

The English language in students' present and imagined identities: an Exploratory Practice in a state school

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ABSTRACT:

As students start learning English at school, perceiving the new language as part of their identities might be a key factor in order to assume a powerful position regarding their learning process. Based on studies of identity and language learning, this paper aims at understanding, through the principles of Exploratory Practice, learners' relationship with English and if the language is part of their present and imagined identities. The results, here presented as mutual understandings, were achieved by teacher and learners through a didactic unit for six classes, implemented in a public school with 6th grade students. These mutual understandings express that it was possible to raise learners' awareness about the importance of the English language in their lives now and the space that this language might have in their future, although more classes would be necessary in order to have a significant change of perception regarding the many purposes for learning the English language.

KEY WORDS: Exploratory Practice. English language. Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The way students from public schools in Brazil perceive themselves as English speakers may have a direct influence on their learning throughout several school years.

Since many of them carry the belief that it is difficult to learn English at public schools, students end up demotivated and speaking this foreign language is seen by themselves as a goal far from their realities (BARCELOS, 2006). On the other hand, due to the widespread acceptance of English as a global language (CRYSTAL, 2003) or the language of global contact zones (CANAGARAJAH, 2014) knowing this particular language is a "must" for every person if one wishes to be successful in the future (BRITISH COUNCIL, 2014; FERNANDEZ; FOGAÇA, 2009; FERRAZ, 2015). This discourse,

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however, results in excluding people who do not have full support and means to learn how to speak English effectively.

When trying to learn English, it is important for students to feel as if they are part of a community, and in this case, the community of English speakers. According to Leffa (2007, p.5), “Belonging or not to a community depends on exercising the activity performed by the members of that community³”. Although the benefits of learning a foreign language may be clear for students as they get older, the difficulties when trying to learn it might lead them to quit early and remove themselves from the English speakers community.

By excluding themselves from trying to learn a foreign language, students define what is part of their identity or not, even if unconsciously. Claiming that English is not necessary for them, learners repeat a common belief that learning English is required only if traveling abroad or that it is just a subject in the school’s curriculum (LEFFA, 1991), which is controversial, since it is possible to find the use of English on a daily basis even if living in a country that has a different mother language.

Based on the assumption that the English language enables students to actively participate in the globalized world (BRASIL, 2018), Brazil’s guideline document for education –National Common Curricular Base (BNCC)– follows the idea of English as Língua Franca as a guide for the English classes. In this scenario, the classes would be in accordance with the principle that English does not belong to any specific country or nation, but it is a language that can be used by anyone without the need to “erase” one’s identity.

According to the document (BRASIL, 2018, p. 241),

(...) The English language is no longer that of the “foreigner”, coming from hegemonic countries, whose speakers serve as a model to be followed, nor is it a variant of the English language. From this perspective, the uses made by speakers around the world are welcomed and legitimized, with different linguistic and cultural repertoires, which makes it possible, for example, to question the view that the only “correct” English - and to be taught - is the one spoken by Americans or British.⁴

In this sense, the English class at school has the potential to bring students closer to the principle of English as a Lingua Franca, showing them the uses of English by people from

³ All translations, including this one, were done by me/the author. In the original: Pertencer ou não a uma comunidade depende de exercer a atividade executada pelos membros dessa comunidade

⁴In the original: a língua inglesa não é mais aquela do “estrangeiro”, oriundo de países hegemônicos, cujos falantes servem de modelo a ser seguido, nem tampouco trata-se de uma variante da língua inglesa. Nessa perspectiva, são acolhidos e legitimados os usos que dela fazem falantes espalhados no mundo inteiro, com diferentes repertórios linguísticos e culturais, o que possibilita, por exemplo, questionar a visão de que o único inglês “correto” – e a ser ensinado – é aquele falado por estadunidenses ou britânicos.

different cultures. However, it also has the power to move students away from their goals of speaking English if it keeps picturing one specific culture or accent as the one to be followed, delegitimizing other English language uses.

In the realm of this study, authors such as Norton (1997, 2000), Norton and Toohen (2011) and Coelho and Mesquita (2013) address the relationship between Language and Identity, while Jenkins (2007) brings a view on the relationship between English as a Lingua Franca and Identity. However, it was not possible to find on websites, such as Google Scholar and portal de periódicos da CAPES, studies that explore the classroom and students' experiences in order to research the relationship between their identities and the English language through the use of the Exploratory Practice.

Based on this issue, the main goal of this paper is to understand the relationship between students' identities and the English language. The research question that embodies this study is: 1) What mutual understandings were achieved through the Exploratory Practice regarding students' present and imagined identities related to the use of the English language?

Attempting to seek answers for this question, this paper is organized in three main parts. The first one, the literature review, brings an overview on topics that encompass important themes for this study; on the second part the methodology adopted in this research is presented; on the last part, the understandings achieved, the results from this exploratory work are informed and then discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand students' process of learning English at school, it is important to first analyze their relationship with this foreign language and whether they feel that it belongs to their identity or not. The theoretical framework of this paper was based on several studies (JENKINS, 2007; SILVA, 2000; COELHO AND MESQUITA, 2013; NORTON AND TOOHEY, 2011; GOMÉZ LOBATÓN, 2012; LOPO RAMOS, 2021; LEFFA, 2007; NORTON, 2010) that worked with themes related to Identity, Language and English as a Lingua Franca.

In Brazil's public schools, English is the foreign language students learn through several years. It happens mainly because of its status in the globalized world, as it is the language most used for communication among non-native speakers. Moreover, its growing

dominance as a Lingua Franca increases diversity in the way that English is spoken among its many users (JENKINS, 2007).

English is a language largely spoken all around the world by people with different mother tongues. The concept of English as Lingua Franca may help learners to understand English as a language that can be spoken by all, and do not have any specific patterns nor accents to be copied. Students should feel that the English language is part of their identity, even if they live in Brazil and have Portuguese as their mother tongue.

Identity, at first, can be defined as “what I am” (SILVA, 2000). All that we like, want, wish to be and have are part of our identity and makes us who we are. Furthermore, differences between a person and the other also play their role in building the identity of a being. In this sense, Silva (2000, p. 82) states that “Asserting identity means demarcating borders, it means making distinctions between what remains inside and what remains outside.”⁵

We create and recreate our identities throughout life based on what surrounds and influences us. The culture of the place that we live will certainly be important in our identity, since it can define what you are going to wear, eat, and most important for this work, the language you speak. According to Coelho and Mesquita (2013, p. 31), “The relationship between language, identity and culture is immanent, since there is no culture without a language and identity is constituted through the language and the culture (...)”.⁶ Consequently, the language we speak also makes us who we are.

When talking about language and identity, Norton and Toohey (2011, p. 415) state that

The theoretical constructs IMAGINED COMMUNITIES and IMAGINED IDENTITIES contribute usefully to understanding SLA [Second Language Acquisition], because a learner’s hopes for the future (or their children’s future) are integral to language learner identity. For many learners, the target language community is not only a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. An imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language can be understood within this context.

In the process of learning English, it might be a key factor for students to feel as if they are part of the English speaker’s community, understanding the new language as part of

⁵ In the original: Afirmar a identidade significa demarcar fronteiras, significa fazer distinções entre o que fica dentro e o que fica fora.

⁶ In the original: A relação entre língua, identidade e cultura é imanente, uma vez que não há cultura sem língua e que a identidade é constituída por meio desta e da cultura.

their identity. Only by being able to feel the advantages of speaking the language will learners be willing to spend time learning it. In accordance with Gómez Lobatón (2012, p. 65), “(...) through the use of discourse, a learner can assume either a powerful or powerless position within the classroom environment”, and in a language classroom it might be decisive, since a “powerless position” will influence their relationship with English in the long run.

In a public school English class, students’ powerless position regarding identity is sometimes represented by the discourse “I don’t use English, why should I learn it?”. Only a minority of them recognize themselves as English speakers. In this sense, the English language is seen as foreign language (EFL), restricted to the classroom environment and thought of as being used only for specific purposes such as reading or traveling to English speaking countries (LOPO RAMOS, 2021).

In the Brazilian context, Leffa (2007) investigates the potential self-exclusion that happens with some students, saying that when learners state that they “hate English”, it is a statement that suggests that this is a deliberate choice, but actually it is a discourse spread by society that made him/her believe that. To lessen the impacts of the exclusion, Leffa (2007, p. 5) also points out that the system usually “gives the person the illusion that the choice of not belonging to a certain community came from his/her own will”, and then, it may result in students excluding themselves from learning English, believing that it was their choice.

All things considered, it is feasible that students, while learning English at school in Brazil, might feel as if speaking and using the English language is far from their reality. English is seen mostly as a foreign language and is not incorporated into students’ identity, resulting in a self-exclusion during the classes. Nonetheless, as stated by Norton (2010, p.2) “(...) the conceptualization of subjectivity as multiple and changing is consistent with the view that pedagogical practices can be transformative.” In this sense, it is possible for the English teacher to provoke transformations in students, trying to re-signify their perception regarding the importance of learning English and have positive outcomes from the classes.

3. METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to understand the relationship between students’ identity and the English language, and it has as research question: what mutual understandings were achieved through the Exploratory Practice regarding students’ present and imagined identities related to the use of the English language?

This qualitative research involves an interpretative approach, following the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP), that is “a form of practitioner research in language education which aims to integrate research, learning and teaching” (HANKS, 2015, p.2). This type of practice has seven basic principles to be followed (HANKS, 2015), that are:

- 1) Concern about the “quality of life” from teachers and students;
- 2) Work to understand this “quality of life”;
- 3) Involve students and teachers for the understanding;
- 4) Bring people together through the work;
- 5) Aim at mutual development through the work;
- 6) Work for understanding is a continuous endeavor;
- 7) Integrate the work for understanding with the classroom practices and activities.

The data for this paper was collected during my teaching internship classes, in which I participated through the program “Residência Pedagógica⁷” funded by CAPES⁸, at a public elementary school located in Londrina, Paraná. This school had internet and a TV inside each classroom, although the equipment was not of excellent quality. It also had a multimedia room, with computers and a projector with a bigger screen. The students ranged from lower to lower-middle class and had a textbook to support the classes, even though they were not used often. In addition, printed handouts and blackboards were used as teaching tools.

In total, I taught six English classes in a classroom with 21 students from the 6th grade, with ages ranging from 10 to 12. The students were talkative and a little disruptive. Thus, it was necessary to call their attention sometimes. Based on the classes, it was possible to notice that they all had a low level of English, and had difficulties with grammar and vocabulary. In the first semester, the topics studied by the group were “greetings”, “numbers from 1 to 100”, “verb to be” and “daily routine”.

3.1 INSTRUMENTS FOR DATA COLLECTION

⁷*Residência Pedagógica* is a governmental program that aims at strengthening and deepening practical teaching training of undergraduate students in Brazil.

⁸ Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel. CAPES is a Foundation within the Ministry of Education in Brazil that has among other purposes to improve the quality of Brazil’s scholars in higher education through grant programs.

Bearing in mind the principles of Exploratory Practice, through the classes I developed a didactic unit in order to understand the relationship between students' identity and English, raise students' interest in the English language, as well as try to make them recognize the importance of speaking English. Also, during this unit, I worked with the theme "verb to be", bringing to the classes activities to understand the meaning and use of this grammar topic as it would be relevant to enable students to express their identities. As resources, I used pictures when bringing new vocabulary, the blackboard for explanations and exercises, videos, some activities from the textbook and printed handouts.

For the first two days of classes, the activities aimed to show students that they already knew some words in English and that they use them everyday (such as mouse, ketchup, show, etc.), as well as to understand the basic rules from the verb "to be". For that, I used pictures on the TV and the blackboard in order to explain and practice vocabulary and structure. Some activities from the coursebook were also used in order to discuss the use of English in our daily lives.

Afterwards, in the next two days of classes, we worked on an activity called "All About Me" in which students had to write some facts and preferences about themselves. In this exercise they also practiced the verb "to be" while writing and speaking, and it was possible to work with a video from an Indonesian girl introducing herself, which generated a discussion about the use of the English language by foreigners. Besides, the students and I created group mental maps about why they learn English at school and the space that English has in their lives now.

For the last two days I focused on working with students' imagined identities, that is, what they aim to do, go, have and wish to become in the future (HOOPER et al., 2019). For that, I prepared an activity called "Dream Board", in which students had to represent through drawing and writing their desires and hopes for the future. These were related to profession, places they want to go, things they want to have, etc. In the end, they had to reflect whether they believed English would be important for their future or not and if English is somehow present on their Dream Board.

In total, I was able to work with three main activities, which are represented in Table 1 according to their contribution to answer the main objective and research question, considering the principle of Exploratory Practice of working for understanding.

Table 1- Integration of research and classroom practices.

| Objective | What I seek to understand | Data/Classroom practice | Work for understanding |
|---|--|---|--|
| Understand the relationship between students' identity and the English language | Is the English language part of students' present identity? | <p>Activity</p> <p>'English is..' - Activity regarding "verb to be" in which students had to mark whether English is or is not important to their lives now and if English is easy or hard to learn.</p> <p>How often do you use English? - Activity in which students had to mark the frequency (always; sometimes; never) that they use English on a daily basis.</p> <p>All About Me-</p> <p>Activity with videos and a handout in order to make a list of facts about themselves and also practice "verb to be".</p> | <p>Open discussion on the importance of the English language;</p> <p>Diagram on the board about the use of English in students' lives now and the reason why they believe that they learn English at school;</p> <p>Discussion of words and expressions we, Brazilians, use in English on a daily basis.</p> |
| | Is the English language part of students' imagined identities? | <p>Activity</p> <p>'English is..' -</p> <p>Activity regarding "verb to be" in which students had to mark whether English is or is not necessary for their future</p> <p>All About Me-</p> <p>Activity in which after watching a video on the importance of English, students had to give reasons why they would "compromise" themselves to learn English</p> <p>Dream Board-</p> <p>Activity in which students had to draw or write dreams for the future and after that ponder whether English is or is not involved in their dreams</p> | <p>Open discussion about the videos watched;</p> <p>Teacher-student interaction regarding the relation of their drawings on the Dream Board and the importance of English for their futures.</p> |

Source: Author 's.

3.2 ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

In order to analyze the data collected through the exercises and practices from the didactic unit, the analysis procedure of this paper is in accordance with the principles of Exploratory Practice. For the Exploratory Practice, it is more important to understand the issue under study rather than solve problems (ALLWRIGHT, 2005).

According to Allwright (2005, p. 361) “Exploratory Practice is an indefinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting on with their learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom”. In this sense, with the activities proposed during the teaching unit used in the classes, I aimed to understand the relationship between students’ identity and English, and also generate collective understandings among teacher and students. The outcomes and answers from these activities, that were grouped according to their similarity, are the data to be analyzed in order to comprehend students’ beliefs.

4. RESULTS

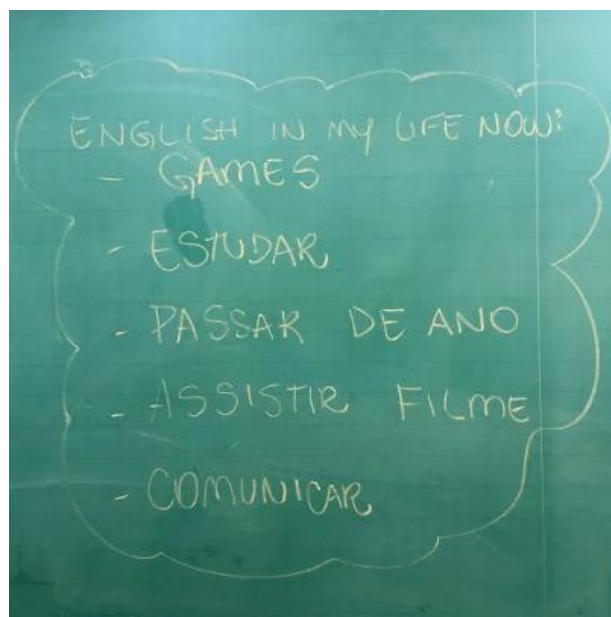
For a better organization of this paper, I divided the results section into two parts. In the first part, the mutual understandings, I wrote about the outcomes of the discussions that the students and I had together while in the classroom and what mutual understandings were achieved through the Exploratory Practice. For the second part, my understandings, I aimed at exposing the reflections and thoughts that I had while analyzing the classroom activities and interactions.

4.1. MUTUAL UNDERSTANDINGS

In order to understand if the English language is part of students' present identities, I asked them to mark, through the activity “English is..”, whether English is or is not important to their lives currently. In total, 15 students believe that English is important to their lives now, while 5 believe that English does not have an importance on their lives in the present moment. Aiming to comprehend their answers, we had a group discussion in which students had to say for what purposes they use English now. The outcomes of this discussion were summarized and written in the blackboard, shown in figure 1.

Figure 1⁹- Students’ understandings regarding English in their lives in the present moment

⁹ In English: English in my life now: games; study; be approved at school; watch movies; communicate.



Source:

teacher-researcher.

Students and

Even though some students marked that English is not present in their lives now, through the group discussion they realized that English indeed has space in their lives, being it through games, studies, movies or communication. Also, some students still perceive the language as a subject from school that they need to get enough grades to pass, and that would be the reason to study it.

After that, in the same activity “English is...”, I asked learners to mark whether they believe that English is easy or hard to learn. The results were that most of the students, 17 of them, believe that English is hard to learn, while only two marked that English is easy to learn. For that reason, I showed students pictures representing words derived from the English language that we, Brazilians, use in Portuguese on a daily basis. When they saw the pictures (mouse, show, ketchup, milkshake, cookie, “like” button from YouTube), they all were able to say what it was, and then students realized that they know some vocabulary in English, and that it is more used in our daily lives than they actually thought it was. Some students even remembered other used words, such as “drive thru”, “shopping” and “delivery”.

In order to start to get students to think about the relation that English might have with their future, that is, the English language as part of students’ imagined identities, first I showed the class the results of another question from the activity “English is..” in which they

had to mark whether English is or is not important to their futures. In this sense, 18 students marked that yes, English is important to their futures, while only one marked the opposite. There was also one student that created a new space in the activity and wrote “maybe”, even though it was not a possible answer.

Based on those results, we had a new discussion about the reasons why English is a mandatory subject that they all must learn through several years at school. With this discussion it was also possible to try to deconstruct the idea that they must learn English to get enough grades to be approved, which was a topic mentioned by students in the last group conversation. The main topics raised by students in the new discussion were written on the blackboard and are presented in figure 2.

Figure 2¹⁰- Why do we learn English at school?
Source: Students and teacher-researcher.



Through the group discussion students reached agreement that some reasons they believe English is studied at school would fit the purpose of helping them to get a job, travel, live abroad, go to the United States and more specifically to Disney, and in their studies. In this sense, through this discussion, students perceived English as a global language (CRYSTAL, 2003) that is taught at school for several reasons in the view of the fact that it is important in different spheres, influencing learners’ relationship with the language positively towards assuming a powerful position (GOMÉZ LOBATÓN, 2012) regarding their language learning process in the long run.

¹⁰ In English: English at school: job; studies; live abroad; travel; go to the U.S.A; Disney.

Next, so as to start deconstructing the view of English as a foreign language (LOPO RAMOS, 2021), I showed students two videos¹¹, one of them from an Indonesian girl saying facts about herself and the other called “Why Learn English”. With the first video, we were able to discuss that because the Indonesian girl is speaking English in her video it makes it possible for us, Brazilian English learners, to understand her, as if English was a “bridge” that had the power to connect people through communication. With the second video, students noticed different reasons why learning English is important, for instance, it is the language most used for international communication, a language that dominates in international arts, culture, entertainment and business, etc.

After watching both videos and discussing them, students did the activity “All About Me”, in which they had to complete the sentences with personal information, something similar to what they saw in the Indonesian girl’s video. In this activity, there was one question that students had to write reasons why they would learn English, as if it was a compromise they were making with the subject they will be studying through several years. Also, this activity aimed to practice the structure of the verb “to be” as an attempt of meaningful use of the language. One example of this activity is represented in figure 3.

¹¹ Video 1- Introducing myself in English. Available on: <https://youtu.be/GdIESpzmqDo>. Accessed on July 18th, 2022.

Video 2- Why Learn English. Available on: <https://youtu.be/Q1JdcvMv8yA>. Accessed on July 18th, 2022.

Figure 3- Activity “All About Me”

The image shows a student's completed worksheet titled "ALL ABOUT ME" in a banner at the top. The worksheet contains the following questions and handwritten answers:

1. MY NAME IS _____
2. I AM TEN YEARS OLD.
3. I WAS BORN ON September, twentyth
2. I LIVE IN BRAZIL
3. MY SCHOOL IS: _____
4. I AM A Student
5. MY TEACHERS ARE: _____
6. MY HOBBIES ARE: Play
7. MY FAVORITES:
 - MY FAVORITE ANIMAL IS Dog
 - MY FAVORITE COLOR IS BLACK, WHITE and aqua
 - MY FAVORITE FOOD IS Pizza Cordeiro
8. I WANT TO BE A/AN youtuber
9. I WILL STUDY ENGLISH BECAUSE:
Para quando eu precisar, para os estudos, porque eu gosto, para eu entender filmes

At the bottom of the page, there are three drawings: a star, a yellow notepad with a pen, and a red heart.

Source: Student's classwork.

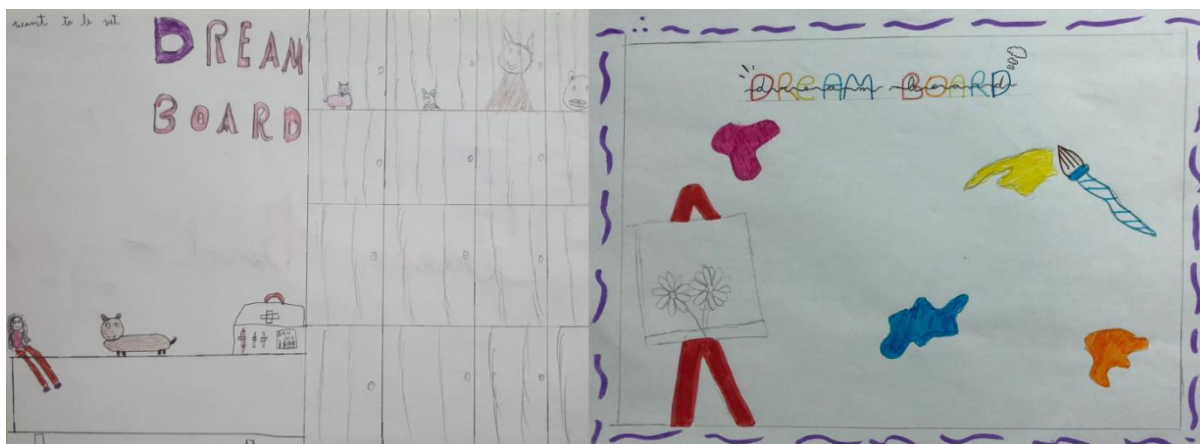
Students' answers on that question followed some patterns. There were nine of them that kept the same view of English for a specific purpose, saying that they would learn English to travel and go to the United States. In the other seven students' answers, it was possible to notice that they thought about the previous discussion when writing, since they said that they would learn English for communication with other people, work, study and to understand the “language of entertainment”. The last four students who answered the question only said that they would learn English because they know that it is an important language for their future, without giving much detail why.

In order to engage students into understanding if the English Language is part of their imagined identities, the next activity proposed was the “Dream Board”. In this activity, learners had to represent through drawing some hopes and wishes they have for their futures related to job, travel, things they want to do, have, etc.

Students' work ranged from illustrations of jobs, dream trips and wishes. Regarding the jobs, the ones mentioned were ballerina, youtuber, police officer, vet, doctor, artist, judge

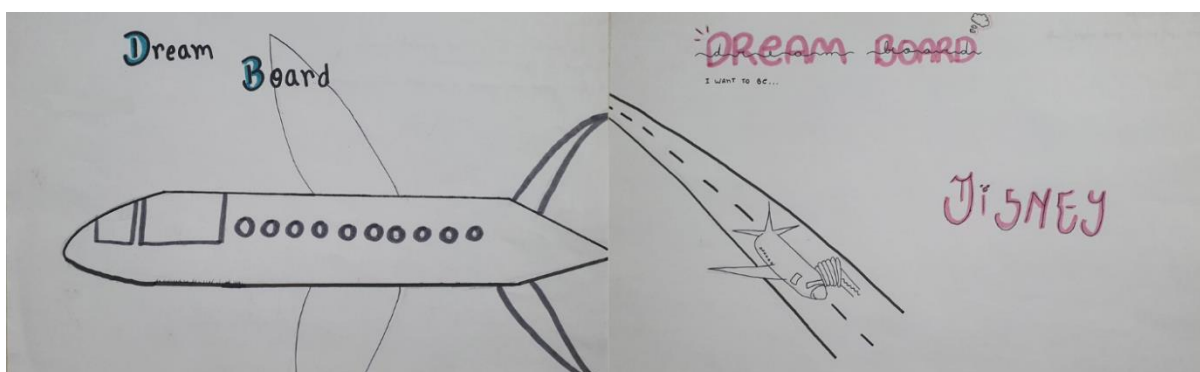
and artist. About the trips, students' most mentioned destinations were Disney and Japan. Students still mentioned wishes, such as to become a millionaire, to be famous and to go on a helicopter ride. Some final works are represented in figure 4, 5 and 6.

Figure 4- Examples of Dream Boards regarding jobs.



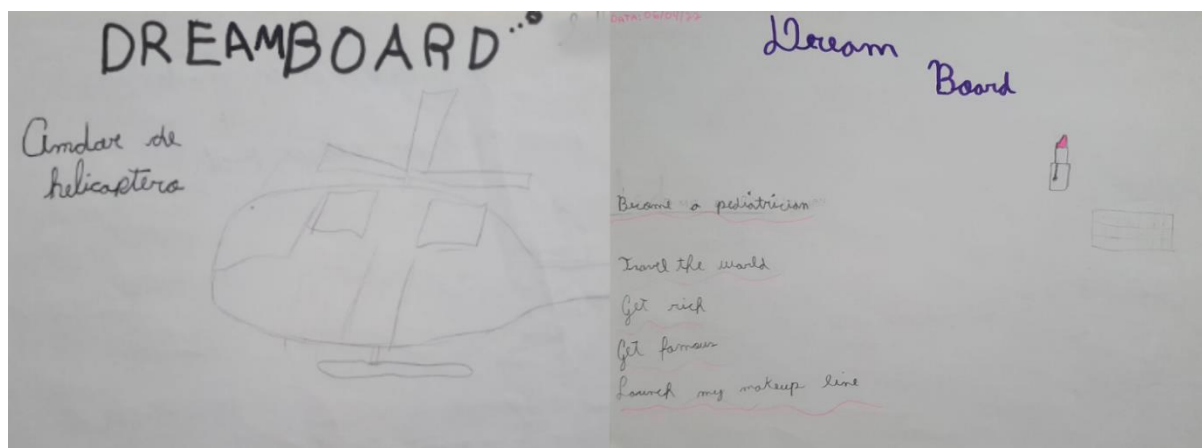
Source: Students' classwork.

Figure 5- Examples of Dream Boards regarding trips.



Source: Students' classwork.

Figure 6- Examples of Dream Boards regarding wishes.



Source: Students' classwork.

As students were creating their work, I went from desk to desk in an attempt of teacher-student interaction, in order to discuss a little about the space of English on their Dream Board. After finishing, students had to answer the questions “How is English present in your ‘Dream Board?’” and “Do you believe that English will be important for your dreams to come true in the future?”. Those questions were answered in Portuguese since learners did not have enough knowledge of vocabulary and structures to express themselves in the English language. Students’ answers were translated by me and are presented in table 2.

Table 2- Students’ Answer on the “Dream Board” activity

| Dream Board’s drawing | How is English present in your ‘Dream Board | Do you believe that English will be important for your dreams to come true in the future? |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Student 1- Coke’s factory in Japan | “I’m going to use English because maybe I will leave Brazil” | “Yes, because my dream is to leave Brazil” |
| Student 2- Airplane | “Travel” | “Yes, because I will need to communicate with other people” |
| Student 3- Airplane and Disney | “In communication” | “Yes, because I want to travel a lot” |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Student 4- Ballerina | “To go ballet touring” | “I want to travel the world touring as a ballerina” |
| Student 5- Youtuber | “With games, to read comments in English, to read games’ texts, etc” | “Maybe not” |
| Student 6- Police Officer | “Yes, it will be useful to communicate with foreigners” | “Yes, for my CV, to speak in English with other people” |
| Student 7- Disney | “It is present in everything” | “Yes, I need English to go to Disney” |
| Student 8- Helicopter Ride | “Yes, so I can understand the commands” | “Yes, to travel to other countries” |
| Student 9- Vet | “Because I can use [English] to speak with people, to read things” | “Yes, because I want to travel to the U.S.A” |
| Student 10- Police Officer | “To be in other country, maybe work there” | “Yes, to travel” |
| Student 11- Doctor | “Yes, because when a doctor get a medicine or the name of a disease, they need to know English” | “Yes because for the work that I want [I] need to know English” |
| Student 12- Police Officer | “Yes because I will be a police officer in Chicago” | “Yes because in Chicago they speak English” |
| Student 13- “Become a pediatrician/ travel the world/ get rich/ get famous/ launch my makeup line” | “To travel, to become a pediatrician, to be famous”. | “Yes, to travel, etc.” |
| Student 14- Judge | “For when someone from the U.S.A appear” | “Yes, when I go to another country” |
| Student 15- A company | “Yes, for when I meet with foreigners” | “Yes, for foreigners” |
| Student 16- Vet | “College, [read] medicine’s instructions” | “Yes, to travel, to communicate, etc” |
| Student 17- Vet | “Because I will travel to all places” | “A little” |
| Student 18- Artist/painter | “To exhibit my art pieces in the future” | “Yes, travel” |

Source: Authors’.

After the teacher-student interaction, students were able to think of how English is present in their dreams for the future. Some learners mentioned ways that English will be useful for their work, for example, “To exhibit my art pieces in the future” and “College, [read] medicine’s instructions”. Some could perceive the importance of English for communication, for instance, “Because I can use [English] to speak with people, to read things” and “With games, to read comments in English, to read games’ texts, etc”. In essence, almost all students could make a relation between English and what they had drawn.

When answering the second question, “Do you believe that English will be important for your dreams to come true in the future?”, some students were, again, able to make a connection with what they had drawn on the Dream Board, for instance “I want to travel the world touring as a ballerina” and “Yes because for the work that I want [I] need to know English”. However, most of them still wrote about English for the specific purpose of traveling “Yes, when I go to another country” or specifically going to the United States, such as “Yes, I need English to go to Disney”, “Yes, because I want to travel to the U.S.A”, and “Yes because in Chicago they speak English”.

In general, the use of the Exploratory Practice in this research involved me and students in understanding, through the activities and practices, the relationship between students’ identities and the English language. Although there were only six classes and we were not able to continue developing our thoughts on the topic, the little we worked on brought us together in trying to find meaning in studying English and perceiving the language as part of our lives.

4.2. MY UNDERSTANDING

After analyzing the activities and understandings undertaken by me and students while in the classroom and based on the literature, I had some significant insights as a teacher-researcher of my own practice. Regarding the discussion “English in my life now”, it was possible to notice that the class still has a view that the English they learn is also used to get enough grades to pass the subject at school, being the grades the reason to study English, not a consequence of their learning.

This could also be linked to the result of the activity “English is..”, in which 17 students marked that English is hard to learn. Although they are in 6th grade, that means, it is the first year that they are having the English subject in the curriculum, students already come

to class believing that English is difficult, and this might lead to a future self-exclusion (LEFFA, 2007) from learning the language.

Concerning the discussion “English at school”, it is notable that students still have a tendency of perceiving English as a foreign language (LOPO RAMOS, 2021), more used for traveling and working abroad. Even after discussing about the space of English in their lives now, students could not explicitly mention in the new discussion reasons why they learn English at school that would apply to their needs in the present moment, keeping a view that English is used for specific purposes, such as traveling to the United States.

After that, in the activity “All About Me”, some students’ behavior might have interfered in their change of perception. Even though some students were able to think of deeper reasons why learning English is important, it was notable that some of them could not develop critical thinking on the issue, keeping the same view that they will only use English for traveling abroad. Perhaps the lack of focus of some students on the classes and discussion, and also their disruptive behavior in some moments might have hindered their learning, consequently not properly participating in the discussion and not answering the proposed question with different or new arguments. Unfortunately, this posture might lead to learners’ powerless position regarding the classroom environment (GOMÉZ LOBATÓN, 2012), influencing students’ relationship with the English language in the present and future.

In the last activity performed, the “Dream Board”, when asked if English was going to be important for their dreams to come true in the future, still most of the students wrote about English for the specific purpose of traveling. Perhaps, most of them indeed dream of traveling the world or maybe because when thinking about the English language, still what comes first into their minds is the usage of English outside of Brazil, more specifically in the United States. In any case, most students are at least a little more aware of the importance of English, including the language on their imagined identities (NORTON; TOOHEY, 2011).

In essence, it was possible to notice that students have a view of the English language strongly connected to the United States and thought of being used only if they leave Brazil, reaffirming it many times during different activities. Even though I tried to relate English to students’ present and imagined identities through the classroom practices, I believe that more classes and discussions would be necessary in order to start perceiving more significant changes of perception, although the understanding that we accomplished together through this exploratory work was already a great starting point.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on studies of identity (SILVA, 2000), language, culture and identity (COELHO; MESQUITA, 2013), imagined communities and imagined identities (NORTON; TOOHEY, 2011), English as a foreign language (LOPO RAMOS, 2021), and English as a global language (CRYSTAL, 2003) the purpose of the current study was to understand, through the principles of Exploratory Practice (ALLWRIGHT, 2005), learners' relationship with English and whether the language is part of students' present and imagined identities. In this sense, The mutual understanding achieved by me and students in this exploratory work, through the use of a didactic unit developed for the classes, ranged from discussions of the importance of English in the learners' lives now, reasons for studying English at school, and the space of English in their futures.

It was possible to notice that students' view of English was sometimes limited, being associated mainly with the United States and therefore not seen as part of their identities. However, through the activities and discussions, I believe that students started to perceive how the language is present in their lives now and how it relates to their futures, being then more aware by the end of the didactic unit of the status of the English language in the world and therefore its space on their present and imagined identities.

As I analyzed the outcomes of the activities from the didactic unit, I could observe that students still have a strong view of English as a Foreign Language. In their perception, English would be used only if traveling abroad or when speaking with natives from the United States, holding a view that English belongs only to this specific country. For that reason, more classes and discussion on the matter would be necessary in order to continuously remind students of the importance of English in a globalized world, being present in several areas of life and not only for the specific purposes mentioned, as well as being spoken by a large diversity of people from different countries that have and don't have English as a mother tongue.

Also, since the Exploratory Practice is based on the classroom activities, another limitation of this didactic unit implementation would be students' low level of English, being necessary most of the time to have discussions in Portuguese instead of in the target language. For better outcomes through Exploratory Practice I suppose that being with students for a longer period of time, rather than only six classes, could bring more significant results to the goal to be achieved, since we could develop through time more skills necessary to communicate better in English while engaging everyone on the issue under study, making it a continuous endeavor to involve language learning and social practice.

All things considered, I believe that this exploratory work was important to my practice as a teacher-to-be, since through that I was able to prepare a didactic unit, be in contact with students and understand a little more about the relationship that they have with the English language. Also, the activities presented here can be an inspiration for teachers who want to attempt to understand students' identity relation with English or even go further and try a change of perception regarding the reasons for learning English at school.

In conclusion, through the Exploratory Practice, it was feasible to raise students' awareness on the importance of the English language in their lives now and the space that this language might have in their futures. Hopefully, this short period of discussions and activities will have a great impact on their path as language learners, making them feel a little more participants of the English speakers community and consequently understand the language as part of their identities.

A língua inglesa na identidade presente e imaginada dos alunos: uma prática exploratória em escola estadual

RESUMO:

À medida que os alunos começam a aprender inglês na escola, perceber esta nova língua como parte de sua identidade pode ser um fator chave para assumir uma posição de poder em relação ao seu processo de aprendizagem. Baseado em estudos sobre identidade e aprendizagem de línguas, este artigo visa compreender, por meio dos princípios da Prática Exploratória, a relação dos aprendizes com o inglês e se a língua faz parte de suas identidades presentes e projetadas. Os resultados, aqui apresentados como entendimentos mútuos, foram alcançados pela professora e alunos por meio de uma unidade didática para seis aulas, implementada em uma escola pública com alunos do 6º ano. Esses entendimentos mútuos expressam que foi possível conscientizar os estudantes sobre a importância da língua inglesa em suas vidas no presente momento e o espaço que essa língua possa ocupar em seus futuros, embora ainda sejam necessárias mais aulas para uma mudança significativa de percepção sobre as diversas razões para se aprender a língua inglesa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Prática exploratória. Língua inglesa. Identidade.

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