

## UNDERSTANDING ‘ENGLISH AS A *LINGUA FRANCA*’ (ELF) THROUGH THE ‘ABOLISHING, PRESERVING AND TRANSCENDING’ (*AUFHEBUNG*) MOVEMENT: ENLIGHTENMENTS ON O’REGAN’S MARXIST CRITICISMS TOWARDS ELF

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- **ABSTRACT:** This is an analytical paper that fits within a specific and controversial dispute faced by English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) scholars, which still reverberates in studies, within the field of Applied Linguistics. The ELF field has been questioned during its development; the fiercest criticisms seem to have derived from a Marxist stance. In this scenario, departing from four significant articles depicting the ‘attacks and defenses’ published in the Applied Linguistics journal between the years of 2014 and 2015, this paper aims to analyze these publications elucidating some of the points of disagreement that the authors present to subsequently put forward a different understanding on ELF, one sublated by a Marxist epistemological stance, capable of answering to some of O’Regan’s criticisms addressed towards this field. The Marxist epistemological stance of this study derives from its affiliation with Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical approach to human development based on dialectical and historical materialism. In this vein, this paper attempts a dialectical movement of *aufhebung* proposing to abolish, preserve and transcend some aspects of ELF still open to such criticism, while dialectically proposing ELF as a Vygotskian scientific concept and then, endeavoring to answer to some of O’Regan’s criticisms.
- **KEYWORDS:** English as a *lingua franca*; marxism; Vygotsky; applied linguistics.

### Introduction

English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) is a perspective for the teaching and learning of English that, according to Kohn (2019), offers a conceptual framework with its focus on the success of English communication; in this sense, ELF assumes that language learning is a creative construction, and so, recognizes the implications of the pedagogical status of Standard English (SE) while also advocates for the legitimacy of creative uses of this language.

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Considering this context, ELF has been intensely present in Applied Linguistics studies for more than 20 years, and even after all this time, scholars still have to answer some criticisms — mostly aligned to the fact that this field challenges the privileges given to the English (normative) language. Although, one of the founders of the ELF field, Jenkins (2018), asserts that most critiques have been clarified; one critique in specific seems to remain unanswered for, what appears to be, some misunderstandings about its roots. In this concern, it is an analytical paper that aims to fit within a very specific controversial situation that entangles the field of English as a *Lingua Franca* with Marxism. Therefore, this paper’s analysis and reflections depart from four significant publications available in the *Applied Linguistics* journal:<sup>1</sup> O’Regan (2014), Baker, Jenkins e Baird (2015), Widdowson (2015) and O’Regan (2015).

The discussions ignited by the aforementioned articles are important as their contents are materialized in many ELF articles, although not always recognized by readers not aware of this impasse in the field. To clarify this statement, it is possible to pinpoint some occurrences of the fact mentioned with few chronologically local and global examples of such materialization. The presence of the discussions initiated by the four mentioned articles can be observed in one paper written by the Brazilian ELF scholar Telma Gimenez (2015, p. 81, our translation) who, in the same year that the replies to the first critique by O’Regan were published, pointed out that “many restrictions towards ELF studies derive from the contact with less recent literature or divergences resulting from theoretical perspectives different from the ones adopted by ELF scholars”.<sup>2</sup> She also mentioned, in a footnote, as an example of such criticisms of ELF “O’Regan’s view, based in Marxist studies, that situate English in a political economy prism”. Another example of the repercussion of the aforementioned four publications can be found in Schmitz (2017, p. 335). This Brazilian ELF scholar explained, already in the abstract, that his “paper is motivated by the reading of [O’Regan’s] “English as a *Lingua Franca*: An Immanent Critique [...]”, for this reason, he would construct his arguments opposing to the ones presented by the Marxist-oriented original paper. In a more global sphere, the debate carried out by the four publications that ‘make the stage’ of this paper can be found in Jenkins (2018, p. 597). In her article, she mentions that “anti-ELFers [...] who dislike the phenomenon of ELF [...] published attacks on ELF from [...] various other ideological persuasions including Marxism”.

Considering the materializations of such ‘dispute’ ignited by the publication of the four articles in the *Applied Linguistics* journal (2014–2015), ELF and Marxism have been related in a tangle of ideas and discussions that are spread and present, directly or indirectly, in many other studies. In this context, I, as a researcher from a Vygotskian Marxist background, also interested in ELF, felt motivated (borrowing Schmitz’s expression) to tentatively add to this discussion. In this context, based on the readings

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/applij/pages/About>. Access on: 17 nov. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Original: “muitas restrições aos estudos do ILF resultam ou do contato com literatura menos recente ou de divergências resultantes de perspectivas teóricas distintas das adotadas pelos estudiosos do ILF” (Gimenez, 2015, p. 81).

of both areas, I consider that what might be missing is a further understanding of the dissimilar epistemological stances of the areas; or in other words, the understanding of the essence (in a Marxist sense) of the points of disagreement presented by each part.

Regarding this understanding, the objective of this paper then is to analyze the four aforementioned studies in an attempt to elucidate some of the points of disagreement that the authors present to subsequently present a different understanding of ELF, one sublated by a Marxist epistemological stance, in an attempt to answer to some of O'Regan's criticisms addressed towards the ELF field.

As this paper aims to tackle a very specific situation that relates the ELF field to Marxism, it is out of its scope to introduce both areas. Nonetheless, it is essential to revisit the series of publications that make the stage of this discussion, before moving to the explanation of divergent points, in order to situate the reader who is unfamiliar with this quarrel.

### **The motion and rebuttals — a brief overview of the series of publications that make up this scenario**

The controversies that are going to be discussed here have started with the publication of an article by O'Regan (2014) who develops studies within a Marxist perspective associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and had ELF subjected to an Immanent Critique. This publication generated answers from a group of ELF scholars in the form of two articles, released in 2015, along with a rebuttal from O'Regan, himself. Critiques towards ELF seem to be considered by Jenkins (2018) to be divided as follows:

‘anti-ELFers’ divided broadly into two camps, one who dislikes the phenomenon of ELF because of its threat to ‘Standard’ English (whatever they mean by this ambiguous term), and the other who (mistakenly) sees the ELF research paradigm as proposing a new monolithic kind of English: a new global standard (Jenkins, 2018, p. 597).

In sum, O'Regan's Immanent Critique appears to have been the most memorable ‘critical appraisal’ of the ELF field as it has generated replies from widespread ELF scholars. To expose the publications in focus, the next subsection briefly presents the article that has set this quarrel into motion: the Immanent Critique by John O'Regan (2014).

### **The motion — English as a *Lingua Franca*: An Immanent Critique (O'Regan, 2014, p. 533–552)**

John O'Regan has probably become the fiercest critic of ELF claiming “[...] that the ELF movement is ideologically conservative, is inconsistent in its arguments and is

lacking in theorization” (O’Regan, 2014, p. 534). With harsh comments towards ELF, and as pointed out by him, based on the method of the Immanent Critique, O’Regan (2014, p. 534) makes clear in the very beginning of his article that his paper is not towards ELF’s “linguistic structural merits”, but rather

[...] to do something different, which is to confront the ELF movement with its contradictions and absences which its own texts reveal and, as part of this, to question its theoretical adequacy whilst also uncovering its ideological presuppositions. The immanent critique [...] can thus be understood as a critical, as well as historical-social reading of ELF movement discourse and theory as this, is presented in its own texts. (O’Regan, 2014, p. 536).

In this sense, he states that the “ELF movement discourse is marked by slippage” (O’Regan, 2014, p. 536), as it seems to present postmodernist, poststructuralist, and transformational discourses based on apparently three theories about globalization: hyperglobalism, skepticism, and transformationalism. Moreover, he adds that research on ELF presents methodologies that contradict its discourse as some studies adopt positivist and objectivist research models.

O’Regan criticizes that it is only through the hypostatization<sup>3</sup> of English in the form of *lingua franca* that ELF theorists can make it look ‘real/material’. He presents as examples the terms ‘written in ELF’, ‘communication via ELF’, and ‘users of ELF’ found in ELF articles as examples of the hypostatization practice. According to O’Regan, this hypostatization is the formula for the well-established ELF authors, and also the new ones, to be able to identify ELF as a research area.

To sum up O’Regan’s criticisms, it is worth highlighting his statement that there is fetishism in ELF studies that seems to assert ELF as ‘one thing in itself’. According to the author, this displays a false consciousness to legitimize itself by blurring the distinctions of class, economy, gender, and race, which reinforces the position of something mystical and unreal, a ‘thing-in-itself’.

## The Forum rebuttals

Following the publication of O’Regan’s article in December of 2014, in the Forum section of the first issue of the Applied Linguistics journal, in 2015 (v. 36, n. 1), two responses to O’Regan’s article, plus O’Regan’s own rebuttal, were published. The first rebuttal to O’Regan’s (2014) paper is written by Baker, Jenkins, and Baird (2015, p.121–123) entitled “ELF researchers take issue with ‘English as a *lingua franca*: an

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<sup>3</sup> The Japanese philosopher and interpreter of Marx named Hiromatsu equals hypostatization with the marxist concept of reification. In this sense, he “redefines reification as the hypostatizing misconception of what is actually a functional relation” (Hiromatsu, 2022, p. 4).

immanent critique”, the second one was done by Widdowson (2015, p.124–127) and is entitled “Contradiction and Conviction: A Reaction to O’Regan”. In addition to these two papers, one may also find O’Regan’s (2015, p. 128–132) reply to both articles entitled “On Anti-Intellectualism, Cultism, and One-sided Thinking. O’Regan Replies”.

Turning the attention to Baker, Jenkins, and Baird’s (2015) response to O’Regan’s article, it is possible to observe that these scholars present arguments on the hypostatization issue. From the viewpoint of these authors, ELF is hypostatized as a product of O’Regan’s own interpretation in which he indicates ELF researchers as part of the “ELF movement”. Working on the contradictory points, the authors recall that it was O’Regan himself who chose to use the term “ELF movement” and they indicate that not even ELF scholars describe themselves in such a manner.

Besides that, Baker and colleagues also highlight that O’Regan’s (2014) critique represented ELF as a homogeneous research area composed of well-established interests and philosophies. Also, and yet contradictory to his own view of ELF as homogeneous, O’Regan indicates ELF has “slippages” within its body of research because of the tensions and competing discourses within its studies. In this manner, Baker and his collaborators claim that it is precisely the tensions and competing discourses within ELF studies that allow advances in the area to occur. They also pinpoint that those areas as interdisciplinary as Applied Linguistics commonly present discourses in tension in their body of research.

Following this, Baker, Jenkins, and Baird counterargue O’Regan’s criticism of ELF studies ignoring ‘ideology issues’. These authors state that the ELF body of research does raise such issues when discussing the native speaker ideology, standard language ideology, or even ELF researchers’ ideology. Baker, Jenkins, and Baird pinpoint that O’Regan’s failure to recognize how ideology is dealt with within ELF research is due to the fact that “he disagrees with the approaches taken so far because they do not accord with his own Marxist understanding of the issues” (Baker; Jenkins; Baird, 2015, p.122). In this vein, they contend that the treatment given to ideology, classes, capital, and power within ELF studies may differ from how O’Regan treats them in his Marxist perspective, and within this context, these ELF authors reply that “it is not realistic to expect one research field to be accountable in terms related to another” (Baker; Jenkins; Baird, 2015, p. 122).

Finally, this trio of scholars argues that O’Regan described ELF in a way that few ELF researchers would recognize, and, in their understanding, this fact alone weakens O’Regan’s immanent critique since the purpose of an immanent critique is to “evaluate the field in its own terms” (Baker; Jenkins; Baird, 2015, p.122).

Moving on to Widdowson’s response to O’Regan’s (2014) article, it can be said that Widdowson took O’Regan’s arguments on a more personal level. According to Widdowson, he also felt provoked to respond to O’Regan, but his response is not directed towards what was said about English as *Lingua Franca*, but rather on how the argument in O’Regan’s article was built. Widdowson states that he took O’Regan’s article personally for two reasons:

[f]irst, O'Regan's paper derives from discussions of a Marx reading group at the University of London Institute of Education, and presumably represents their way of thinking. As a former member of the academic staff of that institution, I am naturally curious to learn about the kind of intellectual activity its present members of staff are currently engaged in. Secondly, since Applied Linguistics, according to its notes to contributors, requires articles 'to represent outstanding scholarship', I am interested, as a founding editor of the journal, in seeing what kind of article is now deemed to meet this requirement. (Widdowson, 2015, p. 124).

After exposing the motivation behind his reply, Widdowson, too, presents his counter-argument to O'Regan's hypostatization issue. He points out that, according to O'Regan (2014), when researchers of ELF refer to "'interactions in ELF' or 'ELF settings' or 'ELF speakers', ELF is inevitably invoked as a hypostatized object" (Widdowson, 2015, p. 125) through the use of noun phrases which might mean that

[i]f all nominalization invokes hypostatization, then speakers of English – of whatever stripe – are condemned out of their own mouths (so to speak) to accept a very partial and inadequate version of reality. And anybody learning the language would, of course, be obliged to subscribe to this version. Here, O'Regan might have gone on to make an even more subtle point, and one which would lend support to his argument about the hegemonic use of English in the exercise of power which he accuses 'the ELF movement' of failing to take into account. Here his position is essentially the same as that of Phillipson, whom he quotes with approval, namely that calling something ELF does not alter the fact that it is English, essentially the same thing however it is used, whatever form it takes. English is thus hypostatized as a 'bounded entity' everywhere, the preserve of power and privilege and an instrument of oppression. (Widdowson, 2015, p. 125–126).

Finally, he concludes his reply by observing that what had him disturbed the most about O'Regan's (2014) article was his epistemological intolerance. At the end of his paper, Widdowson states that his rebuttal does not emerge from a concern about the problems with the ELF research and its field, because all areas of research present problems that should be critically analyzed; however, this author indicates that what generated his reply was the lack of critical thinking in O'Regan's article that was "conspicuous by its absence" (Widdowson, 2015, p.127).

Moving on to O'Regan's (2015) right to reply to the comments presented by the aforementioned papers by researchers from the ELF field, the author of the immanent critique initially directed his responses to Widdowson's (2015) rebuttal pointing out that the scholar was superficial in addressing his immanent critique and the hypostatization

issue. He describes Widdowson's answer as just a pretext that the ELF scholar found to question his scholarship and to accuse him of being a Marxist fundamentalist. In this Forum piece, O'Regan indicates that he will not defend himself against Widdowson's cursory criticism as he prefers to leave the results of this quarrel for readers to decide. However, O'Regan takes a more direct stance regarding Widdowson's insinuation that he and his Marxist group do not engage in critical thinking. O'Regan indicates he considers this insinuation of an anti-intellectualism content in which he understands that ELF scholars dismiss theoretical elaborations, such as the one made by him, for the simple reason that these are not welcome.

In addition, O'Regan (2015) reinforces that the multiple approaches that he took to describe 'ELF epistemology' and 'truth' throughout his article could demonstrate how different and deeply confused the epistemological positions presented in ELF literature are. He continues in his 'second-round' rebuttal stating that his 2014 article does indeed bring relevant points such as the fact that ELF is projected into the material world as the hypostatization of a thing-in-itself. O'Regan then replies to Widdowson's mention of the fact that all English speakers hypostatize things in the form of noun phrases, as he, himself, did in his article when citing 'the ELF movement' (a fact that Widdowson highlighted in his answer as a slippage on O'Regan's part). However, O'Regan defends himself by saying that the ELF's hypostatization found in his article, highlighted by Widdowson as a contradictory slip, is not fatal to his argument. Striking back he states that the same cannot be said about what ELF studies do, indicating this fact as being the main finding of his Immanent Critique.

Continuing his reply, O'Regan comments on Baker, Jenkins, and Baird's (2015) article blaming the ELF researchers for not

[...] dealing with any of the substantive points: the ideological fetishism of 'ELF', the elitism of 'ELF' research, the conflation of learners with users in 'ELF' literature, the near total neglect of the political economy of English(es) under conditions of neoliberal global capitalism, and the central issues of the theoretical incommensurability and epistemological contradiction, [preferring] instead to push the discussion elsewhere. (O'Regan, 2015, p. 129).

O'Regan alludes that not dealing with criticisms received is a common practice for those who come to defend the ELF field. He states that normally ELF advocates instead of directing their efforts to present arguments against the criticism they receive, usually accuse the critics of having misunderstood or misinterpreted the area. O'Regan cites the response received by Baker, Jenkins, and Baird (2015) as an example of this selective practice. In this sense, O'Regan (2015) implies that Baker and colleagues almost did not give further arguments to the issues raised in his 2014 paper, "[o]nly on the last point do they speak to a substantive argument [...] they do so only in a superficial and selective way" (O'Regan, 2015, p. 130). For this reason,

O'Regan states that wholly maintains his critique on the incommensurability of the nature of the ELF theory.

Having presented the main arguments put forward by the four aforementioned papers, I feel, as a reader from both areas, that some of O'Regan's critique may not have been understood by ELF scholars, even right now, as they may be out of the horizon (Löwy, 2000) of 'non-marxist' readings and/or theories. Under this impression, in the next section, I attempt to elucidate some of the critiques made out by O'Regan (2014), as well as their essence to potentially clarify the reasoning behind them and the reasons they keep unanswered.

### **A tentative elucidation of O'Regan's (2014) arguments**

It seems that the publications mentioned earlier sparked in some other authors an intention to clarify and aggregate the arguments presented by both sides of the quarrel (Schmitz, 2017; O'Regan, 2016; Ishikawa, 2015; Gimenez, 2015). However, even considering these publications, it is possible to say that the number of studies relating ELF to any stance aligned with Marxism is scarce. This lack of related works can be understandable since Marxism and ELF have their objectives towards different conditions of society which, as Barbosa (2009) points out, imply different understandings of scientific and political procedures. In this context, Marxism approaches must depart from the (dialectical) historical materialism, while ELF is developed from varied constructs (multi-/pluri-/translingualism and decoloniality, to cite a few). In light of this, set in the field of Applied Linguistics (AL), ELF is developed within what Moita Lopes (2009) calls "Indisciplinary Applied Linguistics", which, according to Pennycook (2010), has as characteristics some influences of 'new turns' in social sciences. This might be the reason for ELF, being subscribed to this 'new postmodern AL turn', to be formulated through varied frameworks. All in all, ELF is developed within a postmodern paradigm.

In this vein, Lyotard (2009) explains that postmodernity is the current condition of society and its major feature is the invalidity of universal truths. In this author's view, this refusal to accept grand narratives moved the focus of valid parameters from the collective social life to the isolated persons that form such a collective. In other words, micronarratives now serve as parameters for the validity of truth. Postmodernity, which is the most developed form of society, emerges negating its previous condition (modernity) entirely. Löwy (2000) indicates that this movement negates altogether the three main, and yet very different, schools of thought found within the modern paradigm: positivism, historicism, and Marxism.

From the appointments made so far, it is possible to observe that the invalidity of universal truths assumed by a postmodern school of thought leads to basilar differences between ELF's and Marxist's roots. This understanding might make Baker, Jenkins, and Baird's (2015, p. 122) statement of "it is not realistic to expect one research field



to be accountable in terms related to another” more robust; not only because it may imply the fact that ELF and Marxist studies, of any strand, might not only understand social conditions differently; but mostly, and more importantly because these distinct understandings imply distinguishable ways of questioning and responding to social problems. In sum, hardly ever will the ELF field, as it is originally proposed, be able to answer (or even question) societal issues the same way as a Marxist study.

Looking further at this point, as a reader of ELF from a Marxist epistemological base, the fact that the ELF field is established in postmodernity makes it very difficult to respond to issues, or even define objects and problematizations, that for Marxism (a modern school of thought) are considered as priorities. Löwy (2000) discusses this diametric relation when he highlights that different points of view might imply distinct values and ideologies, because:

[...] the problematization of a scientific-social investigation cannot be naively understood as just designing a study’s framework: the problematization defines a certain field of visibility (and non-visibility), the problematization also imposes a certain way of conceiving the specific objects circumscribing the limits of possible variations on the responses to be found. Values or ideology of the problematization reverberate on the group researching a specific topic/subject, and it is acceptable that these ‘values and ideology’ might be questioned by scientists who do not share the same values or assumptions: they rightly refuse, from their point of view, to stand on a minefield and accept a theoretical field that seems false to them beforehand. (Löwy, 2000, p. 41–42, our translation)<sup>4</sup>.

Bearing Löwy’s elucidation in mind, some of the criticisms that O’Regan (2014) directed towards the field of English as a *Lingua Franca* may sound reasonable as I understand that “Marxism is a whole world view”<sup>5</sup> that has as its main tenet the possibility of the proletariat’s emancipation through a social transformation: which calls for the abolition of class society. In sum, from a Marxist view on any subject, the extinction of class division is a mandatory/basilar issue. It is the starting point for any discussion in focus, and it is by far not in the field of visibility of ELF studies.

In this regard, the eradication of the capitalist society and its forms of production is outside of the scope of the ELF body of research given its field of visibility (Löwy, 2000), or affiliation; for this reason, ELF does not advocate for a real transformation of this society. In other words, ELF studies accept and adapt to the *status quo*. In this

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<sup>4</sup> Original: “A problemática de uma investigação científico-social não é somente um corte do objeto: ela define um certo campo de visibilidade (e de não-visibilidade), impõe uma certa forma de conceber este objeto, e circunscreve os limites de variação das respostas possíveis. A carga valorativa ou ideológica da problemática repercute, portanto, necessariamente sobre o conjunto da pesquisa e é normal que isso seja questionado pelos cientistas que não partilham estes valores ou pressuposições: eles se recusam, com razão, a partir de seu ponto de vista, a se situar sobre um terreno minado e aceitar um campo teórico que lhes parece falso de antemão” (Löwy, 2000, p. 41–42).

<sup>5</sup> The phrase is by Georgi V. Plekhanov quoted in Fetscher (1991, p. 347).

matter, Rajagopalan (2003) elucidates that Marxism is the only school of thought that considers philosophy and science as tools for social transformation; so, even if considered a hypothetical situation in which ELF studies tried, by any chance, to face issues such as the *status quo* of the class society and capitalism, yet, they would be unlikely to tackle them the same way as studies that assume a Marxist stance do. And this is because the answers found by the ELF field are already “largely predetermined by the very formulation of its questions [...] [as the] group of cognitive démarche is [also] addicted by the nature of the question” (Löwy, 2000, p. 41, our translation)<sup>6</sup> that ELF body of research presents. Once again, because ELF’s problematizations and field of visibility impose limits to the responses that can be found — class society is not the root of the problems or starting point of ELF studies. ELF scholars mainly advocate for the decentralization of the English native speaker as the (only competent) user/model while also unveiling that the full exploration of speakers’ linguistic repertoire (i.e. use of other forms of language, the ability to negotiate and adjust meaning) was sidelined by studies/fields interested in additional language acquisition/learning.

That said, it seems to me that although the ELF field does not aim at the transformation of society, in Marxist terms, it does not discredit the scientific merits and advances that ELF researchers have achieved. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the field of English as a *Lingua Franca* proposes transformations within its own controversies and tensions. Therefore, it is within this understanding that this elucidation of O’Regan’s arguments appears to be necessary.

It was aforementioned that the field of ELF develops itself based on a postmodern epistemology which, according to Lyotard (2009, p. xv, our translation), represents “[...] the position of knowledge in the most developed societies”,<sup>7</sup> that is bourgeois, and as such, are guided by efficiency and profit. Moreover, knowledge in the bourgeois society “is and will be produced to be sold, and it is and will be consumed to be valued in a new production: in both cases, to be exchanged” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 5). Under those circumstances, knowledge is transformed into a product/commodity that is sold and consumed, resulting in the abandonment of “any critical thinking about social injustice from the point of view of class society” (Norris, 1993 *apud* Fortes, 2014, p. 9, our translation).<sup>8</sup>

In this context, it seems licit to say that English (as knowledge) in this society has become a product to which not everybody has access. The neglect of this (capitalist) reality, where some have access to products that others do not — in other words, where human beings are alienated from the products historically developed in human society — matured with the Industrial Revolution and deepened into society as something given, as a natural situation. It is paramount to understand that this illusion of the ‘naturalness

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<sup>6</sup> Original: “largamente predefinido[s] pela própria formulação da pergunta [...] o conjunto da démarche cognitiva está viciado pela própria natureza da questão” (Löwy, 2000, p. 41).

<sup>7</sup> Original: “[...] a posição do saber nas sociedades mais desenvolvidas” (Lyotard, 2009, p. xv).

<sup>8</sup> Original: “qualquer pensamento crítico sobre a injustiça social do ponto de vista da sociedade de classes”. (Norris, 1993 *apud* Fortes, 2014, p. 9).

of capitalism’ is necessary for the maintenance of the capitalist society and its bourgeois state (its *status quo*). In this sense, it is paramount to highlight that not knowing the social reality in all of its forms (historical and social) with maximum depth is also a mandatory condition for the (re)production of the postmodern condition (Tonet, 2013). The maintenance of capitalism and the reinforcement of its ‘naturalness’ is based on the “exploitation of man by man, by social inequality, with all its consequences and on which his own (bourgeoisie) [and also the capital] existence depends” (Tonet, 2013, p. 53, our translation)<sup>9</sup>.

For the reasons presented, it is essential to understand that social classes mediate the relationship between individuals and society (Tonet, 2013), so elaborations on any social concern must consider class issues to denaturalize the *status quo* in a way that aims to confront and transform it. In this regard, it is possible to recognize that although ELF studies present arguments on issues such as ideology, power, and rights, they do not explore them with the desire of transcending/transforming the reality of the class society. Thus, it results in an adaptative position as such issues seem treated as isolated from reality (this society is divided into two antagonistic classes) and considered the source of the problems discussed in the field.

The problematization/issues that the field of English as a *Lingua Franca* proposes to answer “contains a [...] highly ideologically-charged conception of the social structure” (Löwy, 2000, p. 41, our translation)<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, if ELF is not challenging the *status quo* of a society divided into classes, it seems conceivable to imply that this area is developed (consciously or not) within the ‘adaptative limits’ of the society that is already established. That said, it is also essential to point out that although assuming a more ‘adaptative mode’, ELF studies do it in a non-hegemonic-imperialist way (within its limits), and this fact deserves its merits. In sum, from a Marxist stance, those critiques are valid as the ELF field (at its core) will not seek to openly challenge the social reality of this society — its division in classes — so, any counterhegemonic call ELF studies make presents their adaptative nature, but in a way they attempt to challenge the system within their own limits.

ELF does not propose this transformation, because transforming society is not in the ‘field of visibility’ (Löwy, 2000) of English as a *Lingua Franca* studies. To be clearer, this is an issue that only Marxism challenges, no other epistemological stance does so. However, bearing this in mind, I also understand that ELF studies have expanded discussions in the English Language Teaching (ELT) field bringing significant progress to the area of Applied Linguistics; on behalf of ELF scholars, I may point out that such inquiries were not directly in the field of visibility of Marxist linguists either.

It is possible to indicate as the main feature of research in ELF the re-conceptualization of the understanding of the different uses of the English language in contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> Original: “*exploração do homem pelo homem, pela desigualdade social com todas as suas conseqüências e da qual depende a sua própria (da burguesia) [e também o capital] existência*” (Tonet, 2013, p. 53).

<sup>10</sup> Original: “*contém já uma concepção [...] ideologicamente carregada da estrutura social*” (Löwy, 2000, p. 41).

society. Its discussions, if not yet provoking transformations in ELT, it is at least, questioning naturalized ideas as people are confronted with this new perspective. ELF studies, in fact, have developed continually; building from different areas (such as World Englishes) in an Interdisciplinary Applied Linguistics (Moita Lopes, 2009) movement that has postulated that ELF studies are expanding towards their third phase — ELF 3: English as a *Multilingua Franca* (Jenkins, 2015) — now, consciously located within the Multilingualism umbrella. Moreover, in a more localized stance, ELF developments have also ignited the Brazilian movement called ‘ELF made in Brazil’ (Duboc, 2019; Duboc; Siqueira, 2020), mostly based on decolonial epistemologies. In sum, ELF studies offer rich discussions for the English Language Teaching field that should be considered. The conceptualization that studies in ELF propose, from different perspectives, involves, among many things, the understanding that speakers who have English as an additional language should be treated/understood as legitimate speakers of English (or of many Englishes) as well as speakers who have this language as their mother tongue. The field of ELF is revolutionary within its own controversies because it seeks to transform the status of the derogatory ‘non-native speaker of English’ into the status of speakers or users of English (and many other languages) in their own right. No other view on additional languages has ever fully assumed this goal. Considering this claim, it is also understood that the field of ELF will not, and cannot, face issues related to the pursuit of transcending the class society due to the limitation on the scientificity imposed by its ideology/worldview which is the one sold by our reality — the capitalist one.

Despite the limitations presented, it does not seem right to plead for discarding ELF’s entire field as O’Regan (2014, 2015) seems to do. This does not appear to be the most appropriate way to act as studies in ELF present very significant advances in the understanding of today’s intercultural communication. Attempting to answer some of O’Regan’s criticisms, I acknowledge in this article the necessity to abolish, preserve, and transcend (*aufhebung*)<sup>11</sup> the understanding of ELF from the way it is constructed in an attempt to place ELF studies’ findings into an understanding that can, perhaps, be more aligned with a Marxist worldview that envisions the future in a non-class society. Furthermore, Marx himself could recognize the importance and value of the knowledge developed by the economist Ricardo — who Marx perceived as having a limited understanding of the internal aspects of bourgeois society and processes. Even being limited, Marx recognized that Ricardo could still unveil, up to some point, some of these aspects with an “undoubtful scientific value” (Löwy, 2000, p. 102). It seems odd that O’Regan openly denies recognizing or crediting some of “the merits of English as a *Lingua Franca*” (O’Regan, 2014, p.536).

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<sup>11</sup> *Aufhebung* is a German word hard to translate into English. This word represents the dialectic movement of negation and affirmation of something present in Hegel’s and Marxists’ writings. *Aufhebung* is usually translated as ‘sublation’ when put into English; however, this wording choice still misses some points contained in the German word. For this reason, it was decided to expose the three main aspects of the German word ‘*aufhebung*’ represented by the words ‘abolish, preserve, and transcend’. These three words have the potential to convey the ‘negation-affirmation’ movement. This way, ELF is being ‘negated’ as it is, but in a new conceptualization aspects of it are going to be ‘preserved’, ‘transcending’ the previous proposal.

All in all, it seems that the objective of analyzing the four publications available in the *Applied Linguistics* journal (O'Regan, 2014; Baker; Jenkins; Baird, 2015; Widdowson, 2015; O'Regan, 2015) elucidating some of the points of disagreement between these scholars has been reached. For this reason, in the next section, I tentatively put forward a different understanding of ELF: one sublated by a Marxist epistemological worldview which means that this attempt is going to be done within a Marxist stance through this paper's affiliation to Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical approach to human development. Based on Vygotskian psychology, that according to Elhammoumi (2002, p. 91) is "a theory of higher mental phenomena [...] [rooted] in dialectical materialism, the theory that historical changes in society and material life produce changes in the human mind". This paper endeavors a Marxist dialectical movement of *aufhebung* which proposes to abolish, preserve and transcend the dualistic notion of ELF — at times understood/presented as a theoretical field (ELF as theory) while, at others, it appears to be understood as a means of communication (ELF as a function/phenomenon). In light of all that was said, this last part of the discussion intends to strive for a 'new' notion of ELF, one that assumes ELF as a Vygotskian scientific concept that might be able to answer some of O'Regan's criticisms.

### **The *aufhebung* movement: ELF assumed as a Vygotskian scientific concept and the issue of hypostatization in O'Regan's arguments (2014, 2015)**

After the points presented in the previous sections, it appears that a Marxist reading of Vygotsky (Duarte, 2011) may help address some of O'Regan's (2014, 2015) critiques on the issue of the hypostatization/reification of English as a *Lingua Franca*.<sup>12</sup> That said, it is essential to observe that any research within the educational field in Brazil requires considering the national educational policy presented by the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC in Portuguese), whether agreeing to this document or not. Hence, a critical view of it is always necessary. In this sense, as a researcher, I acknowledge that BNCC puts forward the perspective of English as a *Lingua Franca* as the one to be adopted for the teaching and learning of the English language in Brazilian schools. Notwithstanding, while working with ELF from a Cultural-Historical Vygotskian background, I methodologically feel the pull to incorporate, — or, put in a better term — I must sublimate ELF findings: exposing the contradictions among these different worldviews in a dialectical and historical-materialist way.

Exploring the tensions between ELF and Cultural-Historical theory is necessary to enlighten the points that make them indeed different at their core. Moreover, in line

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<sup>12</sup> It is out of the objective of this paper to be able to address all aspects of O'Regan's critique. However, focusing on a few of them, this paper tried to unveil the different layers of the discussion he proposed that were discussed in the previous sections; which means moving the arguments from the discussions' appearance towards their essence. Moreover, as it may be seen as initially redundant, it is paramount to reinforce that the word/sign 'essence' throughout this study must be understood in Marxist terms as in the diad essence/appearance.

with Vygotsky (1987) — who has discussed the risks in the blending of ideas from different epistemological/methodological bases — I understand that there is a tendency of considering contradictions and tensions as secondary or exaggerated: it is within this rationale that the essence of different approaches usually ends up being erased or lost.

To avoid falling into this trap, I assume that embracing ELF as it is currently put in the field represents a difficulty (even a theoretical incoherence?) for studies following a Vygotskian perspective — recalling that each epistemological basis has its intellectual horizon and field of visibility which allows and restricts the kind of problems to be faced. Therefore, as a scholar and a language teacher, I consider as essential to abolish, preserve, and transcend (*aufhebung*) ELF's discussions in a way that openly puts forwards the need i) to abolish the neoliberal/postmodern conception of society in which the learning and teaching of the English language are centered; whereas ii) preserving the advancements made by the body of research related to ELF in order iii) to transcend the body of knowledge developed by the field of ELF.

All in all, here is brought into the scene a different understanding of the words/signs 'English as a *Lingua Franca*/ELF' (in Vygotskian terms);<sup>13</sup> one that in an *aufhebung* movement (Löwy, 2000) seeks to understand ELF, sublating its dualism: I) ELF sometimes understood as a theory, and/or, at times, also; II) understood as a function/phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> This paper proposes an understanding that incorporates the discussions made by the ELF area; one that considers that these signs carry a collective of systematic knowledge in which the meanings of ELF (word meaning) can "serve as a means for different intellectual operations and the different intellectual operations that are realized through the word [signs ELF/English as a *Lingua Franca*] underlie basic differences" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 160) "in which natural processes (spontaneous concepts) are transformed by higher-level processes (scientific concepts) over which [...] (human beings) exercise control" (Miller, 2014, p. 34).

In other words, the understanding of ELF that is being proposed here acknowledges that the signs (words) 'ELF' and 'English as a *Lingua Franca*' carry a systematic body of (fluid and ever-changing/advancing) knowledge that represents a scientific concept developed from syntheses of discussions carried out during all ELF's studies phases<sup>15</sup> (ELF1, ELF2, ELF3, and ELF made in Brazil). It is essential to observe that these signs gain their social and individual meaning through social usage that might function as a psychological tool for each reader, user, and/or scholar. These tools, once appropriated

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<sup>13</sup> An understanding of the concept of tools is essential in Vygotskian studies. Vygotsky (1987) indicates that in the world there are two types of tools: the physical ones (i.e. books, and hammers) and the symbolic ones, also called signs (i.e. language, and numeracy). Signs are psychological representations of reality that mediate the collective life of human beings. Language is a powerful psychological tool, being so, words (synonymously called signs) are the material carrier of word meaning (a psychological representation). So, in this text, the two distinct signs 'English as a *Lingua Franca*' also called 'ELF' carry the same word meanings.

<sup>14</sup> This dichotomy is one aspect of O'Regan's critique of the reification/hypostatization of ELF as a thing in itself (O'Regan, 2014, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Calling them phases may imply a linearity that misses the fact that studies situated in these 'different' approaches coexist; however, following Jenkins (2015), they are being called phases here.

and developed, mediate one's understanding of ideas presented by the field about the uses of the English language in the contemporary world. This comprehension of the sign ELF being used as a concept interweaves theory and practice. That is, the area's development impacts the functioning of one's mental activity after the sign's (re) appropriation and (ever-long) development; the concept of ELF internalized, in turn, influences the way one acts in the world.

Exploring further this idea, it is important to remember that Vygotsky's circle showed that signs have a social function as it is in the word (sign) that the union between thought and language is reflected through the socially constructed meanings. Words/signs are generalizations of things in the world, and in this vein, Martins (2011) points out that every word is a reflection in consciousness of a material representation — materiality — that is now converted into a symbol, or idea — that is, it is a concept; for it is in the symbolic world, now it is freed from the immediate surroundings. Furthering this idea, Duarte (2016) stresses that a material representation of a thing is not made by its materials but by the specificity of such a social object. In this sense, this author specifies that “[w]hat characterizes a book, for instance, it is not the paper and ink, for this way, there would not be digital books. The materiality, in this case, is only the support for the specificity of this social object” (Duarte, 2016, p. 30, our translation)<sup>16</sup>.

That said, this paper assumes that the word(s)/sign(s) ‘ELF/English as a *Lingua Franca*’ is “something reflecting something else”, as Martins (2011, p. 59, our translation)<sup>17</sup> has enunciated it. The signs ‘ELF’ and ‘English as a *Lingua Franca*’ represent — in their essence — communications among different people using English and, perhaps, also other languages. This is the signs’ ELF/English as a *Lingua Franca* materiality. These signs carry a concept that grasps the specificities of language understood as a social object (Duarte, 2016) with its “[...] essential, general, universal properties, setting common features and functions [...]” (Martins, 2011, p. 60, our translation)<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the “social and material conditions [discussed in ELF studies] dialectically interrelate with, and demonstrably contribute to, the formation of higher-order mental functions” (Lantolf; Thorne, 2006, p. 41). Being the concept of ELF developed into a psychological tool (a concept, a type of higher-order mental function) it has a dual directionality: outwardly directed at others, while also inwardly directed at the self. This dual orientation is paramount as while oriented inwardly, ELF as a sign can be able to promote one's new attitudes towards the use of the English language (self-regulation); whereas outwardly, it is directed toward others' regulation/mediation. “The sign [...] is a means of psychological action on behavior, one's own or another's, a means of internal activity directed toward mastering man himself” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 62).

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<sup>16</sup> Original: “[o]que caracteriza o livro, por exemplo, não é o papel nem a tinta, pois se assim o fosse não existiriam livros digitais. A materialidade, nesse caso, é apenas um suporte para a especificidade desse objeto social” (Duarte, 2016, p. 30).

<sup>17</sup> Original: “algo que reflete outro algo” (Martins, 2011, p. 59).

<sup>18</sup> Original: “[...] propriedades essenciais, gerais, universais, fixando traços e funções comuns [...]”. (Martins, 2011, p. 60).

In this regard, summarizing the reasons that make me disagree that ELF was hypostatized as ‘a thing in itself’; I see that being the conceptualization of English as a *Lingua Franca* ‘something reflecting something else’, the sign ELF captures the concrete-in-reality. There is a reality to it: the communications that occur in the world/nature in which English (among other languages) is used. This concrete-in-reality is converted by the studies as a concrete-in-thought. When scholars among their peers use the signs ELF/English as a *Lingua Franca*, they do it in a concretely determined abstraction which they usually functionally call ‘ELF as a theory’. Moreover, when they describe the mechanics of the communications they are studying there seems to be a tendency to functionally name them as ‘ELF as a phenomenon’ or even ‘ELF as a function’. In this sense, it is the generalization of what this sign (or signs) represent(s) that when objectified in concrete-in-thought (theoretical elaborations) transforms the one who appropriates/internalizes it, and in turn, dialectically transforms ELF itself through the varied elaborations seen in the field (including this one!).

All these movements of thought are possible because as Vygotsky (1987, p. 169) indicated: “the concept is not simply a collection of associative connections learned with the aid of memory [...]. At any stage of its development, the concept is an act of generalization”. That said, each person develops the concept of ELF in different ways as they appropriate the meanings that this sign/word carries: in different levels/depths according to one’s affordances and constraints. In this movement, while one objectifies the social meanings of ‘ELF/English as a *Lingua Franca*’, they are also transformed; it is not a passive copy, but an active construction of individualized meanings (sense). People do not learn/receive concepts in their full form, they develop them by the mediation of others — through articles or in-person interactions, for example. In this understanding, people who develop the concept of ELF, and internalize it, have one more psychological tool available to orient their practices that may continue developing as a lifelong process.

In this regard, considering that the meanings of a sign develop, the understanding of ELF presented by this article offers, yet, one more meaning for the signs English as a *Lingua Franca*/ELF, a transformed one that aligns better with Vygotskian’s studies without major epistemological clashes. This transformed understanding of these signs passed through a process of abolishing, preserving, and transcending movement — *aufhebung* (Löwy, 2000) — that allowed the sign English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) to be understood as a scientific concept.

In sum, this transformational movement of ELF, now understood as a scientific concept, implies that studies adhering to this proposed view must consider the abolishment of the neoliberal society when investigating the uses of the English language in the contemporary world. After tracing this path, I, as a researcher, believe that this conceptualization of ELF into a scientific concept may also offer a counterargument, at least in part, to the issue of hypostatization/reification indicated by O’Regan (2014, 2015). In this regard, the understanding is that ELF being a scientific concept allows scholars to see passing the appearance of communications, and through the abstractions



presented by ELF studies, the essence of such interactions is unveiled,<sup>19</sup> not only external manifestations of such uses (in a more structural view of language). The concept of English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) enables daily communications happening in the concrete-in-reality (material condition) to become concrete-in-thought (abstraction/theory) more holistically.

In this vein, this conceptualization of ELF as a scientific concept also allows the understanding that when ELF authors use terms such as ‘written in ELF, communication via ELF, users of ELF’ among other terms in their writings, these scholars are speaking through concepts: that means they are speaking in chunks. This is a robust kind of communication that requires a high level of intersubjectivity between the interlocutors since in a speech in chunks “the knowledge shared by speaker and listener can be so great that there is very little need to rely on external linguistic stimuli to convey a message” (Yakubinskii, 1923 *apud* Wertsch, 1985, p. 87). In this context, these linguistic stimuli do not represent forms of hypostatization of something abstract in the material world, as O’Regan (2014, 2015) indicated. On the contrary, such linguistic stimulus departs from the material world (concrete-in-reality) which was transformed into concrete-in-thought.

In this concern, the sentences ‘written in ELF, communication via ELF’ and many more do not mean ‘it is something written/communicated in a thing called ELF’ but recall a whole body of systematic knowledge that is accessed through the use of the ELF sign. In reality, these sentences bring back all the theoretical discussions that ELF studies produce and that the sign ELF symbolizes according to the level of formation that this concept has been developed by the interlocutors using it. In this sense, Vygotsky (1987, p. 193) indicates that “the scientific concept necessarily presupposes a different relationship to the object [...] that presupposes the presence of relationships of concepts to one another”. In this vein, such sentences are examples of speech in chunks which: I) save time during interactions whereas; II) require a high level of deliberate thinking (as it demands a systematic relation among concepts) and attuned to the attunement of one’s interlocutor to keep the flow of communication efficiently.

## Final remarks

After all the presented, it seems this article reached its objective: to analyze the four publications available in the journal *Applied Linguistics* (O’Regan, 2014; Baker; Jenkins; Baird, 2015; Widdowson, 2015; O’Regan, 2015) elucidating some of the points of disagreement that the authors of the aforementioned papers present to subsequently put forward a different understanding on ELF, one sublated by a Marxist epistemological stance, able to answer to some of O’Regan’s criticisms addressed towards ELF.

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<sup>19</sup> ELF studies explore the importance of accepting all English speakers as speakers in their own right which relates to issues of identity and norm, to cite just a few aspects.

This paper presented a reformulated way of understanding the signs ‘English as a *Lingua Franca*/ELF’, not considered here as a theory, much less just as the representation/description of the appearance of communications that has English as a language chosen to be used. It tried to offer a concrete-in-thought that recognizes it is in the signs ‘English as *Lingua Franca*/ELF’ that the meaning(s) of this concept is brought to consciousness and developed, dialectically transforming its users while the sign itself is transformed throughout history. Anchored in the dialectical and historical materialism, through a Vygotskian affiliation, it is assumed here that this transformation represents the objectification of the concrete-in-reality in concrete-in-thought; that is, “the synthesis of prior ideation and natural matter. Not just idea, not just matter, but a synthesis between the two, typically realized in and through labor, which gives rise to a new way of being: the world of human beings” (Lessa; Tonet, 2011, p. 42, our translation)<sup>20</sup>.

Discussions around the concept of English as a *Lingua Franca* are the result of an ongoing historical process that had, and still has, its origins in the expansion of the British colonies; development of the economic power of hegemonic countries; immigration of different people to these countries; technological advancement; digital age; globalization, and many other historical conditions necessary for English to assume the position of the more widely used contact language globally, becoming a *lingua franca*. These aspects were, and still are, objects of synthesis — pre-ideation/decontextualization of material-in-reality — of the ELF field, up to some extent, and they are part of the systematic body of knowledge that builds ELF as a scientific concept.

Not recognizing the importance of the scientific concept of English as a *Lingua Franca* in helping to understand the current material condition (material-in-reality) — its essence and appearance — is almost the same as denying the materiality that there are more English speakers as an additional language in the world than English speakers as a mother tongue (Mauranen, 2018). Not recognizing these changes in the material-in-reality we have now, and ignoring the need for a transformed way to conceive the use of English in the world (which this current material condition requires) means not recognizing the merits of ELF. Ignoring all this is almost a reactionary position of not accepting the concept of ELF, which seems to best depict the current material-in-reality, remaining attached to old concepts in a static manner, without accepting their possible historical transformations.

Finally, based on Marx’s dialectical and historical materialism, presented in this study through Vygotsky’s writings and scholars, the proposed understanding of English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) as a scientific concept represents an objectification from the social materiality enabled by the movement of abolishing, preserving, and transcending (*aufhebung*). This comprehension intersects spontaneous and scientific concepts thus erasing the dichotomy between theory and practice that has been historically developed

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<sup>20</sup> Original: “a síntese de prévia-ideação e matéria natural. Nem apenas ideia, nem só matéria, mas uma síntese entre as duas, tipicamente realizada no e pelo trabalho, que origina uma nova forma de ser: o mundo dos homens” (Lessa; Tonet, 2011, p. 42).

(Vygotsky, 1987). Moreover, and in parallel, in this movement of sublation (*aufhebung*), the discussions in this paper sought to develop answers to some criticisms rooted in a Marxist perspective towards the area of English as a *Lingua Franca* attempting to somehow contribute to the development of this field.

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LIMA, J. Compreendendo o ‘Inglês como Língua Franca’ (ILF) através da ‘superação por incorporação’ (*aufhebung*): esclarecimentos sobre as críticas marxistas de O’Regan em relação ao ILF. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.67, 2023.

- *RESUMO: Este é um artigo analítico que se enquadra em uma disputa específica e controversa enfrentada pelos estudiosos do Inglês como Língua Franca (ILF) que ainda reverbera em estudos no campo da Linguística Aplicada. O ILF, como área, foi questionado durante seu desenvolvimento e suas maiores críticas parecem derivar de uma postura marxista. Nesse cenário, a partir de quatro artigos que retratam os ataques e defesas publicados na revista Applied Linguistics entre os anos de 2014 e 2015, este trabalho objetiva analisar essas publicações, elucidando alguns de seus pontos de divergência para, posteriormente, apresentar uma compreensão sobre ILF superada por uma postura epistemológica marxista, com potencial de responder algumas das críticas que O’Regan dirige ao campo. A postura epistemológica marxista deste estudo deriva de sua filiação à abordagem histórico-cultural de Vigotski para o desenvolvimento humano embasado no materialismo histórico-dialético. Nesse sentido, este artigo tenta fazer um movimento dialético de *aufhebung*, propondo superar por incorporação (abolir, preservar e transcender) alguns aspectos que ainda possibilitam tais críticas ao ILF, ao mesmo tempo em que apresenta, dialeticamente, o ILF como um conceito científico vigotskiano para, então, tentar responder a algumas das críticas recebidas de O’Regan.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: inglês como língua franca; marxismo; Vigotski; linguística aplicada.*

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