeply. However, as time went by, that constraint vanished, and in the end I could do my self-assessment easily and without any fear, which contributed, without doubt, to my substantial improvement. (João André)

Some parents have also written positive comments about how portfolios promote continuous learner development, especially as regards interest, commitment, motivation, skills integration, and ability to self-assess and overcome difficulties.

For the teacher, the time burden is the biggest problem, especially when you must assess around 90 portfolios in about two weeks at the end of each term. Although having a set of criteria makes assessment more objective and transparent, it is extremely hard work. Nevertheless, I think it is worthwhile. My students become more motivated, have more academic success, and above all become much more aware of and responsible for their learning. And that is a great step towards autonomy. What better reward could a teacher expect?

2.2 Play B – Developing learning competences: a cross-disciplinary approach (Clara)

2.2.1 The set

Schools should become unique places where questioning, the search for knowledge, and discovery can facilitate meaningful learning and reflective behaviour aimed at creating autonomous, motivated students. This view has been advocated in the educational literature for a long time and is also part of educational policies in Portugal.

Since 1996–97, our government has implemented policies to enhance school autonomy by adapting the national curriculum to local contexts and needs, but also by promoting the development of cross-disciplinary competences that emphasize learner-centredness, lifelong learning and an active role in society. In 2001, Supported Study (SSt) was introduced into the curriculum of compulsory education as a cross-disciplinary area whose main aim is to foster learning competences that make students more autonomous and help them learn the different school subjects. It demands professional development in terms of peer collaboration, responding to students’ needs and interests, acquiring knowledge on learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, socio-affective), and materials design. Hopefully, these competences will become more visible in our practice.
However, questions have been raised concerning the relevance of SSt. Is it possible to establish a connection between this and specific subject areas? What kind of learning competences should students develop, and how can their usefulness be assessed? There has been controversy around these matters, which is why I decided to look more closely at the cross-disciplinary potential of SSt.

2.2.2 The stage manager

*My identity card*

Name: Clara Lima

Job: English language teacher

Place of work: Escola Secundária com 3º Ciclo do Ensino Básico de Baltar (Baltar Secondary School)

I have been teaching English for almost fourteen years and among other choices I have made so far in my life, becoming a teacher was the most deeply felt. I was young and unsure about what to do with my language teaching degree. One thing I was certain about: it should be pleasant and challenging in a way that would facilitate both my personal and professional growth. I was sure I had made the right decision when I faced a classroom full of students for the first time: the pleasure of teaching has never faded and the challenge is still my motto for teaching, reinforced by my own subjective educational theory, which became the main driving force in my teaching practice.

The statement that follows clarifies the reasons why I have invested so much in my teaching career, and hope to go on doing so, aiming to develop and improve student learning as well as my own teaching: "Change is the synonym of learning. Those who learn best and most, and change most comfortably, are those who take responsibility for themselves and for their future, have a clear view of what they want that future to be, want to make sure that they get it, and believe that they can." (Allan 1997:31).

The word “autonomy” became part of my professional world in 1994 when I started my experience as a teacher trainee at the University of Minho (Braga). Later on, learning about action research raised my awareness of my own teaching practice and the urge to improve its articulation with the students’ learning. To understand pedagogy for autonomy, I needed to develop my own autonomy, to undergo a process of change.

I have always tried to be a student-centred teacher, encouraging students to play an active role in the teaching-learning process, which encouraged me to ask questions about my teaching: How can I best teach vocabulary, grammar, etc.? Am I aware of my learners’ needs? How does my teaching style affect my learners? What do my practices say about my beliefs about teaching? Why do I ask students to perform that task in that particular way? What constraints do I find in teaching? I believe teaching is a lifelong process of renewal. As teaching situations are so varied and involve students with different motivations and attitudes, I am conscious of the fact that sometimes only “little” answers are possible.

In 2002-03 I enrolled in a postgraduate MA programme on Pedagogical Supervision in ELT, which gave me the opportunity to engage more deeply with pedagogy for autonomy, and I also became a member of the GT-PA (see note 2), where I participated in a collaborative study on SSt (Vieira et al. 2004). For my dissertation project, I developed an action research experience in 2003-04 that is the basis for the present report.3

2.2.3 The plot and the actors

My research emerged from my own questioning about SSt. I wanted to understand its potential for the development of learning competences that enhance subject learning, in my case, the learning of English. The study would involve the construction of pedagogical materials for both curricular areas so as to make the cross-disciplinary policy a reality.

I chose to work with a class of 23 students in the 8th form (starting their fourth year in English) who had been my students in the previous year, both in English and SSt. I had not explored before the cross-disciplinary potential of SSt in the way that I would this time, and I also felt the urge to adopt a cyclical approach that enhanced continuous development in selected areas of difficulty. I would also create my own materials rather

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3 This project was supervised by Flávia, who was also the coordinator of the MA programme.
than resorting to resource books as I had done before.

The first step was to select cross-disciplinary competences that might be tackled in SST and English from those defined in the national curriculum. We agreed on the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developing Writing Strategies</th>
<th>Cross-disciplinary Competences (see 1-5 above)</th>
<th>Aims, Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supported Study</td>
<td>[Competences: 1, 3, 4, 5]</td>
<td>Aims: Reflect on attitude towards writing, identify difficulties, raise awareness of the role of writing in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Ideas about writing</td>
<td>Activities: Short writing task (in the native language) → question-and-answer (reasons to write, attitudes, difficulties and strategies to overcome them) → discussion of answers (compiled by me) (see Appendix B: B.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How to plan the writing process</td>
<td>Aims: Raise awareness of the writing process steps to follow</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. How to correct and evaluate written work</td>
<td>Activities: Reflect on personal experience as writers (what they do before, while and after writing the first draft) → comparing experiences and selecting good writing practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>[Competences: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5]</td>
<td>Aims: Use writing strategies learnt in SST, develop creativity, improve writing in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Writing a creative text (based on a short story read in class)</td>
<td>Activities: Selecting the type of text to write → planning writing by following suggestions → planning writing (in English) and using resource materials to solve problems → reflecting on strategies, difficulties, doubts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Assessing writing</td>
<td>Aims: Self-assess writing ability</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Reflecting on the impact of the activities done</td>
<td>Activities: Self-assessment of texts according to criteria/levels (text content, organization, spelling/punctuation, vocabulary choice, grammatical accuracy, and originality/creativity)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Developing writing strategies (supported study ←→ English)

1. Adopt working and learning methodologies according to previously set goals.
2. Research, select and organize information.
3. Adopt strategies related to problem solving and decision making.
4. Carry out tasks in an autonomous, responsible and creative way.
5. Self-evaluate learning (added by me).

The students were aware that these would be developed in SST and transferred to English, where three main problem areas were identified: research, reading and writing. As an example of the approach, I present a sequence of activities related to writing which illustrate the articulation between SST and English (see Table 2; sample activities are presented in Appendices B1 and B2). The main strategies used to evaluate the impact of the approach upon learning were self-evaluation questionnaires, final interviews, and my teaching journal.

2.2.4 The backstage and the audience

The main support to develop the project came from my dissertation supervisor, Flávia, and also the students, who knew that it was centred on their learning so as to benefit them. Another encouraging factor was my previous experience in SST: I already had an idea of what was expected which reinforced my convictions about its advantages. Being free to design materials and choose content and ways of assessing learning and the experience itself was also a positive aspect. However, there were some situational constraints.

In the 8th form English is taught once a week (90 minutes) and that slowed down the experiment. I sometimes felt it was rather time-consuming and somewhat frustrating. In the context of postgraduate research there is much pressure to carry out our plan in a pre-determined time schedule and, simultaneously, much hope that we shall carry it out successfully. Nevertheless, developing competences is a slow process that has to respect each student’s learning pace.

Although all the teachers of this class were informed about the competences to be developed in SST and invited to motivate students to use them, collaboration was reduced to one or two cases. The statement “No teacher is an island” implies a collaborative policy, and teachers complain
they help us understand what may enhance bottom-up innovative processes:

a. Two factors seem to play a decisive role: the teacher’s (i) biography (vision of education, training opportunities, and experience) and (ii) commitment to professional change, which seem to be both connected with a (iii) concern for the quality of learning.

b. Another crucial factor is having (iv) opportunities for professional growth through self-initiated inquiry, which in turn requires (v) a certain degree freedom to make pedagogical choices.

c. Teacher inquiry towards learner autonomy appears to be enhanced by (vi) self-directed choice and decision making, (vii) responsive teaching, which includes the participation of students in the negotiation and validation of local practices, and (viii) professional satisfaction with the outcomes of practice in terms of both teacher and learner empowerment.

d. Pedagogy for autonomy can take different forms and requires (ix) flexibility, creativity, and context-sensitivity; commonalities are to be found less in action itself than in justifications for action: assumptions, values, concerns, goals.

e. Pedagogy for autonomy can be instigated by (x) policies that resonate with the teachers’ practical theories, pedagogical concerns, and background experience.

f. Innovation would be enhanced by (xi) a culture of collaboration in schools, the lack of which appears to be perceived as a major constraint to the sustainability of change.

If we return to our metaphor, it seems that ‘staging’ pedagogy for autonomy is highly dependent on the ‘stage-manager’ (the teacher), the ‘plot’ and ‘actors’ (classroom experimentation), and the “review” (local evaluation of practices). External factors appear to be less influential, as long as they do not interfere with freedom to experiment. Among these factors, policies stand out as potential instigators of professional change.

The two teachers’ narratives and my reflection on them show that looking closely into teachers’ practices can be an invaluable path to understanding pedagogy for autonomy as lived experience, which also

3 What enhances innovation towards autonomy (Flávia)

Pedagogy for autonomy does not result from the application of research-based prescriptions. The two narratives above show that only teacher-generated knowledge can determine pedagogical choices, and

about isolation, but when they are challenged to collaborate they often become suspicious and resist. Collaborative work among teachers will hopefully corroborate Knezic and Scholl’s statement (1996: 79): “Collaboration is a powerful vehicle for exposing and developing knowledge of teaching.”

2.2.5 The review

This study became a process of inner growth, both personally and professionally. I took the decision to implement it out of my strong belief that competence development and reflectivity on both sides (teacher and students) would contribute to an increase in learning success. I really felt I would reach my goals, despite being conscious of the obstacles that would emerge.

All the students, even the less motivated ones, expressed a positive opinion about learning competences and acknowledged their impact on the learning of English. They believe this should be a long-term project, as they need time to apply the strategies learnt. However, not all of them showed responsibility for their learning. Some were teacher-dependent, not willing to take initiatives, and not very self-confident; others just felt they were incapable of taking on the challenge of autonomy. Now that I am in my third year working with them, I can see that their confidence as learners has increased, making them more responsible and conscious of their role in language learning.

I believe that one of the major problems in developing learner autonomy is lack of self-esteem, which fosters negative attitudes towards one’s ability to learn autonomously. Students need to believe in themselves and persist. As I intend to go on working on a cross-disciplinary approach through SS, besides developing strategic and metacognitive competence, I will emphasize the need to improve self-esteem.
gives us insights into how to design teacher education programmes that instigate innovation towards autonomy (for example, should they explore the teachers' biography, create opportunities for teacher-initiated inquiry, foster collaboration, etc.?). We certainly need more accounts of teacher experiments, but also more collaborative projects so that teachers, teacher educators and researchers can build communities of inquiry where pedagogy for autonomy is explored and disseminated as a collective interest. Unless this is done, autonomy is probably doomed to be no more than an academic preoccupation that has little impact on school education.

**References**


### Appendix A

*Portfolio Assessment Grid*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>MARK</th>
<th>SELF ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>TEACHERS ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Per item</td>
<td>Per item</td>
<td>Per item</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>MARK</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRESENTATION (50 marks)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORGANIZATION (40 marks)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCESSUAL (10 marks)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REACTIVITY (10 marks)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFLECTIONS (10 marks)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*In terms of self-assessment, reflect critically on your personal learning, your actions, and your responses to the tasks.*
B.1 The Writing Process

Aims:

- to know your attitude towards writing
- to identify writing difficulties
- to make you aware of the role of writing in your learning process

Activity 1
Individual work
Look at the Picture and write a text about it. (you have 10 minutes)

Activity 2
Group work
Share with your school mates the difficulties you felt and think of questions you would like to ask your teacher.

Activity 3
Individual work
What do you think about writing? Answer the following questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you like writing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Why do you write?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. When you have a writing task, what do you feel?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What advantages or disadvantages do you find in writing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. What do you write with pleasure / by obligation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. What difficulties do you feel when you write?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. How can you improve your writing competence?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. How can a teacher help you improve your writing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Note: the answers were collected, summarized and presented in the following lesson for class discussion]
B.2 Evaluating your Writing Competence

We have been talking about the writing process in *Estudo Acompanhado*. We shared ideas and strategies which we put into practice in the English class. It is important that you evaluate your performance and the experience.

This questionnaire will help you...

- to reflect on the usefulness of writing strategies, mainly for the improvement of English learning
- to be aware of the difficulties you felt

Answer the questionnaire about the writing activity done in the English lesson.

(1- yes, 2- No, 3- Maybe/ I don’t know)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Strategies</th>
<th>1/2/3</th>
<th>Difficulties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Did I read the activity instruction attentively?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Did I understand the activity?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Did I think about the writing situation to decide what to write and how to do it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Did I draw a plan about the text I wanted to write?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Did I use any resources to support my writing (texts I read, notebook, course-book, dictionary,...)?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Did I select and write down useful vocabulary?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Did I reread my text while writing it?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Did I use varied strategies to solve problems?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Did I reflect on structure and organization, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation and text cohesion?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Did I correct my text by identifying mistakes?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Other:</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In *Estudo Acompanhado* we reflected on the process of writing a text and how to improve it. Recall the activities done and answer the questions:

1. Did the activities contribute for improving your writing competence in English? Why?

2. What did you learn?

3. Would you like to go on developing writing activities? Why?

4. What kind of activities would you like to do?