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**TEACHING ENGLISH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A  
DESCRIPTION OF THE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE ADOPTED IN THE  
MUNICIPALITY OF SOUTHERN BRAZIL**

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## ABSTRACT

The **purpose** of this study is to investigate teaching English in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in a municipality of southern Brazil. The country has not agreed to make English language teaching compulsory for this age, but some private schools have introduced English language teaching on the premises .

Regarding **methodology**, the experimental study was conducted in schools “A” and “B”. Private school “A” was represented by a teacher with her group of four-year-old children. State school “B” was attended by two representatives of the volunteer program who worked with a group of five-year-olds. The research tools were observation in the classroom from each group, questionnaires answered by the teacher and volunteers, individual interviews with each of them, and a documentary analysis of the pedagogical project of schools, pedagogical materials. The experiment was conducted in compliance with all ethical standards.

The analysis **resulted** in an understanding of the importance of such aspects as: duration and frequency of classes, the number of groups, lack of books for students and teachers, limited use of English by teachers and students; and the predominance of listening/speaking among other students' skills in both schools. The teacher and the volunteers jointly acknowledged this advantage, noting that different techniques were used. Each group of teachers tried to improve the learning process, taking into account the preferences of the students. The volunteers of school "B" followed the structured plan of the lesson according to the program, used various types of activities. In school "A" the teacher used one type of activity at the lesson. Although the group had four-year-old children, it did not have significant negative consequences.

According to the results of the study, it can be **concluded** that the approach proposed by the teachers is based on teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The development of language education in Brazil has a long way, given the establishment of public policy on early childhood education system in combination with theoretical and practical researches used in the educational process.

**KEYWORDS:** Bilingual Education, Language Teaching, Teaching Methods, Education Policy, Early Childhood Education, Brazil.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study refers to a municipality situated in the south area of Brazil. It is the 9th most populous state, and the estimated population of 2018 is 180.000 inhabitants. When it comes to education, the attendance rates for children from 6 to 14 years old reached 97,1% in 2010, however, no data were collected concerning Early Childhood Education (ECE) (IBGE, 2010) and this database could not be updated in 2020, as expected, because of the COVID-19 pandemic period.

In terms of English teaching at this age, recent studies (Bortolotti, & Krause-Lemke, 2021) have shown that from a total of 23 private and 60 public schools currently accepting children under 6 years old, only 17 private institutions offer English classes, but not public ones.

A deeper analysis and comparison of both realities were possible to be traced due to a volunteer program holding a partnership

with a few public schools, but they are not recognized yet as formally offering the study of English once it is not an initiative of themselves. Also, there could be an interruption of classes at these schools at any time because there are no established rights for all those who attend public schools.

As it has been stated, the purpose of this paper is to identify the reality of Brazilian schools for teaching English through the study of a municipality, namely at its ECE which is still a stage that lacks public policies designated to educate these children in another language. The absence of national parameters allows public and private schools to reveal significant discrepancies, being mostly the latter where children can start learning English at an early age.

On the other hand, those families which cannot afford to pay school fees end up with no opportunities to teach English to their children before the beginning of the second

cycle in elementary school. As agreed on the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (Brazil, 1996) it has become compulsory to teach a foreign language only in the 6th year (from the age of 11). There used to be no government directions on how to teach English before.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In territories where migration is a noteworthy aspect it has become popular to teach English as a Second Language (ESL), which means language usage goes beyond the classrooms and plays an important role on a daily basis. European countries exemplify this context, where students often show some previous knowledge of English before their first day at school.

Migration is not the only cause responsible for the popularity of English in such countries once education policies and geographical aspects come along as key factors and the magnitude of this language. According to the title this type of teaching received, English comes as an ESL or a second possibility further than a single mother tongue (Möller, & Zurawski, 2017).

In Brazil, despite its history of migration movements, the foreigners that decided to try a new life here in the XIX century could not find support to keep their own language but were forced to acquire skills in Portuguese to find better living opportunities. The variation of bilingualism found in Brazil was thus recognized as subtractive, meaning the replacement of a language by another one (Altenhofen, 2013).

A further aspect noticed about language teaching in this South American country is the relationship created between the apprentice and the content as unrelated or scarcely related. English is commonly taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) and becomes a target of severe criticism due to the failure tendency of educators to point to this

approach or simply the non-appearance of any connection (Graddol, 2006).

Exceeding the perspectives of EFL and ESL, nowadays bilingual education has become largely supported. According to García and Woodley (2014), this encourages teachers to use the language as a tool to learn any topic of interest, besides exploring exclusively the language itself. Surpassing subjects and academic contents, bilingual education also sustains a trajectory towards communicative, cognitive, and cultural advantages to the learners (Wei, 2007).

### METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted as a quantitative proposal, is also classified as an experiment once it considers 2 schools as a reference to a whole municipality. It is understood that this perspective reveals its strengths while bringing detailed information about the reality but has also some weak points, mainly concerning the impossibility of generalizing the exact data of the participants as an overall situation.

In order to avoid biased results, the choice of the institutions was carried carefully (Lüdke, & André, 2013). School A is a private service located in a neighbourhood nearby the city center with its group of 4-year olds. School B, 5-year olds, is public and supported by a volunteer program from a private language school.

This paper adopts a triangular analysis for data generation while including the viewpoint of the teachers from schools A and B, the schools themselves, and the researchers' understanding of the phenomenon. The children were directly accessed but were part of the class observation, allowing the investigation of the pedagogical practices performed by the teacher.

Besides the observation of a class from each group/school, the teachers were invited to answer a questionnaire about their career and interviewed regarding their practice in class. School pedagogical project and any material used in the referred class were part of the data as well.

It is important to highlight that all required ethical standards were respected, including firstly the approval of the local committee on human experimentation. Schools were invited to take part and as soon as an acceptance letter was signed by them the invitations were given to the teachers.

From now on the teachers will be named teacher T (school A) and volunteers V<sub>1</sub> and V<sub>2</sub> (school B). T is a 40-year-old woman, a bachelor in tourism who started to teach English after being recognized for her knowledge at the language school she used to study. She has been teaching for 20 years and she has even got an extra licentiate degree course to help her improve practice.

The volunteers are 16-year-old students attending a high school, this experience is considered to be the first one in their professional life. At the period of data generation, they were about to complete a year as English teachers. This opportunity was proposed to them linked to a preparation course to improve their language skills and introduce the teaching aspects to them.

## RESULTS

School A and B provide a weekly class lasting around 50 minutes for children from 4 years old. There were 18 students per classroom at school A, whereas in B there were officially 20 enrolled but 4 missed the observed class. T oversees the class planning of her group from the topic she will teach to how she will do so as opposed to the volunteers, who receive a guideline from the language school supporting the program.

Although V<sub>1</sub> and V<sub>2</sub> are free to decide how they will lead the class, they mentioned there were a few minor adjustments they did. At both schools, there were no official books to be followed, neither for the teacher/volunteers nor for the students but written activities were usually adopted. T added some information to the topics that are currently under discussion by the other teachers of the group.

She tried keeping an interdisciplinary environment, supported children's skills in English. The participants were directly questioned about their teaching method and the practices they adopted, however, none of them could name any approach or give detailed information regarding this theoretical issue.

The main comment T and the volunteers gave about their manner of teaching was to choose an approach to children, which they applied offering games, music, stories, and using props or other usual toys that belonged to their students.

As a language class, another topic of interest for researchers refers to how teachers and students make use of their mother tongue and the one in focus. As expected, the use of Portuguese still surpasses English in terms of frequency. The situations where English is mostly used are usually when the target vocabulary is presented or when involving previously studied popular topics (for example, colours and numbers).

The teacher and the volunteers often walked among the children while they were working on their activities and asked questions in English. Praises, greetings and classroom language are other examples of information that could be commonly exchanged in English.

The predominance of certain language skills over the others was noticed, especially the time spent on listening and speaking rather

than reading or even writing at schools A and B. A relevant strategy T, V<sub>1</sub> and V<sub>2</sub> mentioned was repetition, meaning the stimulation of children to repeat new vocabulary after them.

There was also a reference to the increase of the English language usage by the students comparing the beginning and the end of the academic year. Rephrasing was not the only technique used by the teacher and volunteers to help memorizing English words but also mistake correction. In both classrooms, whenever a child would make a mistake, there would be no formal or evident correction but rather a friendly repetition of the message with appropriate usage of English.

Towards the end of data generation, the teacher and volunteers were invited to share their daily professional challenges and issues. T and V<sub>1</sub> mentioned the reduced number of hours to teach English, pointing out more weekly classes are necessary for children's development. V<sub>1</sub> demonstrated a slight concern about behavioral problems mainly at the beginning of the year, stating that it decreased once she learned how to deal with the problems. Her partner V<sub>2</sub> did not face any challenges.

On the contrary, T got satisfaction from children's participation in class and their learning potential, relating these to her motivation to work with this audience. She even confessed that at the beginning of her career she could not imagine herself as an ECE teacher but having gained this experience she felt self-fulfilled pointing out how smart and affectionate children were.

The volunteers shared the same feelings as the teacher. V<sub>1</sub> also brought into evidence the subject itself as easy to be explored and requiring no deeper involvement with harder topics such as intermediate or advanced grammar. At last, V<sub>2</sub> concluded that as they

used to be students from school B in the past they knew its culture, which helped them to understand how to deal with discipline in class.

## DISCUSSION

This discussion starts with the age of the children involved in both schools and the inexistence of opportunities for younger ones. According to the literature (Nascimento, & Lira, 2018), there is a general disadvantage at ECE regarding children up to 3 years old, who tend to be less assisted in terms of learning than caring, although studies about language teaching and learning (O'muircheartaigh et al., 2013) reinforce the importance starting to promote another language at this age.

The frequency and duration of the English classes delivered to these groups are similar to the pattern found in most schools from the municipality (Bortolotti, & Krause-Lemke, 2021). Möller and Zurawski (2017) understand that the lack of policymaking affects the quality of English teaching at ECE, the schools and teachers have to decide on everything including how often and long the classes last.

However, the number of students per group is one of the few aspects that run under special rules, once it is connected to ECE entirely and not exclusively to English teaching at this stage. The state recommendation limits the number to 20 children per teacher, a condition that is observed in the study.

Researchers (British Council, 2019) collect evidence of the importance of smaller groups for language teaching and learning to improve communication in class. Larroza and Santana (2020) point to teacher demotivation in the case of overcrowded classrooms but no specific maximum number of students is detailed.

The quantity seems to be a subjective criterion regarding the teaching method. The interaction the volunteers have with the children passing by each desk while they work on their activities is an example of how to keep a closer contact.

The connection between the teachers of other disciplines and the English teachers was highlighted by T as it is also a matter of relevance for researchers in the education field. Passoni and Luz (2016) comprehend the choice of topics as an opportunity for children to understand English could be part of their real and daily lives. For Montero and Rodríguez-Chaves (2007) an interdisciplinary and communicative approaches are effective for learning.

Despite the fact of receiving a class plan set by the language school supporting the volunteer program, the structure of it and especially the variation of activities applied by the volunteers is worth mentioning. Highly appreciated for kids at this age, a big range of tasks to be performed in class increases the participation of children which in general tend to lose their focus when submitted to long-lasting exercises (Queiroz, & Carvalho, 2010). T does plan the classes all by herself and is also responsible for teaching alone.

These situations were difficult for her once she found it hard to use suitable activities for ECE. She said the internet was her main resource and that she could not expect school materials. An example of strategy she followed was making use of books in Portuguese for storytelling and its simultaneous translation. T admits that having a partner to count on would mean considerable help because she is nowadays forced to keep class plans simpler to be able to deal with the whole group.

At both schools, written activities seem to be proposed as a way of registering children's

progress and reporting it to their responsibilities. The use of paper and pencil is observed as a demand from adults rather than a necessity for children. Scheifer (2009) recognizes the parents as the final customers of a market called education, being educators in charge of serving them and answering their requests instead of working on what and how they learned should be more beneficial for students.

The theory does not appear to directly influence the practice of the teacher and the volunteers. When asked about it, no method was cited by them as a guide for their classes. Ur (2013) considers the independence of the educators from the methods as an advantage meaning freedom and autonomy to choose the pedagogical practices that suit each peculiar reality. The playful manner cited by the participants is in fact what researchers from the field of education refer to the most or, as Aquino and Tonelli (2017) classify, the most important feature while working with ECE.

Adding some entertainment while teaching young children is surely a recommended tool regarding the introduction of a language that sounds unfamiliar to them. Choosing the right way and time to approach them although not easy is an ability expected from the teachers (Souza et al., 2008).

By doing so, educators help children to feel more comfortable with the language, stimulating them to feel interested in trying to discover what others say, reproducing, and even making use of English. The first abilities that were reported to be used by the children from the study were listening and then speaking, the same Scaramucci et al. (2008) identified.

Besides the increasing use of English by the teacher, the volunteers, and the children throughout the year, is still considered as a practice to be worked on. The British Council

(2019) explains the lack of initiative from teachers as directly related to their graduation, which in Brazil tends to give not enough support for speaking.

The children are automatically affected by the low input and even though repetition is a strategy in use by the participants its use should be associated with an expanding discourse. Lighbown and Spada (2013) posit that besides echoing the speech produced by the students and making possible delicate adjustments more experienced teachers should add information to the conversation with longer and more elaborate sentences.

Another obstacle is the number of hours children have weekly, they lack active contact with the foreign language. Apart from the weekly hour at school, many children do not find further stimulation at home, especially those from public schools who cannot count on their parents' proficiency in English.

Bearing these external aspects in mind, the teachers and school are understood as not the only responsible for failure or success but part of a wider system. Education must be understood as a shared responsibility among policymakers, families, schools, and educators.

The concern about reduced hours of English classes appears not only related to children's slow improvement in listening or speaking but also connected to the difficulties T mentioned. Unfortunately, schools A and B are nothing but just other examples of a common reality found in terms of English teaching at ECE.

Garcia (2011) analyzed the opportunities Brazilian children have to study English and concluded there could be four types of them: at regular schools, language schools, bilingual schools, and international schools. The first represent the institutions from this study and are described by the author as

those which implement English classes earlier than assured and required by the current legislation.

It means they are proactive and decide to give their children an additional experience, facing the onus of no patterns to be followed. With no guidance or support, it was verified for example that the number of hours varies from 1 to 5 weekly, being school A and B results in part of the national average.

Leaving the quantity issues aside, Larroza and Santana (2020) write about the importance of the quality of the time spent at work. They associate teacher's satisfaction and motivation to work at ECE with the aspect referred by T, V<sub>1</sub>, and V<sub>2</sub>: positive and affectionate attitude of the children towards them and the knowledge.

Despite the unanimity found among the participants, the weakness of the study in terms of the number of participants has to be taken into consideration. It is highly recommended that further research include more schools from the municipality or enlarge the analysis to a regional, state, or even to a national perspective.

Further papers could also discuss enhancing language classes to English teachers as part of their ongoing training. Despite the fundamental knowledge acquired while undergraduate, graduate teachers deserve continuous support to reinforce and expand their teaching and language skills. A final piece of advice for upcoming research involves considering the success of teaching English at an early age.

The demand for proficient children will require from their teachers as they make progress in their path of studies has to be taken into consideration in advance. If leaving ECE with significant basic interpersonal communication skills becomes a reality, consequently elementary school and high school curriculum will have to be

submitted for a review. Content and language integrated learning has been under discussion as a field of study that goes beyond an ordinary trend to become an authentic claim.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper was meant to evidence the offer of English classes at ECE in a south Brazilian municipality, considering this as an additional proposal some schools choose to provide although not a must imposed by any national legislation.

The results demonstrate the pedagogical practices are part of an EFL approach when the language being taught is still kept distant from the student's reality. There was a lack of indication of ESL by its usage besides school or connected to their routine and the teaching parameters did not reflect a bilingual education understanding.

Brazil has a long path towards the implementation of bilingual education, namely at ECE. There is a gap in terms of

published papers, probably due to the lack of practices.

The current perspectives of teaching show signs of an answer to the market of education, including English in their curriculum to attract parents to a so-called necessary skill in a globalized world, with limited concern about the real development of children in terms of this language.

As mentioned previously, this has to be a shared responsibility among several agents from politicians to parents, including teachers without turning them into the main agents.

As well as Lima, Borghi and Souza (2019) we agree that the absent legislation directly affects the condition of teaching English at ECE, a fact that led our interest to collect data about ongoing practices in this limited scenario. There is no intention to list them as a script, a fixed class plan but rather support future policies and studies or, mostly, to contribute with teachers in charge by inspiring them to reflect on their practice.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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#### АНОТАЦІЯ / ABSTRACT [in Ukrainian]:

### ВИКЛАДАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ В ДОШКІЛЬНІЙ ОСВІТІ: ОПИС ПЕДАГОГІЧНОЇ ПРАКТИКИ, ПРИЙНЯТОЇ В МУНІЦИПАЛІТЕТІ НА ПІВДНІ БРАЗИЛІЇ

**Мета** цієї розвідки – дослідити викладання англійської мови в системі дошкільного навчання в муніципалітеті на півдні Бразилії. Країна не погодилася зробити викладання англійської мови обов'язковим для цього віку, але деякі приватні школи запровадили вивчення англійської мови.

Що стосується **методології**, то було проведено експериментальне дослідження у школах «А» і «Б». Приватну школу «А» представляла вчителька зі своєю групою чотирирічних дітей. Державну школу «Б» відвідували два представники волонтерської програми, які працювали з групою п'ятирічних дітей. Інструментом дослідження було спостереження в класі від кожної групи, анкети, на питання яких відповідали вчитель та волонтери, індивідуальні бесіди з кожним із них та документальний аналіз педагогічного проєкту шкіл, педагогічних матеріалів. Експеримент проводився з дотриманням усіх етичних норм.

**Результатом** аналізу стало розуміння важливості таких аспектів, як тривалість та частота занять, чисельність груп, відсутність книги для учня та вчителя, обмежене використання англійської мови вчителями та учнями; а також переважання аудіювання / усного мовлення серед інших навичок учнів обох шкіл. Учитель та волонтери спільно визнали таку

перевагу, зазначивши при цьому, що були застосовані різні методики. Кожна група викладачів намагалася поліпшити процес навчання, враховуючи уподобання учнів. Волонтери школи «Б» дотримувалися структурованого плану занять за програмою, використовували різні види діяльності. У школі «А» вчитель застосовував один вид діяльності на уроці. Хоча в групі навчалися чотирирічні діти, це не мало суттєвих негативних наслідків.

Згідно з результатами дослідження можна зробити **висновок**, що запропонований учителями підхід базується на викладанні англійської мови як іноземної (EFL). Розвиток мовної освіти в Бразилії має довгий шлях, враховуючи встановлення державної політики щодо системи дошкільного навчання у поєднанні з теоретичними й практичними дослідженнями, які застосовуються в навчальному процесі.

**КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА:** двомовна освіта, викладання мови, методи викладання, політика освіти, дошкільна освіта, Бразилія.

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#### RESUMO / ANOTAÇÃO / ABSTRACT [in Portuguese]

##### O ENSINO DE INGLÊS NA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL: DESCRREVENDO AS PRÁTICAS PEDAGÓGICAS ADOTADAS EM UM MUNICÍPIO DO SUL DO BRASIL

O **propósito** deste estudo é a investigação da oferta de inglês na Educação Infantil (EI) de um município do sul do Brasil. A oferta da língua para estas crianças não representa uma obrigatoriedade no país embora algumas escolas tenham adotado esta prática, especialmente as privadas.

A respeito da **metodologia**, conduziu-se um estudo de caso com a escola A, privada, a professora e o grupo de 4 anos e a escola B, uma escola pública assistida por um programa de voluntariado, as 2 voluntárias e o grupo de 5 anos. Os instrumentos consistiram em uma observação de aula de cada grupo, um questionário respondido pela professora e pelas voluntárias, uma entrevista individual com cada e a análise documental do projeto político pedagógico e dos materiais pedagógicos. Todos os requisitos éticos foram cumpridos.

A análise **resultou** no entendimento de que a duração e a frequências das aulas; o tamanho das turmas; a ausência de livros do aluno e do professor; o uso limitado do inglês pelos educadores e pelos alunos; e o predomínio das habilidades de escuta e fala das crianças em relação às demais eram iguais entre as escolas. A professora e as voluntárias também demonstraram um depoimento parecido ao não denominar teorias ou métodos de ensino em uso. A respeito das dificuldades vivenciadas, cada uma citou um aspecto diferente, no entanto quanto aos elementos positivos as três apontaram o estilo afetuoso das crianças. As voluntárias da escola B seguiram um plano de aula estruturado fornecido pela escola de idiomas responsável pelo programa voluntário. Esta aula foi composta por atividades variadas enquanto a professora da escola B planejou uma única atividade para a aula. Os grupos tinham um ano de diferença entre si, mas este fato não trouxe implicações para o estudo. De acordo com os resultados é possível **concluir** que a abordagem proposta pelos educadores reflete o ensino de inglês como uma língua estrangeira.

O ensino de línguas no Brasil tem uma longa jornada a ser percorrida, **incluindo** o estabelecimento de políticas públicas para a EI combinadas com pesquisas para suporte da teoria e da prática em sala de aula.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** América do sul, educação bilíngue, educação pré-escolar, ensino de línguas, métodos de ensino, políticas públicas em educação.

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