

TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PURPOSES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This work consists of the first part of a research conducted in the second semester of 2013 in public schools in Gurupi - Tocantins - Brazil, which aims to investigate how the process of teaching and learning English language takes place during the high school years and what their weaknesses are. It is understood to be necessary a survey that generated data in order to detect the causes of such failures and for this, the following questions emerged: (i) Do the methods used by schools correspond to the needs and objectives proposed? (ii) Is the number of classes enough for teachers to work the

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four skills required (reading, speaking, listening and writing)?
(iii) Why are teachers and students so demotivated? The methodology used for this study consists of questionnaires given to 90 high school students from 3 different schools. The results showed: a) an interest from students in learning English Language b) a lack of use of the target language by teachers c) the recognition of the importance of learning a second language by students d) the writing skill as the most used by the teacher in the classroom, e) the excessive number of students per classroom. At the end of this stage we considered that the failures can be, amongst others, the result from issues within the educational system that prepares these teachers as well as inappropriate physical, curricular and didactic structures for teaching.

Keywords: Teaching and learning of English.Motivation. Publicschools.

ENSINO E APRENDIZAGEM DE LÍNGUA INGLESA EM ESCOLAS PÚBLICAS: PROPÓSITOS E DESAFIOS

RESUMO

Este trabalho consta da primeira parte de uma pesquisa realizada durante o segundo semestre do ano letivo de 2013 em escolas públicas da cidade de Gurupi-Tocantins- Brazil, que tem por objetivo investigar como se dá o processo de ensino e aprendizagem de Língua Inglesa durante os anos de ensino médio, e quais sua deficiências. Julgou-se necessário uma pesquisa que gerasse dados a fim de detectar as causas de tais deficiências e para isso, foram buscadas respostas às seguintes questões: (i) Os métodos usados pelas escolas respondem às necessidades e objetivos propostos? (ii) O número de aulas é suficiente para que os professores possam trabalhar as quatro habilidades em sala de aula (leitura, fala, escuta e escrita)? (iii) Porque professores e alunos são tão

desmotivados? A metodologia adotada para este estudo consta de questionários abertos aplicados à 90 alunos de 3 escolas de ensino médio. Os resultados obtidos demonstraram: a) interesse por parte dos alunos em aprender Língua Inglesa; b) falta do uso da língua-alvo por parte dos professores; c) reconhecimento por parte dos alunos quanto à importância de se aprender uma segunda língua; d) a utilização da habilidade escrita como sendo a mais utilizada pelo professor em sala de aula; e, e) o excessivo número de alunos por sala de aula. Consideramos ao final desta etapa que as deficiências apontadas podem ser, entre outros, resultados de problemas no sistema educacional que prepara esses professores, bem como estruturas físicas, curriculares e didáticas inapropriados para a efetivação deste ensino.

Palavras-chave: Ensino e aprendizagem de inglês. Motivação. Escolas públicas.

1 INTRODUCTION

Bearing in mind that the Foreign Language subject in public Intermediate schools in Gurupi-TO [*TO is the acronym for Tocantins, a state in the north of Brazil*] has presented certain difficulties in reaching their goals in an effective way, a study has been required in order to identify the causes of such a deficiency. Therefore, this study intends to present a general view of the process of teaching and learning English in public high schools in *Gurupi, State of Tocantins in Brazil*.

This study also corresponds to the first step of a research which is divided into two parts. The first part which will be shown in this article corresponds to: (i) data collection; (ii) graphic representation; and (iii) brief discussions towards, process, purposes and motivation to teach English in public schools. The second part, still under construction, will be presented in later publications and corresponds to a discussion of the collected data based on speech theories which can lead us to a better way to understand this singular and interesting process known as teaching / learning a foreign language.

The interest in this subject emerged while the researchers

worked as mentors for work placement students teaching English at public schools in Gurupi. By observing them it was seen the reality of current educational system and a question emerged: Why are teachers and students so demotivated about teaching and/or learning a foreign language?

Despite concerns demonstrated by educators regarding the teaching-learning process of the English language, many issues remain unresolved, with no sign of any practical solutions to deal with or improve the results derived from a multifaceted learning process.

It is clear that second-language learners are in many cases faced with barriers when they initiate their studies, as they do not have access to adequate classes and their inclusion in the school curriculum is not met with enthusiasm. Another important factor is that although many people are aware of the importance of learning a second language, they do not have the financial means or access to private schools which offer better-quality courses.

Because of this, people find themselves in circumstances where they might be excluded, since the

curriculums selected in today's strict job market must meet increasingly higher standards. Hence, learning a second language cannot only be seen as a luxury item for the socially privileged few.

It is also more than just acquiring a cultural asset. Learning a second language is a necessary tool in the post-modern world since it is a key to entering the job market, considering that fluency in a second language, especially English, is a communication tool used in nearly every workplace scenario. Knowing a second language is no longer just a means to learn more about culture, instead it has become a necessity to access information divulged in foreign languages, especially English.

Having said that, in order to accomplish with this study the text is organized into five sections. In section 1, it will be presented a brief history of language teaching in general context. In section 2, it will be addressed questions about motivation and how this can be a driving factor in order to the techniques and approaches chosen by the teacher work in the classroom. Also in section 2, some points that defend the teaching of English in public schools will be briefly

presented. In section 3, it will be presented the methodology that guided this research as well as the data collected and the results. Finally in section 4, it will presented the discussions followed by the closing remarks.

2 A BRIEF HISTORY ABOUT LANGUAGE TEACHING

English has not always been the most studied foreign language in the world as it is nowadays. Nonetheless, it is common knowledge that studying a foreign language has not been unusual over the years. Until the XV century, Latin was the language of education, commerce, religion and government in the West. From the XVI century onwards other languages stood out as a result of political changes in Europe. Then, Latin became a curricular subject that was aimed at reading and the interpretation of famous works. The study of Latin was based on the introduction of grammatical rules, conjugations and translations of sentences without a context.

As other languages such as Italian, French and English took over from Latin, the way they were taught at schools followed the same steps that

Latin did, which meant that speaking was not the objective and oral practice took place as a means of reading sentences that were constructed to give grammar examples.

Until the XIX century, textbooks were organized around grammar points and this approach towards foreign language teaching is called the Grammar Translation Method. Grammar Translation dominated European and foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s, and in a modified form it continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today (RICHARDS; RODGERS, 2001, p. 6).

English lessons have focused more on writing, putting speaking and listening aside. The majority of teachers ask students to translate sentences or even texts during their lessons as well as emphasizing the use of grammar exercises. In addition, most of the time, the texts studied are not authentic and were created specifically to work on vocabulary, without taking neither language teaching nor applied linguistics into consideration.

From the second half of the XIX century, the need Europeans had to communicate amongst themselves

created a demand for oral proficiency in foreign languages and the Grammar Translation Method started to give way to new language teaching approaches.

Many methods and approaches with different characteristics and principles in some aspects, but the same in others, have been created, and foreign language teachers have been searching for the 'best' method.

Certainly there is no such a thing as an efficient method that meets all needs in language teaching since there are different kinds of learners, environments and objectives, which lead teachers to have different results. Experienced teachers in many ways use techniques and principles that they learned empirically. In general, unfortunately, university courses in Brazil that train language teachers do not give the required training for them to become future foreign language teachers.

Nonetheless, university teachers have been researching and becoming aware of the need to find efficient ways to teach languages. Teacher training makes them consider their methods and consequently, ways to minimize or resolve problems that are currently barriers in the teaching-learning process.

In his book *Verbal Behavior* in 1957, B. F. Skinner, who represented Behaviorism, created a learning theory applicable to language learning in order to strengthen this theory. The learning principles that make up the psychological foundations of Audiolingualism are specifically based on the creation of a habit through memorized dialogues and drills to practice repetition. According to this author, linguistic skills are learned more efficiently when the language is presented orally first and later in writing.

To start with we must recognize that the ultimate purpose of learning languages is to have the ability to communicate, whether this can be clearly noticed in speaking or writing, or as an implicit psychological activity that underlies speaking, listening, writing and reading (WIDDOWSON, 2005, p. 97).

The need for adults to learn languages started in the 70s when European countries became more interdependent and with the creation of the European Market. As a result, efforts were made to find an approach that aimed at communicative competence.

In 1971 a group of researchers in Europe started investigating the possibility to develop language courses that were not so fragmented. In the

book *National Syllabuses* (1976), its writer, a British linguist called D. A. Wilkins, analyses the communicative meanings that language learners need in order to learn how to express themselves in whatever language they are learning.

This had a substantial impact on the development of Communicative Language Teaching. This approach aims at making communicative competence a target of language teaching and to develop procedures for the four linguistic abilities which are responsible for the interdependence of the language and of communication.

Many methods and approaches have been tested and used in language teaching over the last few years by many dedicated professionals. However, teachers must study each principle and technique related to the activities associated to each method or approach that enable the expected goals to be reached. As time goes by and teachers acquire experience, each of them will adapt methods or approaches to their classroom reality.

3 MOTIVATION: MAKING A BRIDGE BETWEEN METHODS, APPROACHES AND LEARNING

It is understood that motivation is as important as content and the methods used in the teaching-learning process since it stimulates students and guides them during the learning process. The *Aurélio* dictionary defines motivation as 'the act or process of motivating; a number of factors that determine individuals activities and behavior', which means, therefore, that students' motivation will present itself in their attitude in the classroom and receptivity towards English. Motivation must be taken into consideration and driven by teachers during the teaching-learning process as well as when students are carrying out tasks.

Studies have identified three phases in the teaching-learning process and, because of this, they are considered the most comprehensive studies so far. The first phase is called 'pre-action' and it is focused on establishing the intention, which is the reason students seek learning.

The second is called 'action', which means that once the intention is established, learners engage themselves in the learning process itself. Last but not least, we have the so-called 'post-action' phase in which students will be able to evaluate whether the learning process

corresponded to their initial motivation (DÖRNYEI, 2001).

It is understood that the first phase corresponds to the motive/wish that lead students to learn or seek learning. This phase is fundamental in order to effectively stimulate students to learn and be successful. The second is the learning process itself. As for the last phase, it corresponds to the result of the learning process.

Dörnyei (2001,p. 120) mentions that 'teachers motivation is also influential', and it is as complex as students' motivation. He affirms that 'teachers' motivation to teach also affects students' motivation to learn in two ways: their expectations and their enthusiasm'.

The first is the expectation teachers have of students' learning, in other words, the return that the teacher expects from the lesson. The latter is the teachers' practice as it is believed that teachers' enthusiasm leads to students' enthusiasm. He defended that '[...] enthusiastic teachers make students enthusiastic too [...]', making evident the influence teachers have on the teaching-learning process of languages.

Teachers' expectations correspond to what they expect from

students, i.e. participation and interest. Nevertheless, it is understood that teachers' enthusiasm must not be a consequence of students' motivation, it is quite the opposite. It is also understood that motivated teachers must strive to use a more dynamic methodology, making it more meaningful according to students' interests.

As for teaching-learning, the teachers' attitude in the school environment is extremely important, especially in the classroom (LEFFA, 2003, p. 240). The reason for this is that one of the secrets of the learning process is to turn the classroom into the most pleasant environment possible, making the effort to stimulate respect and team spirit between teachers and students as well as amongst the students themselves.

According to Boruchovitch; Bzuneck (2001, p. 30): 'To motivate a class successfully, teachers must master a wide variety of techniques and know how to use them flexibly and creatively'.

We live in a world where people are attracted by creative technology, therefore teachers need to be creative and, consequently, form creative students. Creative teachers will be

more susceptible to have students who learn successfully.

Being creative is a difficult job when teachers face so many difficulties. Students are attracted to so many things outside the school and, on the other hand, teachers have the obligation to make the teaching-learning process happen. Creativity is needed in any profession, hence teachers need to abandon traditional methods and try to use more interesting activities that are closer to students' real lives. Teachers should suggest more appealing and varied activities, and, most importantly, teachers should show enthusiasm towards what they are doing.

Any learning process infers that students have to concentrate and make an effort, whether directly or indirectly. Students need to feel motivated in order to make such efforts to learn. The mechanisms to motivate learning can be didactic and/or paradidactic, and they meet students' and teachers' needs so that, together, they can develop the learning process. 'Motivation without learning will simply result in an aimless activity; learning without motivation will simply result in inactivity, like sleeping' (MEDNICK, 1983, p. 21).

It is important that teachers try to motivate students as well as find out what demotivates them too. During this process teachers must be very attentive to notice any prejudicial behavior amongst students, who need to be motivated in order to learn.

3.1 WHY IS ENGLISH TAUGHT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

It is undeniable that only a few students from public schools will have the opportunity to use English as an interactive tool in a trip abroad, for instance; or have the opportunity to communicate with English native speakers, or, be in a context where English is really needed for communication purposes. Thus, a question arises: why should English be taught to students who will not have the opportunity or need to use it?

However, teachers, we must make students aware of the necessity to use English because of the various possibilities it can create. If we fail to do that, we will be taking away another opportunity they could have, as well as be corroborating with preconceptions and stereotypes. Denying knowledge means denying opportunity, which goes against the intrinsic role of the school. For Oliveira (2009, p.44),

‘[...] teaching foreign languages to underprivileged children can contribute to make them better off. If, on the other hand, they are denied this knowledge, it is the same as telling them that they should remain underprivileged, and that they do not deserve a different fate [...]’.

Schools must not be a place that segregate students, but represent opportunities and possibilities. Students must recognize that through education they have the possibility to ascend socially. Despite the difficulties and students’ distrust, schooling and language learning must represent the opportunity they need to change and grow. As mentioned previously, access to knowledge and information has more barriers nowadays, even though the world is open for all.

In this view, ‘educators are contributing to bring together cultures and, consequently, to build a more human world where everyone can have access to knowledge’ (OLIVEIRA, 2009, p. 46). Students from public schools must recognize the role that English plays in their own lives. Even if, at first, it does not represent an actual opportunity to interact, it must represent a tool that allows individuals to develop intellectually and ascend professionally, as this potential is already recognized.

Paiva (2000, p. 27) discusses this question reminding us that the arguments in favor of the view that teaching English is not socially justified are as follows: just a few students will have the opportunity to travel to other countries; and due to geographical limitations there is no 'opportunity for interaction with speakers of other languages, except for Spanish, as some states are close to Spanish speaking countries'.

Paiva calls this preconception 'neighbors' myth'. She also clarifies that 'The fact that we neighbor countries where this or that language is spoken does not guarantee that interaction will take place'. She continues by saying that in various European countries 'tourism is also a privilege of certain social classes, but this does not prevent less privileged classes from learning foreign languages'.

Oliveira (2009, p.48) also defends that 'any international language will influence the economy and culture. Depriving a country from English is the same as taking away its access to penicillin [...]'. English must not be considered unnecessary in public schools' curriculum under the justification that it is not useful simply

because learners do not have the opportunity to use it.

Bruner (1977, apud MOITA LOPES, 2002, p.131) says that 'learning is not supposed to just lead us somewhere; it must help us to advance without too many difficulties'. Thus, linguistic skills in English must be considered as a tool, a 'bridge' that will create various opportunities to learners as opposed to only a tool for interaction.

4 METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

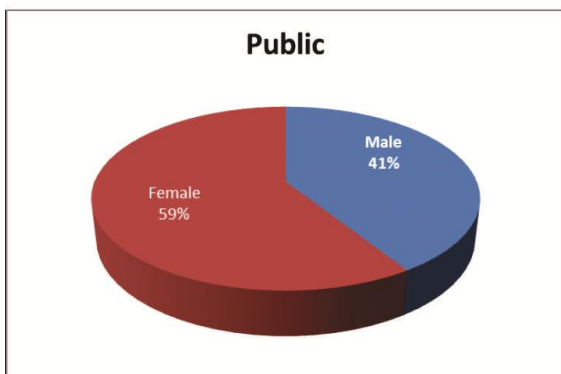
This study sought to achieve its goals through a survey of qualitative and quantitative basis. Given that this research, as stated earlier in the introduction, is divided into two parts, the quantitative data was taken into consideration in this article so that the sample allows us to identify the main objective of this work, which is to present an overview of the teaching and learning process of English in high schools in Gurupi –Tocantins.

For this research students from 3 public high schools from Gurupi were interviewed, totaling 90 interviewees. The choice to work with open questionnaires was made so that the answers could also be justified as they will be used in the second part of this

research. The students interviewed were in their 1st high school year at the time of data generation, which happened during the second semester of the school year in 2013.

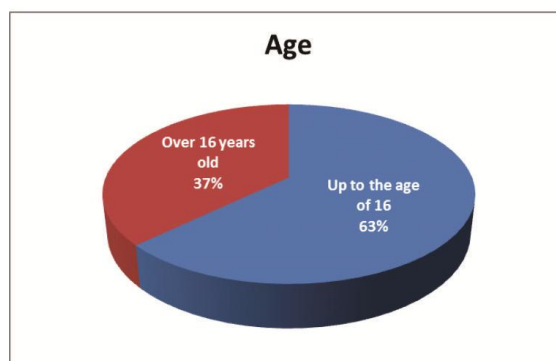
At the time of this first contact, the researchers wanted to perceive how the students see the English Language as a Foreign Language in the school environment. The answers were justified, but only the percentage was showed in the graphs. The questionnaires showed the following results:

Graphic 1 - Among the researched public, 59% was female and 41% male.



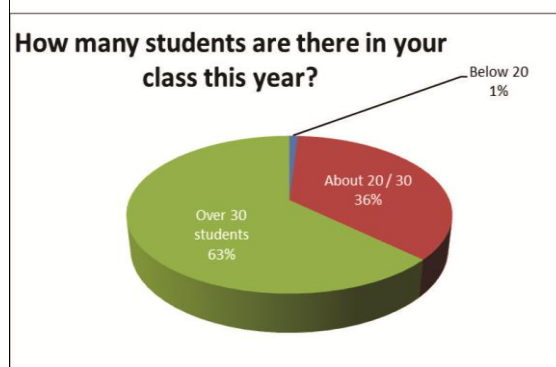
Primary data (2013)

Graphic 2 – 63% of the students were aged up to 16 and 37% were aged over 16 years old.



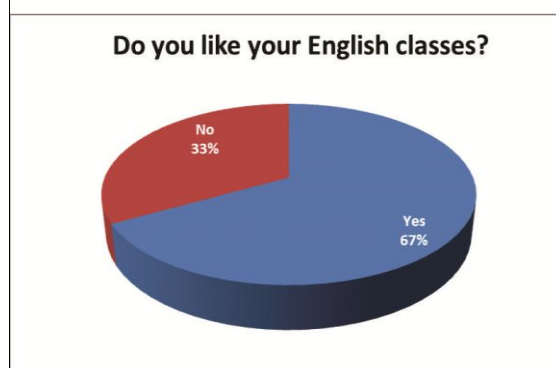
Primary data (2013)

Graphic 3 – The number of students per classroom is over the ideal and the teaching/learning process is unsatisfactory



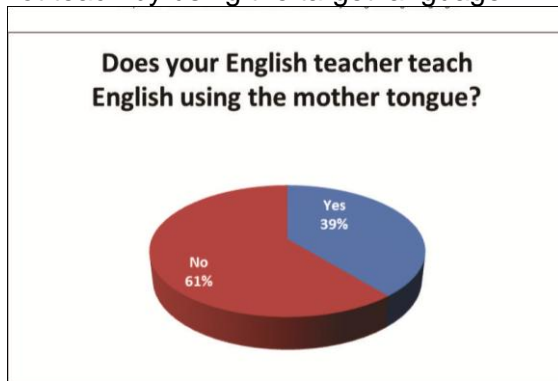
Primary data (2013)

Graphic 4 – 67% of the students said they like English classes and 33% said they do not like them



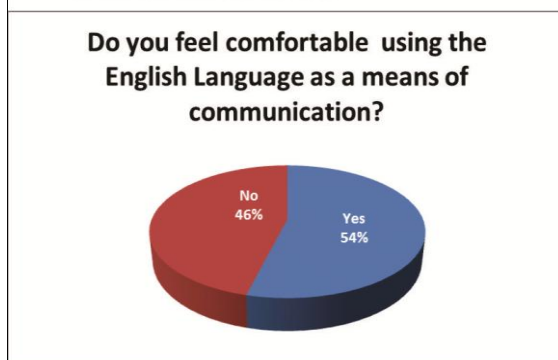
Primary data (2013)

Graphic 5 – 61% stated their teachers do not teach by using the target language



Primary data (2013)

Graphic 6 – 54% of the students answered they feel comfortable by using the English Language as a means of communication and 46% do not feel so comfortable



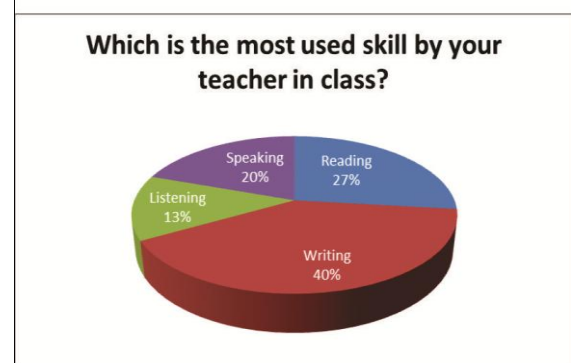
Primary data (2013)

Graphic 7 – 98% said it is important to learn a second language



Primary data (2013)

Graphic 8 – The most used skill, according to 40% of the students is writing, 27% said it is reading, 20% speaking and 13% listening



Primary data (2013)

5 DISCUSSION AND CLOSING REMARKS

Foreign language teaching in Brazil has always been for the elite. To a certain extent, our educational system has proved to be incapable of providing good quality foreign language teaching. The English Language is integrated in the area of Languages, Codes and Technologies, which includes; Portuguese Language, Arts, Physical Education and Foreign Languages, all forming part of the most basic content taught at secondary education level. As a foreign language, English becomes a binding part of the essential knowledge that allows students to learn about another culture.

The importance of English in communication and the globalized world as well as the demands of the

job market, which is under the influence of modernization, leads people, in general, to become proficient in it. It is understood that each person must consider their expectations and the benefits that learning a new language could add to their curriculum.

Over the last few years, the Brazilian educational system has undergone a great transformation. The main objective of such transformation is to improve the quality of education for youngsters and adults considering the need to be prepared for the globalized world. The introduction of the Internet, the instant exchange of information, increased competitiveness and a feeling of uncertainty in relation to the future, has caused people to change the way they behave.

The process of acquiring knowledge has changed incredibly due to new technology and consequently the school curriculum had to adapt and change its structure. Nowadays, the aim is to provide good quality teaching, although there are teachers that still go to the classroom as if the secondary education system has not changed, meaning they continue to prioritize quantity by teaching grammar without

context and turning their backs on the changes that are occurring.

In terms of English language, teachers must have in mind that teaching means to create learning conditions that enable the development of linguistic competences and abilities. Brazilian teachers face the challenge to change their attitude towards their students, which causes fear and insecurity as these changes imply an increase in working hours due to the methods and resources to be used at school.

And, finally it was also noticed by this study that motivation is a current issue in the classroom and undoubtedly important in the current Brazilian education system, where students are not interested in traditional lessons and teachers and scholars are constantly concerned about the lack of interest in the school environment.

This research addresses factors that influence students' lack of motivation and the barriers it creates, greatly affecting the teaching-learning process by preventing it from happening satisfactorily. Within this context where there are barriers to the teaching and learning process, the teachers' role and their teaching

practices are highlighted as they are constantly seeking good results. We can assume that teachers must be aware of their students' needs in order to teach a motivating lesson. It is implicit that teachers need to reflect upon and analyze their work with commitment and dedication.

The importance of new motivating methods to improve the results achieved in the classroom and the need for a friendly relationship between students and teachers can be perceived. The great value of motivation in the classroom is highlighted by educators and scholars

as the educational scenario in Brazil depends on these students' training, as they will be the future generations' educators.

Nowadays, a number of teachers have already realized that foreign languages are a means of communication that give access to information. This can already be seen through lessons with a more communicative approach. The 'seeds' we need to change our educational system have already been sowed, but it will take time for them to grow and produce some fruit.

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