

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT SCHOOLS: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Even though English has been taught for a long time in Brazilian public schools, Brazilian students are far from achieving proficiency level. Several complaints are made by students when it comes to how in-school English lessons work. On the other hand, we have witnessed a significant difference in students from Switzerland, a European country which also does not have English as an official language and has it taught at schools. This study aims at finding out the reason for the apparent inefficiency in English language learning in Brazilian public schools. A comparative study was conducted in which students from both Brazil and Switzerland answered questions about the English classes they have at school. Besides that, research on the language context in both countries was made, so that from those facts we can investigate the reason for success in the European country and what can we learn from it.

Keywords: English Proficiency. Language Teaching. Education. Comparison.

DESAFIOS E LIMITAÇÕES DO ENSINO DE LÍNGUA INGLESA NAS ESCOLAS: Um Estudo Comparativo

Resumo

Embora o inglês tenha sido ensinado em escolas públicas brasileiras por muito tempo, alunos brasileiros encontram-se longe de alcançar proficiência. Diversas reclamações são feitas por estudantes quando se trata de como as aulas escolares de inglês funcionam. Por outro lado, presenciamos uma diferença significativa em alunos da Suíça, país europeu que tampouco tem o inglês como idioma oficial e o ensina nas escolas. O presente artigo objetiva descobrir a razão para a aparente ineficiência na aprendizagem de língua inglesa nas escolas públicas brasileiras. Um estudo comparativo foi conduzido no qual alunos de ambos os países responderam perguntas sobre as aulas de inglês que tiveram na escola. Além disso, uma pesquisa sobre o contexto da língua em ambos os países foi feita, para que a partir disso possamos

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investigar a razão do sucesso no país europeu e o que podemos aprender através dele.

Palavras-chave: Proficiência em Inglês. Ensino de Idiomas. Educação. Comparação.

Introduction

The search for mastering English language by non-native speakers is from long ago. English has been used as *lingua franca* in several political, business, tourism, and academic departments. Therefore, being proficient in it is of great advantage. By observing foreign language teaching in Brazilian schools, it is noticed that at the end of high school we are not able to find students who have become fluent at English, even though they have studied the language since the very beginning of their academic lives.

In a conversation with other students who are also non-native speakers of English and live in Switzerland (a country where English is not an official language, similarly to Brazil) and have just finished high school, a considerable difference is noticed in proficiency levels when compared to Brazilian students. This fact led us to wonder which strategies used by those schools could be applied in Brazil in order to help us have students who are also proficient in English. Is there any fault in English teaching? What can we learn from the schools with positive results?

English as a foreign language has been for years one of the mandatory school subjects in Brazil, but today many students leave school with the wrong conception about learning English. During their school years students stop believing that they can learn the language at school and blame the education. They also leave school with the idea that only those who can afford going to a private language institute have better chances of learning the language.

From that assumption, we realize the need for investigating the reason for depreciating and discrediting foreign language teaching in Brazilian public schools, and comparing it to another country might be of great help. Such comparative study on

English language teaching (ELT) in schools of a country which does not have English as an official language and has achieved success in the process can bring substantial advantages to Brazilian schools. It will result in increment of qualified students for the national job market and the appreciation of ELT in schools around the country. Such method could be used in Brazilian schools.

The main goal of this research is to acknowledge the difference in ELT between schools from two countries where English is not an official language, Brazil and Switzerland, aiming at the improvement in language teaching and student proficiency. The specific goals are to identify the foreign language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing - in Brazilian and Swiss schools, recognize what communication level their classes are at, in order to grasp the difference in each way of teaching, and find out the reason for success.

This paper will be developed in six sections. In the first section a brief discussion about whether there is or is not a best teaching method will be carried out and advance into the post method concept. In the second section we are going to describe a general panorama on Brazilian education, including its regulations and history of foreign language teaching in the country with the intent to find out if there is any cause for the current low proficiency levels in English. The third section will approach the way ELT is seen and carried through in Brazilian public schools. Following, the fourth section will be about ELT in Switzerland including at what level English is present in the country. The purpose will be to investigate the cause of the high proficiency levels in English in the country chosen for this comparative study. Next, the second to last section will be the comparison itself, in which questions were asked to students from both countries regarding the kind of lessons they had at school. Finally, in the conclusion, the results of the comparison will be analyzed and proposals for the development of ELT in Brazil will be made.

What makes a fluent speaker? Is there a right method for it?

It is almost impossible to discuss ELT and not talk about method. Especially in Brazil, a country in which private language institutions are everywhere, what everyone asks before enrolling to one of them is: "what method do you use?". This concept has been discussed since the 19th century, when teachers first started to bundle theoretical principles, techniques, and teacher-student behavior to what we call method. To throw some light on it let us take Richards and Rogers (1994) who defined method as set of determined objectives, a syllabus, and a content, in which the roles of teachers, learners, and instructional materials are specified. According to the authors a method is theoretically related to an approach, it is organized in a specific design, and it is put into practice in a procedure (p. 14-16).

Since the first methods arose, many discussions about the "best" way to teach a foreign language have come up. Several methods have come and gone, some more structuralist, others more interactionist. Some more behaviorist while others more constructivist. This paper will not go over each one of them, but something we could observe quite clearly is that they have all once claimed to be the best English teaching methodology. Oliveira (2014) shows that in his work "Methods for English Teaching" (cf. Oliveira, 2014, p. 72-139) .

However, today we find ourselves in a post method era. Brown (2007) shows us that all those methods are too limited or too productive to apply to a wide range of students on a large scale of situational contexts. We can see then that there are no quick recipes nor easy methods to guarantee success, for every learner is unique and so is every teacher. Every teacher-learner relationship is unique. Therefore, what teachers do need is to understand the peculiarities of each of those contexts and relationships, for then wisely make use of an eclectic approach, based on principles of second language teaching (p.17-18).

In addition to that, Oliveira (2014) shows us that in this post method era a common misconception is to believe that any classroom decision fits in the concept of post method or Eclectic Method. What is needed, according to him, is to know and understand different methods so that from them, teachers can select the language conception, techniques, types of activities and teacher/student roles that are useful for

the teaching context they are in. The author also stresses that teachers should have the pedagogical obligation to know certain teaching methods even if it is to take the decision of not using a specific one. (p. 205-206)

We can conclude then, that when it comes to becoming a fluent speaker, there is not *one* method which is the best of all. Methods work differently on different kinds of people. However, we realize that teacher preparation will play a very important role, because they will be the ones making the decisions, thus, pedagogical choices, on how to teach based on the different methods studied.

In Almeida (2009), Celani puts it well when she reinforces that there are different possibilities for method applicability. On the other hand, she shows us that there are teachers who prefer using something that does not require much of them, like reproducing a "recipe":

Today we are in an era that experts call post method. We talk about principles and different possibilities to apply them. In a way, when it comes to teacher training, we face more challenges in this situation, as it is much easier to take a recipe and apply it. Nowadays we depend on the teacher's analysis of what to do in light of the reality in which their students are inserted in. (Almeida, 2009)

However, if this decision is made without considering the students' previous knowledge and the context they are in, this could be quite a problem for their language acquisition. We will see then in the next section a general panorama of ELT in Brazil in order to find out if this is the reason for the low proficiency levels found in Brazilian students.

A general overlook of elt in brazil

The relevance of speaking English is so largely known that it is even redundant to talk about it in such a globalized world we live in. Many countries around ours invest in English Language Teaching. In Brazil the language has being studied for several years

in most schools around the country. Nevertheless, a 2017 study entitled English Language Learning in Latin America, conducted by The Inter-American Dialogue, shows that Brazil is not a country which achieves satisfactory indicators in terms of the quality of teaching the language and that the country still has a long way to go when it comes to learning targets, learning system and above all, teacher training (Cronquist and Fiszbein, 2017).

Regulations

The ELT in Brazil is regulated by several instances on a highly uncentered way. The main references are the Federal Constitution, the Law of Directives and Bases (LDB), the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs), State and Municipality Curricula, and currently the Common National Curricular Basis (BNCC) which has been implemented throughout Brazil since 2018 with a deadline for full use in schools until 2020.

The Federal Constitution ensures Education for all but does not regulate it. This role belongs to The Law on Education Directives and Bases, which is the main educational structure regulator in the country. The National Curriculum Parameters, in turn, are guidelines that provide orientation to the state and municipality education departments concerning which content will be offered on each subject and school year. On the federal level there is also a public policy named National Policy for Textbooks that offers textbooks of all subjects for all students from public schools in every school year. The Common National Curricular Basis aims at regulating education in Brazil. Its purpose is to define the essential skills which every student, throughout Brazil, will be expected to acquire during the years of basic education.

Foreign languages have been for more than a century one of the school subjects in Brazil. They began being taught in 1855 and remained mandatory school subjects until the first version of the LDB was released in 1961 by president João Goulart. They were taught through the Grammar Translation Method or Direct Method. Among the

languages taught were Spanish, German, French, English, Italian, Greek and Latin. They went through many changes over the years regarding their workload and obligation but English and French were the only ones which never stopped being mandatory. Nevertheless, the 1961 Education Directives and Bases Law placed foreign languages as optional or complementary activities, undermining the importance of learning a foreign language. They remained so for 35 years. In 1996 a change in the Education Directives and Bases Law decided that at least one foreign language must be taught and the decision of which one to be taught would be on the schools or state/municipality education departments. However, this fact would still not favor foreign language teaching. It would still leave English on a less valued position in the school and in the general Brazilian education scenario since there was not a national policy for the subject. It was only in 2017 that English was again placed as a mandatory subject. (Quevedo-Camargo and Silva 2017 p. 2-7)

Foreign Language Teaching Historical Panorama in Brazil³

Year	Fact	Consequences
1855	Foreign Languages began being taught in Brazil.	French, English and German – mandatory for 3 years of High School; Greek and Latin – mandatory for 1 year;

³ This is a partial reproduction of a table by Quevedo-Camargo and Silva (2017).

		Italian and German – Optional for 1 year.
1915	Subject cutback in the mandatory curriculum	Greek is taken out. Latin + 2 mandatory languages remain (French + English or German)
1931	Francisco Campos Reform	Latin workload is reduced.
1941	Capanema Reform	Elementary School (4 years) and High School (3 years – Traditional and Scientific ⁴); 35 hours/week for foreign language teaching. French mandatory in the four elementary school years and in the two first years of high school; English mandatory from the second elementary school year and on the two first years of high school. Spanish mandatory for the first

⁴ For a while, there were two different possibilities for High School education in Brazil, Traditional and Scientific. The first would focus on human sciences while the latter would focus on mathematical sciences.

		year of high school. Latin is kept for both traditional and scientific high school. Greek is kept for traditional high school.
1961	LDB	Foreign Languages become optional or complementary activities
1996	New LDB	At least one foreign language must be taught from grade 5 to the end of high school. The choice is up to the school.
1998	Elementary School PCNs	Oral practice ability is included in the curriculum
2000	High School PCNs	The importance of learning a language in its the social context is emphasized.
2017	Law 13.415/17	English becomes mandatory from grade 6 on.

This situation led many researchers to understand why English teaching in Brazilian schools was not effective. Those 35 years when foreign language teaching was fully optional and the following 21 years when English could be taught at schools

or be replaced by any other foreign language, helped to contribute to the low proficiency levels found in Brazilian students.

The British Council (2015) states that this situation left ELT in a very marginal role on the school curriculum and that the fact the language was kept on the diversified part of the curriculum for many years made the subject less regulated than the others, hardly ever setting a standard to be followed in the classroom. This way, it was treated as a complementary activity inside the schools, which caused the language to have a less important role, sustaining its depreciation (p.7).

Another aspect mentioned on the previous study is the difficulty to measure teaching on a national level due to the lack of standardization in teaching. Such fact makes it difficult to implement proficiency indicator exams for English such as IDEP is for Portuguese and SAEB is for mathematics. Although there is an exam called ENEM that students from all over Brazil take at the end of high school, which covers all school subjects, it is not enough to measure English levels in Brazil because there are only 5 questions which are not even mandatory (students can choose Spanish if desired) The inexistence of such indicators makes it harder to draw strategies to improve teaching. (p.8)

Besides that, when it comes to classroom studies, the National Policy for Textbooks only included English in 2011. Before that, teachers had to relate to their own experiences to prepare classroom material for students. They would try to prepare some handouts for students to photocopy but most of the students could not afford it, which would leave them with board centered classes.

We can see then that those 56 years where English was optional totally reflected on the school and therefore students' perspective of English as non-official activity.

How elt is seen inside schools

According to the British Council (2017), Baghin-Spinelli indicates that English is mainly learned in Brazil when students go to optional private courses. Her research

states that 87% of middle-class Brazilians have attended a language course (p.19). This fact shows us that Brazilian people do acknowledge the importance of learning the language. In fact, the online magazine HELB (2007) shows us quite a paradox when it mentions that the estimation for speaking English increased while the LDB took out the ELT obligatoriness.

The 1998 National Curricular Parameters (Brasil, 1998) even recognizes such estimation for private language institutions over in-school learning:

Although society holds foreign language in high regard, as subjects of learning they are regarded as extracurricular activities. The proliferation of private courses is clear evidence of this. The teaching of foreign languages as of other subjects, is a function of the school, and it is here that it should take place (BRASIL, 1998, p.19).

Such findings show us that Brazilian people do not regard school as the place to learn a foreign language and as a result many of them enroll to a private language institution. A critical reading of the English language component of the Common National Curriculum Basis made by the British Council mentioned Finard (2014) who observed that the existence of such courses actually increases the social divide, since only more privileged classes can afford them.

We can assume then that the LDB lack of obligation on ELT in Brazilian public schools was a large step back in foreign language development in Brazil. According to HELB (2019) although members of society recognize the importance of learning English, the educational policies do not assure quality on its teaching in our schools, and that on the search for this quality the more privileged classes search for private language institutions or private teachers, but the less privileged ones are left without this option.

Is that why students do not learn English at school? Even after being legally included in the curriculum and so many years of classroom instruction. The answer to this question leads us to some facts that will be discussed next.

The Classroom Reality

Lampariello (2019) discusses reasons why students do not learn English at schools. An interview conducted with a group of students at a local High School during this study confirmed his perspective. Here we will discuss five of the reasons given by Lampariello for why students find in-school language learning difficult or ineffective.

Students are passive participants

Most students are passive in their language classes. They consider English classes as a subject as any other, complain and even demonstrate fear when the teacher uses the target language. They also make little or no effort for participation, which we strongly believe is a reflex of teacher-centered classes - criticized by Richards where teachers are seen as presenters of information rather than facilitators - which they had for many years, some of them still face it.

4.1.2 Languages are Treated as a Subject to Study, Not as a Skill to Acquire - In school, English is treated in the same way knowledge-based subjects like history, geography and biology are treated. This way they fall into the trap of thinking they can learn it in the same way, says Lampariello. However, languages are not like these subjects, which can mostly be studied and grasped from textbooks. To learn a second language is to have a skill developed. Therefore, if a student is unaware that a language is a skill, and instead treats it the exact same way of his other school subjects, the process may have a very negative impact in his learning path.

4.1.3 Students are forced to use tedious materials - although students are given textbooks for free by the National Policy for Textbooks, the material has revealed itself to be mechanical and unattractive. Moreover, 42% out of the 1.269 teaches

interviewed on CDE Plan survey mentioned that the books present a content too advanced for the student's level of English (British Council 2015, p. 15). Even so, the teachers themselves have said they cannot use the book in classes because it does not meet the minimum curriculum needs. Lampariello mentions in his article that the material one uses to learn, at least in the first initial phases of language learning, plays an extremely important role in their eventual success. If the book is monotonous and inefficient, it risks impacting negatively even the most well-intentioned and enthusiastic learner.

4.1.4 Students Rarely Use the Language to Communicate - To every student asked during this study if they use English in their classes to talk to friend, even if with basic sentences or commands, the answer was "no". Richards and Rodgers (1994) defend that activities that involve real communication promote learning (p.72). We've noticed that students learn the grammar but do not put it into practice, and in many cases sadly due to unprepared teachers. This teaching goes to the very opposite of one with communicative purposes, which we can clearly observe in Oliveira (2014) who tells us that a teacher should not teach grammar just for the sake of it, but to help students develop their communicative competence, their capacity of performing linguistic functions such as convincing, inviting, informing, and threatening, among others. Grammar is important, but as a means of achieving a communicative end. (p.151)

4.1.5 Students learn within a competitive learning environment – Schools systems today have been set up around competitiveness and students study to pass their exams, get a good grade and recover the low ones. Which goes back to our discussion about seeing English as any other subject they have to worry about. One's mindset towards language learning has a huge impact on the way we engage, ask for information, and improve our skills. Therefore, classes should focus on a cooperative rather than competitive environment, that in fact is one the basic principles of a communicative approach.

We can see then that students are aware of the importance of learning English but do not see school as the place to learn it. They are passive participants and treat English classes as any other subject that does not involve language and skill

development. Moreover, even the schools themselves treat English as one more subject, which we can understand as a reflex of years of having the language as a complementary activity. And we can see this conception goes on until today, “The English classes are the first to be canceled for folklore dance rehearsal” says Nina Coutinho, English language headmaster for the British Council (Jareta, 2015).

The truth is little effort is made in Brazil to make students leave their Basic Education in public schools being able to communicate in English. “Foreign Language was never a concern for the National Directives” says Dirce Charara Monteiro, post-graduation professor on school education in UNESP Araraquara and in Centro Universitario de Araraquara (UniAra). According to her there is an institutional problem which associates inappropriate teacher training and class distribution (id.ibid).

4.2 Teacher Training

Weak academic training and lack of lifelong learning programs are two enormous challenges faced by Brazilian teachers in ELT. Antonieta Celani, who founded in 1970 the first Post-Graduation Program on Applied Linguistics in Brazil, points out in Almeida (2009) that one of the problems is the double major in Portuguese and English, because there is not enough time to manage both. Besides that, there are many universities without qualified faculty, who end up teaching grammar-based programs. The ideal situation, says Celani, is a program which offers language practice in many different ways, and not just recipes, as well as reflective thinking so the teacher is prepared to observe and reflect on his own teaching practice (Almeida, 2009).

Another very important aspect concerning poor academic training is the small amount or absence of linguistic theory. Oliveira (2014) states that lack of theoretical knowledge causes a huge impact on classroom management, for it leads the teacher to take didactic and pedagogical decisions without having a theoretical foundation to guarantee a logic for this decision making. The author shows us that many classroom decisions are taken based on intuition and experience, which is reasonable, but it should not be the only aspect for teachers to rely on. (p.22)

From his studies we can also observe the reflective thinking mentioned previously. Oliveira (2014) based upon Jack Richards tells us that in order to have teachers who reflect and auto evaluate themselves, a certain amount of theory and technical learning is needed. This knowledge will make them much more prepared for conscious decision making, that totally influence on their classroom practice and personal reflection. (p.22)

It is impossible to discuss language teaching and not talk about language proficiency. Cronquist and Fiszbein (2017) point out that Brazil does not set proficiency requirements for English teachers at a national level and does not conduct a national proficiency assessment of its teachers. In addition, The IBGE 2013 school census found that only 33% of English teachers had taken proficiency tests. Moreover, in an article published by Ferreira (2018), Silvia Donnini shows us that only about 15% of public-school teachers are fluent (Ferreira, 2018).

Now we can understand why grammar and translation are so frequently taught in Brazilian elementary and high schools. The average Brazilian English teacher does not speak the language even after being a college graduate. Oliveira (2010) shows us that The Ministry of Education is not unaware of this fact. According to him, the fact that the Ministry of Education through the National Curricular Parameters recommends reading as the most important competence is because teachers in general do not speak the language fluently (2010, p. 42-43).

In the matter of document analysis, a critical reading of the EL component of version 3 of the Common National Curricular Basis conducted by the British Council showed us many inconsistencies between theoretical premises and content. The education regulator document (Brazil, 2017) has as one of its principles to overcome the radical fragmentation of knowledge, encourage students to apply it in real life situations, prioritize the student's learning process and emphasize the importance of context to make sense of what is learned (p.17). However, the study (British Council, 2017) shows us that "the teaching guidelines presented are extremely fragmented and do not address the use of language within a formative context" (p.7). This makes us wonder how this purpose could be achieved. By looking at the chart named

“Distribution of abilities in the segments of the EL component” (p.8) we can see that the Linguistic and Grammar knowledge unit is the most recommended section. This leads to an approach to language as a set of rules to be learned and not as an instrument of communication. This fact reinforces the mechanical and highly structural way of teaching. So how can we expect teachers to prioritize conversation and cultural immersion rather than grammar when they come across such an inconsistent document in its core? Therefore, if we want our classes to change, we not only have to invest on teacher training but also put on some effort to overcome being just one more document proposing ideals for ELT that will not be met.

Inadequate teaching methods, poorly trained teachers, and little contact with English during school years are elements that cause a vicious circle that continues to persist the low ratings and problems with ELT in Brazil. A large quantity of teachers who do not speak the language and who therefore limit their teaching to a few practices they are sure of is found. In general, the content is grammar and vocabulary which are taught in isolation and in a way that does not require skill development. This way we see the urgency of having knowledge and proficiency goals established for both students and teachers. Ferreira (2018) states that for this to change a reestablishment of university curricula is imperative: “In Brazil, teacher training in general is very theoretical and less focused on conversation and proficiency. That does not correspond to the classroom practical demand, which is a communicative approach.” She goes on showing the need for a curriculum review in the university teaching courses to solve this very common issue and the fact that English teachers are not proficient speakers, which deprives the student of a conversation reference (Ferreira, 2018).

English in Switzerland

Along this study, while talking to Brazilian students and reading about public school teachers’ experiences, something often mentioned was the lack of opportunities to practice English outside school. Many of the Brazilian students interviewed for this

study mentioned watching series, playing video games, and listening to songs in English. However, they all mentioned having very few or no chances at all to speak English on their daily routine, which means there is no room for formal or informal conversation practice around them unless they go to a private language institution, and even those who can afford such courses do not have opportunities to speak English outside their classrooms, for example, with strangers. Of course, there are jobs which require speaking English, but our point here is the amount of English around them daily and different opportunities to make use of the language.

Brown (2007) shows us three different contexts for learning English. The first one is learning English within a country where English is spoken natively (i.e., a Spanish speaker learning English in London). The second one is learning English in one's own culture with few immediate opportunities to use the language within the environment of that culture (for example, a Guatemalan learning English in Guatemala). Those two scenarios are quite a paradox, and they are commonly distinguished as ESL (in the first case) and EFL (in the second case) However, Brown shows us a third case, which is learning English in a country where the language is already accepted and largely used for education, government or business within the country. In this case, English has no official status but occupies such a high profile that every educated person can communicate effectively with a native English speaker, which is the case of the country chosen for this comparative study. (p. 205)

Switzerland has four official languages, which are German, Italian, French and Romansh. Surprisingly, a 2015 article entitled Young Multicultural Swiss Prefer English, published on Le News magazine based on the Swiss Federal Surveys for Adolescents, shows us a great inconsistency when it comes to speaking the national languages.

The article indicates that only 28.2% of young people in high school in French-speaking Switzerland speak German. On the German-speaking side, only 40.6% of the same group speak French, still far from a majority. Moreover, only 11.8% of French and Italian speaking Swiss reach C1 or C2 level in German. While the percentage of young Swiss-Germans and Swiss-Italians reaching the same level in French is a small

scale of 9.4%. Italian, on its turn, reaches a better fare, 20% speak advanced Italian as an additional language.

However, when it comes to speaking English, the survey shows us that the situation is quite the opposite. 73.8% of the same high school crowd on the French-speaking side speak English, along with 87.5% of their Swiss-German peers. The percentage nationwide is 85.21.1% speaking English to C1 or C2 level. Which shows us quite a preference for English language over the national ones.

Tognina (2002) states that English is by far the most spoken foreign language in Switzerland and that it might even become the main foreign language taught in many of their schools. Zürich Canton, for instance, made this decision in 2000. Such fact, according to her, worries many people, particularly in the French- and Italian-speaking areas of the country, which fear this could break Swiss national identity.

The fact is, English is widely present in the Swiss society. In some professions and in big Swiss companies such as UBS, Swisscom, and Novartis, English is already used for internal exchanges. On a talk for this study, a Swiss citizen born in Brazil, raised, and educated in Switzerland mentioned having had constant contact with English language in her work environment even though she did not have a high position in the company she worked at.

Dürmüller (2019) from the University of Bern, confirms that English is present in Switzerland to a level that has elicited defensive measures by those who fear losing the "true" culture of their country and the jeopardy of the National Languages. According to him, the language has moved from the status of foreign language to the status of an additional language with *lingua franca* functions.

Dürmüller also mentions that English was officially admitted L3 position in the school's language repertoire, however, unofficially it has won the L2 position among the young ones. Moreover, he also stated that English is very naturally used within universities for presentations, reports, and discussions. English is said to be used without reservation, whenever there is a need to participate in the international scientific discussions. (Ibid 2019)

We can see then that English has acquired a very prominent position in Switzerland's language repertoire, with a communicative function for the Swiss people themselves. Such relevance and use of the language of globalization is very different from our country. We could see that Swiss students are much more familiar and have way more real and meaningful contact with English than ours. This could be a key fact to their proficiency levels compared to the results found in Brazil during this study.

When it comes to the countries, an indicator of the difference in proficiency levels can be observed in the eight edition of the EF English Proficiency Index (2019), said to be the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills. A total of 88 countries were ranked and classified in proficiency levels as Very High, High, Moderate, Low and Very Low. Switzerland was ranked 15th, achieving High proficiency. Only 3 positions bellow Very High. On the other hand, Brazil was ranked 53rd position, achieving Low proficiency and 9 positions bellow moderate level. (EF, 2019 p. 2)

This fact shows us that we certainly have a long way to go when it comes to English proficiency. We will see next what can we learn from this comparative study.

Comparison

During this study, some interviews were conducted with students from both countries. In such interviews, students were asked to describe their English classes regarding the kind of activities they used have, the use of the target language, the textbook used, whether they would practice conversation, and other aspects. In this section we are going to summarize what we found out from those talks.

A university freshman born in the German part of Switzerland, told us a little (personal communication) about the English classes he had during Elementary and High School years. He told us that although he didn't see his language classes as great and special, he was able to achieve a satisfactory proficiency level. According to the student, the educational goal in Switzerland is for students to finish the ninth grade of Elementary School speaking English at B1 level. He believes this goal is achievable because students have a lot of practice on conversations for specific purposes. The

classes were all in English and besides having a lot of conversation and lessons on the textbook English File by Oxford University Press, the teacher would also read literature books for them. Some of the books mentioned were **The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde** (by Robert Louis Stevenson) and **Of Mice and Men** (by John Steinbeck). When it came to High School, he mentioned that the educational goal is for students to reach B2 to C1 level by the end of it. However, not everyone reaches such levels because some of them do not go to High School, which is not mandatory in Switzerland. But for those who go to High School as he did, the proficiency level was also said to be quite achievable. Besides that, he told us students have chances to take proficiency tests and that the schools themselves offer preparatory lessons for such exams. Reading was also told to be present in classes during High School years, but this time the teacher would read to more recent authors like John Green and promote conversations about the book. Moreover, there was conversation practice on other topics given by the teacher such as current affairs. Any of those teachers were native speakers of English.

When asked about learning English outside regular School, the participant said he has not heard of anyone who went to a private institution to learn the language. However, there are many students who travel on exchange programs during or after their school education for English practice.

Another three Swiss young people were interviewed, one also from the German speaking part and the two others from the Italian part of the country. The second German-speaker reported very similar things, such as discussions on current topics and reading books, but this time the literature books mentioned were **Girl with a Pearl Earring** (by Tracy Chevalier), **The Woman Who Walks Into Doors** (by Roddy Doyle) and **Miss Marple Series** (by Agatha Christie). The interviewee, differently from the first student, had both native and non-native speakers of English as teachers.

As for the two students from the Italian speaking part of Switzerland, the first of them said that for him, the main goal of his English classes was to teach the language with solid bases. He was only allowed to use the target language during classes, and he felt that at the end of High School he could interact with others in English and that

the school, linguistically speaking, was able to prepare him for spending holidays abroad at least. The last participant also talked about conversation in the classroom, and she told us she was allowed to practice conversation in pairs or small groups. Something she mentioned that the others did not was that she could tell the lessons and themes got more difficult as they went on. Something else that was different, is that she attended an Art School rather than a regular High School after Elementary School, so her English hours were reduced. As for her teachers, she did not think all of them were native speakers, but they certainly had relatives in England or had lived there for a while. She concluded by saying that she believes to have acquired enough English level to talk to someone, understand them and be understood with basic sentences, which proves us that students do get from A2 to B1 level at least at the end of Elementary Education.

As for the Brazilian results, firstly three students from the second year of High School, each from a different classroom from the same public school were interviewed. They all considered Reading and Writing to be the most practiced competences. They said their classes are very theoretical and grammar centered. When it comes to textbook, they said it is not used. The teacher brings the activities on worksheets or writes them on the board for students to copy. When we asked teachers about the textbook, two different teachers told us they don't use it because the book offered doesn't match the minimum curriculum demanded from the State Education Department. One of these students told us that the classes help him understand English, but not speak it. None of them think the English classes they have had so far, in their regular school education, could enable them to have basic conversations with a foreigner in English.

Three other Brazilians were interviewed for this study. A teenager in the first year of a different public high school and two young adults, both on their twenties. The teenager told us that she has had classes with the same teacher for two years and that the textbook has never been used. Her classes are also very theoretical, and she feels there is too much emphasis on grammar rules, thus, as she told us, writing is the most practiced competence during classes. The student also said that interaction and

speaking are not part of the lessons. She feels her English classes do not enable her to talk to someone in English nor to travel abroad because although they learn the rules and language structure, it is never inside a context, so she does not know how to apply such rules for a conversation.

As for the young adults, the first one, a female university student, told us her classes were highly centered on the board and that she missed more interesting activities. The second one, a self-employed male, described his classes as very superficial ones. He feels students could not have a dialogue in English because the lessons were too simple for them to build conversations on. The only moments they spoke the target language was for asking permission to use the restroom, which they learned as a sentence to be memorized. Translation activities was said to be present in his school lessons.

Final considerations

There were many things we could learn from this comparative study. One of the things we strongly believe, regarding Swiss student's success in English proficiency, is the larger exposure to the language in their daily routines, especially in some regions of the country, like Zurich. They have significantly more meaningful contact with the language than our students. The fact that plays a huge role is the type of lessons they have. We can realize how much conversation in a communicative context is present in their lessons, such as discussions on current affairs, as well as different kinds of practice, such as reading renowned literature books in English.

Neither of those was found in our student's classroom reality. Our research on ELT in Brazilian public schools indicated that teachers training is still very limited in Brazil and that there is a strong need for better qualification programs so we can make teachers more aware of 21st century ELT approaches with a higher range of activities such as we could observe in our comparison to Switzerland. The type of lessons we could see students from Switzerland have, when it comes to conversation practice, is

not different from a class Brazilian students have in a private language course, which is what we should look for in our public schools.

The positive aspects of a communicative approach, found in Swiss schools are: Language is an instrument for communication therefore it is never learned out of a context; grammar is not the most important pillar, although the teacher focuses on helping students make correct use of it; the student is not seen as an empty vessel; the main objective is to help students develop communicative competence, which is what language is really about. We can see those positive aspects found in the Swiss classroom. However, a negative aspect for its applicability in Brazil is the need of teachers who are fluent in English, which many of the articles read during this study showed us is very limited in our country.

This is actually the fact that causes our classes to be centered in writing rather than speaking. Therefore, we once again stress the importance of better programs for teachers during and after their university education in Brazil, to ensure the next generations will have a more meaningful practice in their classrooms.

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