Benefits and challenges of teaching English in Brazilian regular schools

Benefícios e desafios de ensinar inglês em escolas regulares brasileiras

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Abstract: Although the present society requires the knowledge of foreign languages, English teaching and learning are usually considered unsatisfactory in Brazilian regular schools. This article comments on the benefits of teaching English in regular schools, an aspect that sometimes is forgotten in researches that discuss language teaching in Brazilian Basic Education. It also presents some of the challenges to be faced by teachers in this context, together with a few ideas for dealing with them.
Key-words: English teaching; Regular Schools; Brazil.

Resumo: Apesar de a sociedade atual impor o conhecimento de línguas estrangeiras, o ensino e a aprendizagem de inglês em escolas regulares brasileiras são geralmente considerados insatisfatórios. Este artigo comenta sobre os benefícios de ensinar inglês em escolas regulares, aspecto por vezes esquecido em pesquisas que discutem o ensino de línguas na Educação Básica brasileira. O artigo também apresenta alguns desafios a serem superados pelos professores nesse contexto, juntamente com ideias para lidar com eles.
Palavras-chave: Ensino de inglês; Escolas Regulares; Brasil.

1 Introduction

Nowadays, most Brazilians agree that the knowledge of foreign languages is essential for the development of any subject, as it provides an expansion of the ways we interact with the world, qualifies citizens and allows international communication. In spite of this, researches like Perin (2003) and Barcelos (2007) show that English teaching and learning is usually considered unsatisfactory by parents, students and teachers both in public and in private Brazilian regular schools.

The PCNs (Brasil, 1999) indicate that foreign language learning is a citizen's right, and that linguistic education should be accessible to everyone. However, according to Fontana (2005, p.17), foreign language learning is not seen as an important element in the students' development in regular schools, since the subject does not have a privileged position in the curriculum. The author says that, in some regions of the country, foreign language is not even placed in the curriculum, and not in the context of interdisciplinarity, which is essential for global education.

This article is an attempt to show that it *is* possible to promote communicative language learning in regular schools but, in order to do that, teachers have to overcome a number of challenges. It presents some benefits of teaching foreign languages in regular schools, based

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both on my own experience as a High School teacher and on the literature, and some challenges that teachers may face in this context.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the benefits of teaching in regular schools, and shows how to take advantage of the school environment to promote interaction, interdisciplinarity and group work. Section 3 discusses the challenges of teaching English in regular schools, such as the number of students in class, discipline, heterogeneity and motivation, together with a theoretical support for each aspect and some ideas for overcoming them.

2 The benefits

This section shows that, although it is not easy to teach in regular schools, it is possible to take advantage of the school environment to promote effective language learning. Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 present some benefits of teaching English in this context and some suggestions to explore them.

2.1 Interaction

Interaction, according to Brown (2007, p.212), is the "heart of communication". It is the exchange of thoughts, feelings or ideas between two or more people, that is, the act of sending, receiving and interpreting messages in order to communicate.

There is no doubt that the great number of students in class is one of the greatest challenges for teachers in regular schools (see section 3.1). However, large classes are the perfect environment to provide opportunities for interaction, as there are always enough students for activities that involve the production of language for meaningful communication.

According to Hess (2001, p.3), it is difficult to promote interaction in very small classes, where students usually know each other, but larger groups may increase the students' interest, energy-level and linguistic output. In addition, the author says that, in large groups, we get a great variety of human resources, as there are "many cultural backgrounds, many temperaments, many world-views and values, many different experiences and many styles of learning" (p.3). Therefore, it is possible to explore these differences to prepare activities that encourage meaningful conversations, which make students learn by finding out about one another and by sharing their opinions.

The interactions inside the classroom, which are usually controlled by the teacher, may promote social actions that involve the knowledge of how to adequate the speech according to the interlocutor, which may result in changes in the students' social lives outside the school environment (Fontana 2005, p.19)

2.2 Interdisciplinarity

The term "interdisciplinarity", in this paper, refers to the interaction or dialogue between two or more disciplines (Moran 2010, p.14), which promotes an integration of knowledge from the subjects in the curriculum.

According to Brognoli, Marin and Pires (2001), interdisciplinarity and contextualization are important terms in the context of Brazilian regular schools, as they

> constitute concepts which help to construct the academic knowledge in a contextualized and less fragmented manner, leading students to a more global view of their object of study (p.71).

The authors say that working with interdisciplinary projects may provide a more suitable educational environment for the context of globalization and make language learning more meaningful, because it introduces students to other areas of study. Therefore, interdisciplinarity enables students to see the target language as a means for accomplishing tasks.

With the "proliferation" of disciplines, it is necessary to make students understand the value of the subjects they are learning at school for real life, trying to connect what the school teaches with their realities. In this context, interdisciplinarity is an alternative to take advantage of what students are learning in other disciplines to explore the English language. It is not difficult to use English to explore contents of human sciences such as History, Sociology and Geography in the language class, so the English teacher may propose interdisciplinary classes or projects with teachers of other disciplines, in order to integrate the knowledge of these subjects.

The English class is also the perfect environment for approaching ethical values related to the reality of children and teenagers. The *Referenciais Curriculares do Rio Grande do Sul* (Rio Grande do Sul, 2009) mention that English and Spanish classes may encourage the development of "intellectual curiosity" and promote citizenship (p.127). According to the document, these classes should not aim at using grammar topics to teach the target language, but at using this language as a tool for the development of critical citizens. To put this into practice, the document shows the importance of working with texts in the target language, which are challenging for the students because they allow the contact with other cultures and with the globalized world.

2.3 Group work and group projects

The possibility of developing group projects and group work is another advantage to be considered by teachers of regular schools. In very small classes, teachers usually have fewer opportunities to let students work by themselves than in large groups, in which it is possible to

divide the class into groups of six or fewer students in order to provide more opportunities to speak in the target language.

Brown (2007, p.225) mentions a number of advantages of group work in the English classroom. First, it generates interactive language, as it provides opportunities for student initiation and reduces the occurrences of artificial settings in which the teacher is the only interlocutor. Second, group work offers an affective environment, as a smaller group of students is the security that the individuals are less vulnerable to what they may perceive as criticism or rejection by other students. In addition, group work is a way of promoting learner responsibility and autonomy, since it is difficult to "hide" and "relax" in a small group, where the responsibility for progress is placed rather equally upon each member of the group. Finally, because group work is a step toward individualizing instruction, as small groups may help students with different abilities to accomplish separate goals. For doing this, it is important to mention that the teacher has to assume the control of the class and act as a manager and a resource in order to promote effective group work.

In addition to group work in class, it is possible to develop project work, which makes students use the language as a tool to create something meaningful with the language they learn. Project work is usually developed in three stages. The first stage is planning the project, when the teacher informs students about the theme and the procedures to make the project and the students make decisions on how to perform it. The second stage, which is the most important part, is developing the project. At this stage, students put into practice what they have planned in class, but out of the classroom environment. This tends to connect what is taught in the classroom with the actual uses of the language and, as the project is student-centered, it encourages the sense of responsibility and is a way of developing students' autonomy. The last stage is the feedback, which includes the final presentation of the project and the comments by the teacher and by other students, which are valuable to make students more confident and with a sense of achievement.

Therefore, differently from teaching in very small groups and in private classes, teaching English in regular schools provides opportunities for working with group projects, which motivates students and promotes interdisciplinarity.

3 The challenges

Despite the advantages of teaching English in regular schools, teachers may find some difficulties for teaching in this context. Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 discuss the main challenges that teachers may face and suggest some ideas for overcoming them.

3.1 Number of students in class and Discipline

There is no consensus on what is a large class. In language courses, 20 is considered too much, but Brown (2007, p.245) mentions classes with almost 600 students. The author says that this kind of class is not common, but classes with 50 to 75 students are not unusual around the world. According to the author, language classes should have no more than 15 students, as they should be large enough to promote interaction and small enough for students to get individual attention. In Brazilian regular schools, this number may vary a lot, but it normally ranges from 20 to 50 students in class.

Large classes may present problems such as limitation for feedback on students' tasks (especially on written work), minimization of teacher-student attention, and lack of time for listening to all the students' opinions and questions. In addition, it is difficult when only the same group of students participate while others look bored and uninterested. In order to solve these problems, Brown (2007, p.246) makes suggestions such as: (a) learn your students' names, so that they will not be treated as "numbers"; (b) propose interactive work, so that students feel a part of a community; (c) organize the class in pairs or groups to give students opportunities to practice the language.

Pair work and group work considerably increases the amount of speaking time in a large class and allows the teacher to work with one or two pairs/groups while other students keep working. However, it is likely to be noisy, mainly when students have to move around the class. Therefore, the teacher should be able to decide when to teach the whole class or to work in groups. According to Harmer (2001, p.118), this decision will depend on three factors: the *task*, as there are activities that are more suitable for group work and others that work better in a whole-class grouping; the *variety in a sequence*, as varying student groupings helps to increase motivation; and the *mood*, as changing the grouping of a class may be an effective way to change its mood when necessary.

Because of the great number of students in class, teachers may feel out of control and with no authority, so that classroom management becomes an obstacle to be overcome. In order to help organizing the class, Brown (2007, p.249) suggests some actions, like establishing expectations regarding the students' behavior, gaining the respect of students by treating them firmly but warmly and learning to be comfortable with the position of an authority.

According to the author, teachers can play different roles in the classroom, and may be seen as controllers, leaders, facilitators, or even as friends. Obviously, each teacher has a different personality, but, in any situation, they should make it clear that they are authorities in class. For doing this, it is important to keep calm when there is a problem, as shouting may be perceived as a loss of control and help raising the level of noise in the classroom. Talking to the student that is disturbing the class individually is usually more effective than shouting with the

whole class. According to Harmer (2001, p.130), whenever it is possible, it is better to discuss a student's behavior in private than in front of the whole class, and a personal, but formal, relationship has to be established in order to assert the teacher's authority.

Therefore, in order to prevent behavioral problems, teachers should always demonstrate interest in each student as an individual, respect students' opinions and talk to them when there is any trouble, in order to work *with* them, not *against* them (Brown 2007, p.253).

In regular schools, as students have many classes a day, they tend to be tired or messy in the last class periods. In order to avoid misbehaviors and lack of motivation, it is also important to keep students busy, as they are likely to misbehave or feel bored when they are not engaged with an interesting task.

3.2 Proficiency Heterogeneity and Motivation

Although heterogeneity is usually a consequence of the great number of students in class, even relatively small classes may be composed of students who are not in the same proficiency level. Nevertheless, classes in regular schools present an evident difference in language level among students, so that the teacher is faced with the problem of challenging higher-level students without overwhelming lower-level students (Brown 2007, p.247).

In this context, it is not easy to give opportunities for lower-level students to follow the lesson at the same time that you keep higher-level students interested. In addition, it is hard to know what to do with those students who study a lot but do not get good grades and those who think the lesson is too easy and refuse to do the tasks.

Therefore, a problem of heterogeneity is also a problem of motivation, which is essential to success. Motivation is "some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something" (Harmer 2007, p.51) and, without this "internal drive", students do not make the necessary effort to accomplish the tasks in order to be successful.

It is not possible to give a "formula" to solve problems of proficiency heterogeneity and motivation, but authors such as Magalhães & Amorin (2001), Brown (2007) and Ur (2001) present interesting suggestions.

According to Magalhães & Amorin (2001, p.64), heterogeneity is a problem that exists in public and private schools throughout the world, and is not about to disappear. In order to deal with it, the authors suggest that students should be evaluated differently, that is, teachers should not ignore the effort of those students who try very hard but still do not reach their classmates' academic level. Finally, they mention the importance of regarding the proficient students as a positive influence, not a "threat". Thus, the teacher may encourage these students to help their classmates.

Among the suggestions made by Brown (2007, p.247), it is possible to highlight the importance of not generalizing the assessment of students' proficiency levels into "the good students" and "the bad students", as it is usually hard "to determine whether a student's performance is a factor of aptitude, ability, a 'knack', or a factor of time and effort".

In order to teach in this kind of class, Ur (2001, p. 13) suggests the use of "heterogeneous exercises", which may be done at different levels. Instead of proposing only "homogeneous exercises", which do not provide effective practice for all the students, it is possible to design tasks that can be performed at whatever level the students feel suitable. To exemplify homogeneous exercises, the author mentions the ones based on multiple-choice questions, which can only be done by students at a certain level of proficiency. Heterogeneous exercises, on the other hand, present open-ended questions that can be answered either with simple sentences, by students at a lower level, or with more elaborated ones, by those who can write better. This way, all students will have the same opportunity to succeed.

The advantages of group work (see Section 2.3) were mentioned by all the authors in this section as a suggestion for teaching heterogeneous classes. They suggest dividing the class into small groups, either by putting higher-level students with lower-level students or by making homogeneous groups, depending on the type of activity. The teacher can, for instance, include in each group a "monitor", that is, a student with a higher proficiency level or a student that easily understood a difficult subject. By assuming the role of teacher-assistances, students at a higher level do not get bored, and students at a lower level profit from their classmates' help.

3.3 Status of the discipline

The status of English as a discipline in regular schools is rather varied in the literature. Researchers like Oliveira (2007), for example, mention its positive status. By analyzing the discourse of students and their parents in a Brazilian public school, the author found that, although students present difficulties in learning English at school, they recognize the importance of learning the language for professional development and for having better opportunities in life.

On the other hand, many studies show that English does not have a good status in regular schools. Barcelos (2007), who interviewed students of *Letras* and *Secretariado Executivo* about their beliefs in relation to language learning in Brazil, found that most subjects characterize English learning in public schools as "bad" and "not motivating" (p.155). Among the reasons mentioned by the subjects, it is possible to highlight the emphasis on grammar aspects, teachers' inability to teach the language and the fact that English is "only one more subject".

Language courses, on the other hand, are seen as the place where you can really learn the language. The following quote was taken from Barcelos (2007, p.159), and shows the opinion of one of the subjects in her research:

> (…) I studied in a public school and I wouldn't really learn English there. So, I asked my father to pay an English course to me. He couldn't, but he did. In the English course, I really started learning. I wanted to go to class everyday. I was in love with English.

In many Brazilian schools, students have English classes only once a week, during a period of about 50 minutes. Because of this, sometimes English is seen as less relevant than other subjects, and there are students who see no reason to study the language. Who has never heard from students questions like "why should I learn English, if I won't travel to the USA?" or "why should I learn English, if 'they' don't learn Portuguese 'there'?". In this case, it is important to show that nowadays English is not only a tool to communicate with native speakers, but also a way of interacting with the world.

According to Naves and Vigna (2008, p.37), foreign languages, which have been considered irrelevant for a long time, started to be considered as important as any other discipline with the development of the new LDB (Brazilian educational laws), in 1996. It was also in 1996 that foreign language teaching became mandatory from the 5th grade on, in all Brazilian schools. Therefore, differently from other disciplines, like Portuguese, Math and Sciences, Foreign Language has been mandatory only for the past 15 years, and that means we can expect a positive turn in the future.

4 Conclusion

This paper aimed at presenting both benefits and challenges of teaching English in Brazilian regular schools. It showed that this context is suitable for developing interaction, as there are enough students for promoting meaningful tasks involving communication. In addition, it discussed the importance of interdisciplinary work, as an attempt to construct knowledge in a more integrated way.

This article also presented the advantages of group work, when students are divided into smaller groups to accomplish a task in class, and project work, when the teacher assigns a task for students involving out of the school environment. It presented evidence for the fact that working in groups is a step toward students' autonomy and confidence.

In addition to these advantages, this article discussed some challenges that teachers may face in this context. The number of students in class is one of the greatest problems in regular schools, as classes are usually much larger than they should for effective language teaching. Behavioral problems are a consequence of large classes, which requires knowledge of

classroom management to organize the class. In order to overcome this challenge, this paper presented suggestions like keeping students busy, listening to the students' opinions and trying to establish a personal, but formal, relationship with them.

The difference in proficiency level among students was also presented as a challenge, as it is hard for the teacher to deal with heterogeneous classes. In order to motivate students of all levels, this article suggested working with heterogeneous exercises, which can be answered differently according to the student's level.

Finally, this paper approached the status of English as a discipline, and discussed the fact that students tend to believe that it is not possible to learn the language in regular schools, only in language courses.

As foreign language teaching has been mandatory in Brazilian public schools for only 15 years (a short time, if compared to other disciplines), there is a possibility that the discipline gains more space in the curriculum with time. Therefore, although it can be challenging to teach English in public and private regular schools, it is possible to promote critical learning by exploring the positive aspects of teaching in this context.

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