

**“THERE COMES THE CLASS THAT I DON'T LEARN ANYTHING”: FAILURE IN THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

***“LÁ VEM A AULA QUE EU NÃO APRENDO NADA”: INSUCESSO NA APRENDIZAGEM DE LÍNGUA INGLESA COMO SEGUNDA LÍNGUA***

***“AQUÍ VIENE LA CLASE DE QUE NO APRENDO NADA”: EL FRACASO DEL APRENDIZAJE DEL IDIOMA INGLÉS COMO SEGUNDO IDIOMA***

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**ABSTRACT:** This article deals with the reasons that may influence the English language teaching and learning failure in the public school context. This research aimed to understand the factors that can influence the malfunction in the interaction between teacher and student in the classroom. Theoretical contributions to the teaching of English as a foreign language were used to understand the ways that the teaching has been understood. The data presented were obtained through a search in the available academic material concerning English language teaching in public schools. Three factors were found and highlighted as meaningful and which are directly hooked to the English learning and teaching failure.

**KEYWORDS:** English language. Public school. Teaching and learning.

**RESUMO:** *O presente artigo versa sobre os motivos que podem influenciar no insucesso do ensino e da aprendizagem de língua inglesa no contexto de escola pública. Buscou-se, com essa pesquisa, compreender os fatores que podem influenciar para o mau funcionamento na interação professor-aluno dentro da sala de aula. Foram utilizados aportes teóricos sobre o ensino de língua inglesa como língua estrangeira, para entender de quais formas o ensino vem sendo compreendido. Os dados apresentados foram obtidos através de uma pesquisa na literatura disponível sobre o ensino de língua inglesa dentro das instituições públicas de ensino básico. Foram encontrados e destacados três motivos que estão diretamente ligados ao insucesso na aprendizagem e ensino de língua inglesa.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Língua inglesa. Escolas públicas. Ensino e aprendizagem.*

**RESUMEN:** *Este artículo aborda las razones que pueden influir en el fracaso de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del idioma inglés en el contexto de la escuela pública. Esta investigación buscó comprender los factores que pueden influir en el mal funcionamiento de la interacción profesor-alumno dentro del aula. Las contribuciones teóricas sobre la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera se utilizaron para comprender de qué manera se ha entendido la enseñanza. Los datos presentados se obtuvieron a través de una búsqueda en la literatura disponible sobre la enseñanza del idioma inglés en las escuelas primarias públicas. Se*

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*encontraron y destacaron tres razones que están directamente relacionadas con el fracaso en el aprendizaje y la enseñanza del idioma inglés.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Idioma en inglés. Escuelas publicas. Enseñanza y aprendizaje.

## Introduction

### “It is the verb ‘to be’ every year and all year”: English in the public school system

That the English language in the public school system is marginalized, that is unquestionable. But why has the English language, so far, not yet gained a prominent role within the school curriculum? Especially in public schools.

To try to explain such reasons it is important that we start talking about how the teaching and learning of the English language works, which we will treat here as L2 in public schools, since English is taught in most schools as a second language. If we stop to analyze, in all the years of the final years of elementary school and the three or four years of high school, the only competence that is taught, or at least attempted, is the development of grammar or grammatical competence, which does not enable a person to speak a L2. About this, Anjos (2013, p. 44, our translation) states: “what is noticed is exactly the transmission of grammatical aspects”, which has a lot to do with this mechanical practice, reaffirmed in Siqueira (2005), when dealing with teaching and learning of a foreign language and culture, by arguing that if we don't use our experiences and knowledge to get to know ourselves and each other, to value our cultural heritage and to influence our students in a critical way, we will be doomed to a mere mechanical practice of transmission of fragile, meaningless and useless information, which negatively influences the teaching and learning process of an L2. About this, Leffa (1999 *apud* LIMA, 2008, p. 03, our translation) argues that “the methodology for teaching so-called living languages was the same as for dead languages: translation and grammatical analysis”. The facts shown evidence characteristics that often lead to the failure of the English language within public schools.

Years have passed and what we see is the repetition of methods and methodologies that have worked, perhaps, many years ago, however, within the demands that we have today on the part of the public that attends formal learning environments, especially schools of basic education, are no longer effective. Another aspect that takes on an expressive dimension is the belief that there is no need to learn a L2, since it is widely known that English language material is considered irrelevant within the school curriculum. It is very common, as an English language

teacher, to hear students saying that they hate the language, "I hate English", "I hate this subject", because they cannot understand anything that the teacher speaks. This process of rejection and non-acceptance of the language as an object of interaction permeates, once again, the issue of grammar as a way of disseminating the language and its insignificant teaching, that is, the language works only and exclusively as a method of grading in school units.

Within the academic literature, regarding the contents aimed at teaching and learning the English language, many authors understand the language as an object of social interaction. Antunes (2009, p. 65, our translation) defines: "language is a social activity for the purpose of interaction, but which, in addition, must be seen as an element that favors the critical and conscious participation of users". Then, one can envision a social transformation of the environment in which they are inserted through the use of language with an interaction tool. Barros (2017) states: "English as a lingua franca is being reinvented, reconstructed and creatively used, within the localities, as a socio-cultural, political and ideological tool for the peoples of the world to tell their stories in their own way" (BARROS, 2017, p. 54, our translation). Also, according to Barros, the mastery of the English language can provide a critical reading of world political events and intercultural relations can be established. Cruz (2006, p. 35) argues that when we learn a foreign language and culture, we also learn about ours, either through comparison, or through reflection on ingrained and naturalized concepts. Finally, learning another language is not only a tool for interaction, but also a means of gaining knowledge of the world, our own language, cultures and customs.

But what is known is that the reality within the public school differs significantly from the aforementioned conceptions, which in no way come close to interactive participation or understand language as an object of social transformation, nor a sociocultural, political and ideological tool. Within public schools, the language has been viewed solely and exclusively as a school discipline for society, students and even teachers.

Such facts bring with them a process that Leffa (2007) calls self-exclusion and, further, claims to be a social issue, something that starts from the outside in and leads to a series of other issues that can contribute in a very negative way to the teaching of L2 in the public school system.

[...] it is assumed that the student does not exclude himself willingly. When he says "I hate English" it can give the impression that this saying was built from the inside out, when it was built from society to the subject, from the outside in. Self-exclusion does not come from the subject; it is induced by society (LEFFA, 2007, p. 05, our translation).

Still on this process, the self-exclusion process, Leffa (2007, p. 5-6) attributes the factors that are responsible for the negative learning of L2: (1) the school as a reproducer of the values of the dominant class; (2) the universalization of education in the 1960s and 1970s; (3) lack of teacher qualifications.

### **“I don't know what the English discipline is for, I'm not leaving Brazil”**

The teaching and learning of L2 in Brazil goes through a series of conceptions, methods, methodologies that concern more about the place where it is studied than the real effect that such conceptions, methods, methodologies bring in the process. In the midst of these paths on which L2 teaching takes place, there are factors that contribute to the failure of learning an TL (target language) within public schools, which makes it important to map these factors, based on the literature produced until the present moment.

According to Siqueira and Anjos (2012), “for a long time, the teaching of English in Brazilian public schools has been the target of criticism, unworthiness and discredit” (SIQUEIRA; ANJOS, 2012, p. 128, our translation). Not just English, you might say, but foreign languages (FL) in general. This statement highlights everything that has been said previously about the disrepute of FL teaching within public schools. Certainly, the literature on the theme of English language teaching has grown, it has gained space within the academy, however, there is a long way to reach the objective that runs through much of the production, which is the effectiveness in teaching foreign language, in especially the English language, within the public school system. Also, according to Siqueira and Anjos (2012),

Much has also been debated about practices and methodologies aimed at teaching the English language in this environment, its demands and implications, its public results, allowing different beliefs in this regard to emerge and solidify, including the worst of all, and perhaps the most propagated in the collective unconscious, that it is impossible to learn English in Brazilian public schools (SIQUEIRA; ANJOS, 2012, p. 128, our translation).

In fact, the teaching of the English language is seen, by many people, only as a complement in the curriculum of basic education, for the final years of elementary school and high school, this because it is seen as a discipline without social justification. About this Moita Lopes (1996) states:

[...] the traditional objectives of FL teaching (that is, the focus on the so-called four language skills with an emphasis on oral skills) need to be changed since they have no social justification in the Brazilian context, that is, it is not

appropriate. He understands that a school discipline that is not socially justified cannot demonstrate, for teachers, students, and the community in general, the need for its presence in the curriculum. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that FL teachers enjoy very little prestige in secondary schools today (MOITA LOPES, 1996, p. 132, our translation).

Therefore, it is known that what is currently faced in the teaching of a foreign language is not new, since Moita Lopes (1996) was already debating on the subject. What happens, in fact, is the continuation of some practices that fated to failure in the teaching and learning process of a FL. School, society, students, and even many teachers have not yet understood the importance of learning the English language for the social formation of individuals. Siqueira and Anjos (2012) take a position on when they discuss:

Despite decades dedicated to this discussion, the FL teaching and learning process remains inefficient, when not relegated to the last level, in public schools. This seems to be happening because it does not meet the purpose of teaching that the moment we live in requires (SIQUEIRA; ANJOS, 2012, p. 130, our translation).

It is clear that the teaching of the English language still follows methods and methodologies that have been used in distant decades, that are no longer able to contemplate the demands that have been emerging with the new forms of learning and teaching. For Barros (2017),

The current scenario implies the need for a new look at the new forms of this language in the 21st century, since the emerging status of English is a worldwide, international language and, above all, *lingua franca*<sup>2</sup>, which needs to be reconfigured within the scenario in our case, Brazilian (BARROS, 2017, p. 47, our translation).

This quote brings with it a load of demand in which it explains the need for new forms of teaching that can, in fact, make relevant what is taught and learned in the school environment, practices that are able to dialogue with the reality of the people who are learning.

[...] we need to assume new attitudes and initiatives aimed at implementing more realistic teaching approaches, aiming at a language education that favors more meaningful classes for the immediate reality of the student and, when we understand that there is a desire of people from different levels in Brazil to participate in the cultural benefits of the globalized world (BARROS, 2017, p. 48, our translation).

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<sup>2</sup> There are several meanings and definitions for the term *lingua franca*. We conceive a *lingua franca* as the language of contact and communication between groups or members of linguistically distinct groups in international trade relations and other more extensive interactions (SIQUEIRA, 2008; 2011, p. 15).

Proposing new ways of teaching and learning a L2 goes beyond just learning a foreign language. It allows individuals to know their own culture and the culture of the other, and also to have a social role in the world that we call global, disregarding the heterogeneity, the sovereignty of a language that is currently considered to be an object of power. It is necessary to understand that the English language is, today, universal, and we need, as English language teachers, to strip the language of these characteristics that, many times, prevent people from learning it, not only because they do not know the importance of the English language, but also, because they believe they do not fit into a “standard” of significant language learners (PERIN, 2005 *apud* SCHEYERL, 2009):

Despite recognizing the importance of knowing English, students treat English language teaching in public schools, sometimes with contempt, sometimes with indifference. [...] The teacher works with the feeling that the student does not believe what he learns, showing contempt for what the teacher proposes to do during the class (PERIN, 2005, p. 150; SCHEYERL, 2009, p. 126, our translation).

In this scenario, the learning of the target language is impaired, as well as its teaching, as the demotivating factors are evidenced in its purest form, which justifies the subtitle of the text presented here. The intra and extra-school community, the school in general, the students, the teacher... all the subjects mentioned influence, in some way, the success and/or failure in teaching and learning an FL. Regarding the aforementioned, Cruz and Rocha Lima (2014, p. 196, our translation)

The cycle that perpetuates the “failure” of English Language at school means that the teacher does not value his discipline, as well as his colleagues and the school management; this negative atmosphere manages to lower the teacher's self-esteem even more, frustrating him. He cannot (or no longer wishes to) change his student's posture in the face of the study of language, and this whole network of mismatches makes the student to first suspect, then to believe, and finally, to find that there (the school) it is not the place to learn English. Sad mistake.

It is perceived that the teaching of English, as a foreign language, within public schools is the subject of many discussions. There is no magic formula that can bring absolute efficiency to teaching and learning, however, there are attitudes that can be taken and can bring benefits to this process: a) adaptation of the workload; b) meaningful teaching; c) adequacy of the curriculum proposal; d) implementation of more realistic teaching approaches, etc. English language teaching has grown every day, but there is still space to expand and become a significant process within public schools.

## Conclusion

There are several aspects that can contribute to the failure in teaching and learning a second language. The article sought to analyze, based on the available literature, the factors that stand out within the national context, especially within public schools. It was concluded that among the factors that contribute to the failure in teaching and learning a L2, the following stand out: a) focus on teaching grammar; b) low academic qualification of teaching professionals; c) neglecting foreign language subjects. Such factors are directly linked to the inefficiency of the process of teaching and learning a foreign language in the national context.

I ponder that the teaching and learning process of an L2 still needs a long journey of research and analysis of results, I leave this contribution, although small, for other works that are developed within the theme addressed here and on top of the result presented here.

It is evident, from the literature worked here, the eminent need for a reformulation of school curricula and the national common curricular base, with regard to the teaching and learning of foreign languages within public schools, so that, in some way, it has as a goal the constant and immediate improvement of the process that I highlight here. These are problems that can and should be solved through incentive policies on the importance of the English language as an object of social transformation and expression of the individual, policies that can show society that a foreign language can be learned within the public school system, provided that work is done within the necessary aspects that allow the process to be effective.

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