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**ELT in Brazilian Public Schools: History, Challenges, New  
Experiences and Perspectives**

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This article is part of EPAA/AAPE's Special Issue on *English Language Teaching in Public Primary Schools in Latin America*, Guest Edited by José Luis Ramírez-Romero and Peter Sayer.

**Abstract:** Historically speaking, the teaching of English was never a part of Brazilian primary schools programmes. Foreign language teaching as an obligatory school subject appears only in the sixth year of basic education, and its goal is more connected to the development of critical citizens, rather than to the promotion of proficient speakers of the language. Recently, however, a number of municipal public educational systems, often in partnership with private language institutes, have introduced ELT from the very first year of primary school. This is the case, for example, of the project Rio Global Child 2016, created by the City of Rio de Janeiro in partnership with *Cultura Inglesa*, a well-known private English institute in Brazil. What I intend to do in this paper, thus, is: firstly, to present an historical overview of ELT in Brazilian public schools, discussing its educational relevance and functions, the challenges faced by teachers and students, and both the beliefs and debates concerning the issue (cf. Almeida, 2012; Assis-

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Peterson, 2003; Moita Lopes, 1996; Tílio, 2012) – including also a first account of the Brazilian cities involved in the implementation of ELT in primary schools; and, then, to discuss critically Rio de Janeiro's project for the teaching of English in primary schools. Such a discussion is necessary not only because it may help to understand better the risks of adopting a single method (and its materials) for teaching in contexts that can be extremely different from one another, but also because other projects and experiences may benefit from an honest account of the problems faced by the association of private and public spheres and interests exemplified by Rio's project.

**Keywords:** ELT; linguistic policies; Brazilian contexts

### **La enseñanza de Inglés como lengua extranjera en las escuelas públicas de Brasil: Historia, desafíos, nuevas experiencias y perspectivas**

**Resumen:** Históricamente, la enseñanza de Inglés nunca fue parte de los programas de los primeros años de la educación primaria en las escuelas brasileñas. La enseñanza de la lengua extranjera como asignatura obligatoria a la escuela sólo se plantea a partir del sexto año de educación básica y su objetivo está más vinculada a la formación de ciudadanos críticos que la promoción de los hablantes competentes de la lengua. Recientemente, sin embargo, varios sistemas de escuelas públicas de los municipios, a menudo en colaboración con los institutos de idiomas privadas, introdujeron la enseñanza de Inglés desde el primer grado de primaria. Este es el caso, por ejemplo, el niño Global de Río 2016, creado por el Municipio de Río de Janeiro en asociación con *Cultura Inglesa*, una institución privada de enseñanza Inglés bien conocido en Brasil. Lo que quiero hacer en este artículo, por lo tanto, es la siguiente: en primer lugar, presentar una visión general de la historia de la educación Inglés en las escuelas públicas de Brasil, discutiendo sus funciones y relevancia educativa, los desafíos que enfrentan los profesores y estudiantes, así como las creencias relacionadas y debates el tema (ver Almeida, 2012; Assis-Peterson, 2003; Moita Lopes, 1996; Tílio, 2012) - que incluye un primer intento de proporcionar una visión general de las ciudades brasileñas que participan en la ejecución de la enseñanza del idioma Inglés en los primeros años de la escuela primaria; entonces tengo la intención de discutir críticamente el proyecto de Río de Janeiro para la enseñanza del Inglés en los primeros años. Tal discusión es necesaria no sólo porque puede ayudar a entender mejor los riesgos de adoptar un método único (y su material) para enseñar en contextos que pueden ser extremadamente diferentes entre sí, sino también por otros proyectos y experiencias se beneficiará un fiel reflejo de los problemas causados por la asociación entre las esferas y los intereses públicos y privados, que se ejemplifican por el proyecto de Río de Janeiro.

**Palabras clave:** enseñanza del lengua Inglés; políticas lingüísticas; contextos brasileños

### **O ensino de Inglês como língua estrangeira nas escolas públicas Brasileiras: História, desafios, novas experiências e perspectivas**

**Resumo:** Historicamente, o ensino de inglês jamais fez parte dos programas dos anos iniciais do ensino fundamental nas escolas brasileiras. O ensino de língua estrangeira como disciplina escolar obrigatória só se coloca a partir do sexto ano da educação básica e seu objetivo está mais ligado ao desenvolvimento de cidadãos críticos do que à promoção de falantes proficientes da língua. Recentemente, entretanto, diversos sistemas educacionais públicos de municípios brasileiros, frequentemente em parceria com institutos de idiomas privados, introduziram o ensino de língua inglesa desde o primeiro ano do ensino fundamental. Esse é o caso, por exemplo, do projeto Rio Criança Global 2016, criado pela Prefeitura do Rio de Janeiro em parceria com a *Cultura Inglesa*, uma instituição privada de ensino de inglês bastante conhecida no Brasil. O que pretendo fazer neste artigo, portanto, é: primeiramente, apresentar uma visão geral

da história do ensino de inglês nas escolas públicas brasileiras, discutindo suas funções e relevância educacionais, os desafios enfrentados por professores e alunos, bem como as crenças e debates relacionados ao tema (cf. Almeida, 2012; Assis-Peterson, 2003; Moita Lopes, 1996; Tílio, 2012) – incluindo uma primeira tentativa de prover um panorama das cidades brasileiras envolvidas na implementação do ensino de língua inglesa nos anos iniciais do ensino fundamental; em seguida, pretendo discutir criticamente o projeto do Rio de Janeiro para o ensino de inglês nos anos iniciais. Tal discussão é necessária não apenas porque pode nos ajudar a compreender melhor os riscos de se adotar um único método (e seus materiais) para se ensinar em contextos que podem ser extremamente diferentes uns dos outros, mas também porque outros projetos e experiências poderão se beneficiar de uma reflexão honesta sobre os problemas causados pela associação entre as esferas e interesses públicos e privados, que são exemplificados pelo projeto do Rio de Janeiro.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino de língua Inglesa; políticas linguísticas; contextos Brasileiros

## Introduction

The teaching of English as Foreign Language in Brazil has always been influenced by a strong belief that regular schools<sup>1</sup> are not the right place to learn a foreign language. The “lack-of-it-all” scenario of the public school, as teachers see it, has always been compared to that of the commercially successful private language institutes, which promise and – to a certain extent – deliver linguistic proficiency in English (cf. Assis-Peterson, 2003). At regular schools teachers have less than two hours a week dedicated to the teaching of English, heterogeneous<sup>2</sup> classes (often composed of more than 40 unmotivated students), and absence of modern technological resources, such as computers and projectors, while at language institutes they have at least three hours a week to teach small, homogeneous groups of students, making use of modern technological devices.

Adding to that situation is the fact that most teachers do not understand the different roles that ELT should play in each of the contexts mentioned above. That is, while at private language institutes what is being bought and sold is merely language proficiency, at regular schools ELT must contribute to the education of the student as a whole, so the concern in this context has more to do with the development of critical, responsible citizens, than with the promotion of language proficiency per se. In other words, while at language institutes teachers can act as instructors, at schools, both private and public ones, they must act as educators (Assis-Peterson, 2003). However, since there is little reflection upon such issues, many teachers have insisted in trying to reproduce at schools practices which are typical of the methods adopted by language institutes (Almeida, 2012). The results so far are less than acceptable.

So, if ELT at public schools, in most cases, neither helps students become proficient in English, nor contributes to broaden their horizons, it is understandable that students themselves, as well as parents and society as a whole, find little use in such teaching (cf. Barcelos, 2011). The expression “school English” is commonly used to indicate what a person knows of the English language when s/he has not attended an English course outside school.

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<sup>1</sup> By “regular schools”, I mean both private and public elementary and secondary schools, that is, what is known in Brazil as “educação básica” (basic education). In this paper the term is used in contrast with the term “private language institutes”.

<sup>2</sup> Regular schools’ classes tend to be heterogeneous in several aspects, including age, language proficiency, race and social class.

Some teacher educators, myself included, believe that the only way that ELT may become relevant at public schools would be focusing on local realities and needs, so that courses and lessons might, on the one hand, deal with the limitations of the context, and, on the other hand, relate to students' interests, promoting most of all critical thinking and, to the extent feasible, also language proficiency. Others seem to believe that the problem lies on the "lack-of-it-all" conditions already discussed. So they believe that working conditions have to change in order for better results to be achieved.

No matter how one chooses to look at the issue, the fact that Brazilian schools, both the public and the private ones, are not obliged to teach a foreign language before the sixth grade was not until very recently considered a real problem. In fact, there is little – if any – evidence that pupils who begin to learn EFL at the age of 11 or 12 are not likely to attain acceptable levels of language proficiency. However, during the last decade, several Brazilian city and state systems decided to implement ELT from the very first year of primary school.

Instead of making investments to improve the "lack-of-it-all" conditions for the teaching of English from the sixth grade on, authorities, such as mayors, governors and secretaries of education, now claim that poor results, as far as language proficiency (particularly oral proficiency) is concerned, are due to the fact that Brazilian children do not start learning the language until they are 11 or 12 years old. The argument is a frail one, since there is no research which indicates that teenagers would lose their ability to learn a foreign language, unless they started learning it at early childhood. Muñoz (2014, p. 372), for example, suggests that "input quantity and quality may have a stronger influence than age of acquisition on long-term attainment" in contexts of "instructed FL learning". Her results indicate that "age of acquisition is not significantly associated to learners' oral performance, suggesting that an early start did not result in long-term benefits" (Muñoz, 2014, p. 372). Nevertheless, the argument in favor of an early start tends to be accepted by the general public, because it appeals to the wide spread belief that the younger one starts learning the language, the better the results will be.

A lot of those ELT projects for primary schools are being conducted in "partnership" with private language courses. Again, although there is little evidence that the materials and methods produced by such courses fit the contexts of public schools, noncritical thought tends to believe in the excellency of those institutions, due both to better results in promoting language proficiency in their own contexts (which, as already mentioned, are extremely different from those of the public schools, especially as class sizes are concerned), and advertisement.

One of these initiatives is happening in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It is called Rio Global Child 2016 and it is being conducted by *Cultura Inglesa*, a traditional language institute in Brazil. The "partnership" was conceived in such a way that, in practice, every single decision about what should be taught and how it should be taught is made by *Cultura Inglesa*. The teachers of the public system have no say in such matters. They are not expected to contribute with critical reflections about the process, but just to implement the method, that is, to do as they are told by coordinators of the private institute. This is clearly an issue which demands discussion by those interested in critical approaches for the teaching of English as a foreign language in Brazil.

What I intend to do in this article, thus, is this: firstly, to present an historical overview of ELT in Brazilian public schools, discussing its educational relevance and functions, the challenges faced by teachers and students, and both the beliefs and debates concerning the issue (cf. Almeida, 2012; Assis-Peterson, 2003; Moita Lopes, 1996; Tílio, 2012) – including a first account of Brazilian cities and states involved in the implementation of ELT in primary schools; and, then, to discuss critically Rio de Janeiro's project for the teaching of English in primary schools. Let us begin with a brief history of ELT at Brazilian public systems.

## A Brief View of the Recent History of ELT at Brazilian Public Schools

In order to understand the history of ELT at Brazilian public schools, the first thing one must take into consideration is the fact that what is prescribed by Brazilian policies is the teaching of, at least, one modern foreign language starting at the sixth grade of basic education. It does not specify which language(s) should be taught. So, no single language is privileged by any laws or regulations, including the LDBEN<sup>3</sup> (1996) and the PCN<sup>4</sup> (1998).

One could argue that this is not appropriate for the so-called globalized contemporary world, where the English language plays a major part in international communication. Considering the importance of respecting local autonomy, though, it is extremely positive, because it leaves the decision to the scholarly community. Local freedom of choice is particularly important for communities where there is a strong influence of immigrants, such as the Italian and German communities in the state of Santa Catarina. It is also positive when it comes to the Brazilian indigenous population, among whom, sometimes, Portuguese itself may be the foreign language to be learned. In theory, such an approach could help create an atmosphere of diversity when it comes to learning different cultures and languages, with the potential to generate a consciousness of tolerance and respect for those who are different from us.

In practice, however, only a few languages are really taught at most schools in the whole country. English, of course, is the one which is chosen by most schools and public systems, due to its international and economic prestige. Spanish, however, is also very common, and has experienced considerable growth in the last decades, due to the increase in economic, cultural and political integration of Latin American countries. An opposite phenomenon is happening to French, though (cf. Freitas, 2011). After enjoying a period of extremely high prestige, due to the historical artistic influence of France in Brazil, the language is now quickly vanishing from Brazilian public schools' curricula. This situation is acknowledged, for example, in official regulations, such as the PCN mentioned above. The document not only discusses briefly the role played by English as the hegemonic language in the world (Brasil, 1998, p. 39-40), but also, when discussing criteria for choosing a foreign language to include in the curriculum, it states that

the linguistic needs and economic priorities of society must be considered when establishing economic and geopolitical relevant options of languages in a given moment in history. This reflects the current position of English and Spanish in Brazil. (Brasil, 1998, p. 40) (my translation)

So it is important when discussing ELT in the context of Brazilian public schools to have in mind that our policies are for the teaching of one or more foreign languages, and not necessarily for the teaching of English specifically. This in itself is not exactly a problem for the improvement of ELT. Since English, in practice, is the language that is taught in most schools, the fact that the school subject is not necessarily English, but any foreign language, could hardly be considered a major obstacle for achieving better results, as far as both language proficiency and critical thinking are concerned. However, it tends to become a problem when a school has both teachers of English and Spanish, for example. In this case, a problem may arise because most school directors are more worried about accommodating teachers' needs according to the days and hours they have available

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<sup>3</sup> National Education Bases and Guidelines Law.

<sup>4</sup> National Curricular Parameters.

to work at that specific school, than with the language chosen by the student. Then, it is not unusual to find in these schools situations where a group of students learns English at sixth grade, Spanish at seventh grade, no foreign language at all at eighth grade, and English again at ninth grade. Fortunately, this is rather the exception than the rule, otherwise the learning of either language would be seriously compromised.

Focusing on the historical development of ideas, methods, approaches and policies for the teaching of foreign languages, with an eye to the specificities of the context of Brazilian regular schools, it is fair to say that during the 1970s the audiolingual method was still considered in Brazil the only scientific way to teach a foreign language. Based upon structuralism in what regards language, and behaviorism as far as learning is concerned, the method with its focus on oral skills and exhaustive repetition of structural exercises seemed to work well in contexts characterized by small groups of highly motivated students attending three hours or more of language classes a week, in classrooms filled with audiovisual aids and technologies (cf. Richards & Rodgers, 1986). As a matter of fact, the method, as time was going to reveal, was far from the perfection advertised by its supporters: both its results (which were not as efficient as claimed as far as fluency and real communication were concerned) and theoretical assumptions would be called into question soon enough. In spite of that, due to its prestige at the time, the method was transferred from the context of the private language institutes to that of the regular schools (the “lack-of-it-all” context discussed above). The undeniable failure of the method in this context was soon to become evident, generating extreme frustration on the part of both teachers and students.

From the 1980s on, influenced by the birth and growth of the so-called communicative approach, as well as by the development of the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (cf. Celani, 2005), part of the community of researchers and teachers interested in the context of the public schools began to revisit the assumptions and functions of teaching a foreign language as part of the school curriculum. Bearing in mind that each and every school subject must be justified by both its social and its educational relevance, part of our community concluded that reading was the most relevant skill for the majority of the students attending Brazilian public schools. This was so both because of the possibility of its social use outside the school context (a possibility that was almost nonexistent when it came to authentic use of the oral skills), and because of the role played by reading in the process of learning, that is, its relevance for the success or failure of a student (cf. Moita Lopes, 1996). It was claimed (and in fact it really seems to be the case) that, as research indicated, reading strategies learned in a foreign language could be transferred to the process of reading in one’s mother tongue, thus helping the student understand better the texts in Portuguese used at school to teach a number of different subjects.

This movement reached its climax with the publication of the National Curricular Parameters in the 1990s. The document advocated that FL teaching at Brazilian public schools should keep reading as its main focus, but it is important to mention that the document did not close the door on the possibility of teaching other skills. On the contrary, it clearly stated that they could and should be taught as long as the characteristics of local contexts made their teaching both possible and meaningful:

the focus on reading may be justified by the social function of foreign languages in the Country, as well as by the achievable [educational] objectives, given the current [teaching] conditions.

However, this does not mean that, depending on these conditions, the objectives should not include other skills, such as oral comprehension, as well as oral and written production. What matters, above all, is to design and implement

[educational] objectives which are socially justifiable and achievable given the current [teaching] conditions available at the school (Brasil, 1998, 21) (my translation)

Unfortunately, the Parameters were not supported by a considerable part of the community of teachers of English in Brazil. The focus on reading was misinterpreted by many as an obligation to teach exclusively reading (Tílio, 2012). Especially those who had not experienced the absolute failure of ELT, when teachers tried to import methods from the private institutes to the public schools, argued that the curricular policy was preventing the students from learning to really speak English. They also claimed that it was but an excuse of the Government for escaping the responsibility of improving teaching conditions at public schools. Those criticisms, however, never included the issues of social or educational relevance mentioned above among their concerns. Learning English was considered by them important in and of itself, and learning English meant speaking English.

Certainly, there were also many teachers and researchers who understood and supported the Parameters, especially the ones whose professional identities were deeply connected with the public school. Among them, education as whole was the main issue. For this part of our community, the communicative teaching of reading skills, indicated by the Parameters, was a step forward in making ELT meaningful to our students.

It should be emphasized, though, that the focus on reading was never meant to be a permanent policy for the teaching of foreign languages. The Parameters, as mentioned above, explained that indication by providing reasons that had to do with: (a) practical conditions for the teaching of a foreign language at school (that is, what most schools could offer in terms of time, resources, etc.), (b) social relevance, and (c) educational relevance:

reading, on the one hand, suits the needs of formal education, and, on the other hand is the skill which can be used by the student in his/her immediate social context. (...) It is also necessary to consider the fact that [teaching] conditions of most Brazilian classrooms (...) may prevent the teaching of the four communicative skills. (Brasil, 1998, 20-21) (my translation)

This meant that any sound changes in Brazilian educational or social contexts could and should lead to a revision of those language policies. And, indeed, major social change was about to happen. The new millennium not only brought economic globalization to a deeper level, but also provided the means for intercultural communication all over the world with the development of the internet.

Thus, it is now relevant, both socially and educationally, for most Brazilian students to become able to interact with oral, written, and multimodal texts in English, coming from all over the world, thanks to the World Wide Web. And this means not only being able to understand written and oral texts, but also producing their own discourses, that is, sharing their ideas, concerns, and identities all over the world. So, the changes in social context not only reinforced the relevance of learning English (now an international language rather than the language of Great Britain or North America), but also indicated the need to integrate the teaching of linguistic skills, since digital genres tend to be hybrid and multimodal.

That is, to a certain extent, the policy which is established by a later official document concerning the teaching of foreign languages at the final years of basic education: the Curricular Orientations for Midlevel Education. Published in 2006, it no longer supported the focus on reading, but indicated the integrated teaching of oral and written skills. The general orientations of the document are appropriate to the new possibilities for authentic, meaningful use of the English

language brought by the internet. They also present solid theoretical support, quoting studies about literacy, multi-literacy, multimodality, interaction through hypertexts and complex thought.

However, the line of argumentation followed by the document opened the door for the critics of the Parameters, mentioned above, to read in the Orientations a confirmation of their beliefs (Almeida, 2012). First of all, the document does not explicitly recognize the historical importance of the Parameters in making ELT more meaningful for students of public schools. Moreover, in spite of advocating the integration of linguistic skills, in practice it presents a list of contents to be taught categorized under the labels “oral communication”, “reading”, and “writing”. These are features that may tend to reinforce the idea of ELT as instruction rather than education, with the focus on linguistic proficiency rather than on critical thinking, no matter how much the document mentions the importance of critical literacy.

So, the community of teachers of English in Brazil, as far as teaching at regular schools are concerned, has always been characterized by the existence of two groups who oppose each other: those whose professional identities and beliefs are in conformity with the culture of method (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), and the ones who believe that ELT should consider local realities in order to become relevant. In the past, the division was between those who were against the Parameters, and those who supported them. Nowadays, the opposition is between those who believe in fostering linguistic competence through the use of preconceived methods and materials and those who believe in teaching through thematic projects negotiated with the students themselves.

Nevertheless, both groups seem to agree, even if they base themselves upon different reasons for doing so, that there is no need for privileging reading anymore. Public policies tend to follow this tendency: right now the National Common Curricular Basis is in the process of elaboration and public discussion. Again, no focus on a specific skill is suggested. However, the organization of contents and goals does not follow a structural or functional grading. Rather the objectives are organized in terms of social practices, clearly favoring the idea of a thematic integration of skills, as well as the autonomy of learning communities.

It is fair to say, though, that ELT at Brazilian public schools does not have much of a reputation. Limitations of working conditions prevent the achievement of more traditional goals, such as the development of linguistic skills, especially the oral ones. And, according to common sense beliefs of most teachers, students and society in general, the efficiency of ELT lies exclusively in promoting the acquisition of such skills.

Considering what has been just said, one would expect that public authorities made an effort to implement changes to help the achievement of more tangible results. No matter which way one looks at the issue, the working conditions, that is the “lack-of-it-all” context described earlier, undoubtedly play a major part in what is perceived as the failure of ELT in Brazilian public schools, and without dramatic alteration of these conditions there is little hope for reaching better results, as far as promoting both language proficiency and critical thinking is concerned. But the scenario described above has not been modified at all.

Instead of doing so, many local governments decided that the best way for dealing with the problem would be to start teaching English from the very first years of basic education and to get the private sector, that is, the language institutes, to administer public ELT. Supporting this educational policy are social beliefs and ideologies about language learning that are not generally questioned by anyone other than the researchers of the area. One of these is the belief in the excellence of the private language courses and their methods. Another one is the idea that the younger one starts learning a language, the better the results will be.

Certainly, as a general principle, there is nothing exactly wrong with the latter statement. It is always important to remember, though, that such belief is based upon analogies made between the



process of acquiring one's mother tongue and the one of learning a foreign language, which, according to Brown (2007), for example, should be taken with caution. Questionable as the belief may be, given the importance of English as an international language in the contemporary world, it is not difficult to justify the contemporary tendency to start teaching the language from the very first year of formal education. Many countries already do so, and others are planning to start doing it in few years from now. In Brazil, the National Common Curricular Base decided to maintain the obligatory teaching of a foreign language starting from the sixth year, to avoid putting poor cities in a difficult situation; however, there is a bill being discussed in Congress that, if approved, will establish the obligation of foreign language teaching from the very first year of formal education.

As a justification for the present failure of public ELT, though, it does not stand to close scrutiny. According to Moita Lopes (1996, p. 64), for example, "the field of foreign language teaching in Brazil has been suffering the influence of a number of myths". One of them is that "a child within a formal educational context learns a foreign language more easily than an adult does" (Moita Lopes, 1996, p. 65). Considering the previous belief to be merely a myth, as Moita Lopes does, may sound far-fetched for many researchers in the field of Second Language Acquisition, though we should remember that he is talking about foreign language learning rather than second language acquisition. However, even for those who conduct age-related researches on L2 attainment, failure to achieve native-like levels of proficiency is generally associated to post-pubertal L2 beginners (cf. Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, apud Muñoz & Singleton, 2011, p. 5). Thus, even for researches interested in the relation between age and foreign language learning, beginning at the age of eleven or twelve would not be considered a major obstacle for the attainment of acceptable levels of proficiency.

The partnership with the private language courses presents even weaker arguments. First of all, although a relative success in selling their product should be recognized, there is no way to evaluate the real extent of their success. Independent researchers are not welcome. Not even the quantitative data as far as drop outs and failures are concerned is available. There are students that tried out and abandoned several courses, before finding one in which s/he could finally develop his/her interlanguage (Almeida, 2014, p. 116), and also ex-students who believe they are proficient enough but cannot stand the test of engaging in real communication with a foreigner. However, the actual data remains a black box.

Moreover, there is no evidence of educational success when it comes to the partnership between regular schools (both public and private ones) and the private language courses. Though the partnership with the public system is recent, that with regular private schools is not new at all. The contracts between language courses and regular private schools go back at least as early as the 1970s. There are commercial reasons for this partnership. Parents are usually happy to know that a famous course will be responsible for teaching English to their sons and daughters. However, the materials and procedures adopted by the courses rarely fit the context of the regular schools: bigger class sizes and fewer hours of study per week, for example, prevent the replication of course routines in the context of regular schools. The commercial partnership, though, is a win-win situation for the language courses: they earn money for delivering ELT at the school and they use the access to the students to advertise the course at the institute, where the English language can really be acquired. I myself am an example of a student who, back in the 1970s, entered an English course because of the advertisement made at the private regular school where they were supposed to be teaching the language.

However, in spite of the reasons one states for an early start of ELT at public schools and of the commercial interests involved in many projects, there is nothing intrinsically wrong in deciding to teach foreign languages from the very first year of basic education. And, in fact, many Brazilian

public schools are doing so. Let us now present a tentative and inevitably incomplete picture of ELT projects for early years being developed in different Brazilian cities and states.

It is definitely not easy to gather precise data about which cities and states are presently teaching English at public primary schools. According to Gimenez (2013), data from INEP (Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Studies and Researches on Education) indicate that there are currently 9,576 public schools in 2,041 Brazilian cities which offer ELT in the first years of basic education. However, it is not clear how this is being carried out. There are ELT programs at primary schools going on in several cities in the states of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná, Goiás, Mato-Grosso, Espírito Santo, Bahia and others.

In her article, Gimenez (2013) analyses the curricular orientations of a few cities in the state of Paraná and those of the city of Rio de Janeiro. She finds in the documents two main voices disputing the discourse: the voice of university researchers and the one of the private companies which sell materials for ELT. She warns us, though, that the latter may use academic discourse to legitimate commercial interests.

At least two cities of the ones she analyses developed their projects in “partnership” with the private sector: Rolândia (in the state of Paraná) and Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the state of Rio de Janeiro, though she does not acknowledge the latter as doing so. In the case of Rolândia, a local bill established the obligatory offer of ELT in every public primary school of the city. Thus, bidding was opened for the acquisition of instructional materials. The same bidding established that the winning company would be responsible for training teachers in the “approved method” (Gimenez: 2013).

The case of Rio de Janeiro is more serious both because Rio is possibly the best known Brazilian city in the world and also because there was no bidding whatsoever to legitimate the contract with the private company hired to deliver ELT. We turn now to the discussion of the project Rio Global Child 2016.

### **Rio Global Child 2016: A Critical Discussion of Assumptions and Practices**

In the article mentioned above, Gimenez (2013) points out that Rio de Janeiro published its “Revisited Curricular Orientations: 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Years” in 2012. The elaboration of the document was attributed to a team of the Secretary of Education, with the advice of a consulting service provided by professors of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). She also mentions that, unlike the documents of the cities of Paraná, Rio’s Curricular Orientations include the development of critical thought towards discourses as a learning goal. In general, however, she acknowledges that the documents of both the cities of Paraná and that of Rio de Janeiro are oriented towards the development of “oral communication skills, with gradual insertion of writing and reading” (Gimenez: 2013, p. 210).

What she does not mention, though, is that Rio Global Child 2016 started earlier, with the publication of a bill in October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Its actual implementation began with the school year of 2010. Both teaching materials and teachers’ training courses are provided by a company called *Learning Factory*, the publishing house of *Cultura Inglesa*, a Brazilian well-known private English course. As mentioned above, *Cultura Inglesa* was not chosen after different proposals were offered to and analyzed by the city authorities: the partnership, though a legal one, did not include a public call for projects, as most partnerships between public and private sectors do in Brazil.

Initially responsible for providing materials and teacher training for Rio’s primary schools, the private institution has now expanded its influence to other areas of ELT at the public system of Rio de Janeiro, including the provision of materials, methods, evaluation, teacher training and

selection, for both initial (first to fifth) and final years (sixth to ninth) of what we call “ensino fundamental”, which corresponds loosely to what the American system calls elementary and junior high school, and is, by law, a responsibility of the cities’ administrations. It must be mentioned, however, that the expansion of the program to include the nine years of “ensino fundamental” was predicted in the bill of 2009 (Barbosa, 2016, p. 41).

When an institution belonging to the private sector becomes responsible for all these aspects of public education, serious commercial and educational issues arise. Such issues should not go unquestioned by those interested in language education (and) policies. What I intend to do below is precisely to discuss the implications of such an arrangement. But to do so, I must first discuss the role played by *Cultura Inglesa* in the history of ELT in Brazil, contrasting the philosophies and practices which were responsible for the construction of a good reputation for the institution in the past with the ones it has adopted in more recent years. This is important because the reception of the project, by both the general public and expert communities, may have been, at least to a certain extent, affected by it.

The institution was founded in Rio de Janeiro as early as 1930s, and its goals were not only to teach the English language, but also to promote English culture in Brazil. In spite of being, probably, the oldest English course operating in Brazil, *Cultura Inglesa* has not for many decades resembled any other commercial course in the Country.

To begin with, teachers at the institution were always treated with respect, and not as the mere labor force whose members could be disposed of at any time and replaced by younger, less expensive instructors. While most courses were happy to employ instructors with good pronunciation and little or no knowledge of pedagogy or education, *Cultura* has, for a long time, valued higher education in language and literature when selecting teachers. Especially during the 1980s and early 1990s, the institution invested heavily in the development of its team. Teachers were not only better paid if they had advanced degrees in Applied Linguistics or English Literature, but they were also encouraged by the administration to take such courses.

*Cultura Inglesa* also provided its own workshops and courses for the development of its teachers. While most courses just trained their instructors to apply the method and materials which they have adopted, *Cultura’s* perspective was focused on teacher education or development rather than training. One of these courses has, probably, made the institution better known outside Brazil: the one that took place in the early 1990s in Rio de Janeiro, when Dick Allwright was invited to teach classroom research skills to teachers at *Cultura*. According to him, that experience has had a great importance in the development of his framework for both teaching language and researching the classroom, known as Exploratory Practice (cf. Allwright & Lenzuen, p. 1997).

Kumaravadivelu (2006, p. 194), referring to the episode, describes *Cultura Inglesa* as “a major nonprofit language teaching establishment in Brazil”. However, it is important to explain to the foreign reader, that being a “nonprofit” organization does not say much about the institution. As a matter of fact, many private educational establishments in Brazil are (or used to be) officially nonprofit ones. This is certainly meaningful as far as obligations towards the Estate administration and regimen of paying taxes are concerned, but it does not, in any case, mean that those companies are (or were) not searching for profit. This is so clear to the general public in Brazil, that my students can hardly disguise an ironic smile whenever a text with that description of *Cultura Inglesa* is discussed in my undergraduate or graduate-level courses. Moreover, in most cities and states *Cultura* is not even officially nonprofit anymore, it is a commercial corporation very similar to any other private English course in Brazil.

This has brought many changes to the philosophy of the institution. Now, it is aggressively competing for the market that was created by public administrations which have decided to include

ELT in the early years of basic education in partnership with the private sector. The way it treats teachers has also changed, at least when acting in the public sector: now what is important is that teachers follow the course of action prescribed by their methods and materials. According to Barbosa (2016, p. 71),

language institutes, following the culture and myths of the method, privilege the use of their own textbooks and materials. The instructor is expected to follow the manual (teacher's guide) to deliver the lessons. *Learning Factory*, as expected, also provides a manual for the teacher, with instructions on how to use the textbook and other materials. (my translation)

Of course, the provision of a teacher's guide is not in itself evidence of a controlling attitude towards teachers. However, the fact that teachers are not free to choose their materials is. This holds especially true when it comes to the final years of "ensino fundamental", because theoretically teachers working in these years should be able to choose among several different collections selected and distributed by the National Program of Didactic Books.

Training has also replaced education, according to the reports of teachers who attended the meetings of professional qualification for the program. Collected during graduate-level classes, the reports indicate that the emphasis of these meetings was on the acquisition of techniques for the implementation of the material, rather than on reflection supported by theoretical concepts and research. Thus, it seems that critical thinking and pedagogic autonomy are not the qualities sought in teachers anymore.

But I shall go back to these issues soon. For now, it should be enough to say that Rio Global Child did not face strong resistance when it was launched. The historically built positive image of *Cultura Inglesa* explains part of this reaction. Another important factor, though, is the fact that a great part of the community of English teachers in Brazil is traditionally enthusiastic about teaching practices that are organized around the concept of method, and not really used to political participation (cf. Moita Lopes, 1996). One can contrast our reaction to the one of the teachers of Spanish, who organized themselves and, through political struggle, prevented Rio's administration from celebrating a similar partnership with the *Cervantes Institute*.

As far as commercial implications are concerned the partnership is a deviation from the regular procedures for the public sector to hire the services of a private company. First, because there was no public call for publishing houses, language institutes or universities to present materials or pedagogical projects, the public administration could not choose the best one. Secondly, it submits civil servants to the interests and ideologies of a private company. Finally, as the project advances, the teaching materials by *Cultura Inglesa* are replacing the books that are bought, after public call and serious evaluation, by the federal government for the final years of "ensino fundamental", as previously mentioned.

From a pedagogical point of view, though, the problems are even more serious. The project is in harmony with the rationale of an ELT based on the concept of method and its myths (Kumaravivelu, 2006). Local knowledge and diversity are not taken into consideration: the same materials are adopted and supposed to be applied to every single student and school in Rio's public system. There is little or no regard for the autonomy of teachers or learning communities in decision making. Teacher development is replaced by teacher training.

As far as working conditions are concerned, earlier in this paper, I pointed out that there is a consensus about the inadequate conditions for ELT at the public system. Among the several characteristics of the "lack-of-it-all" context is the time available to teach the language, usually two

classes of 50 minutes each or less per week. For the first years of education, Rio Global Child 2016 allowed even less: only one class of 50 minutes per week. The question that might be asked is this: is it really possible to teach the oral skills properly with so little time available?

According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), one of the problems of adopting a method is that it will always involve a considerable idealization of the pupils, their local contexts, goals and learning needs, interests and styles. Adopting the same textbooks and materials, as Rio Global Child does, for every school in a city that is both geographically large and culturally diverse, certainly is inadequate, as far as issues of relevance and motivation are concerned. It does not feel, by any means, right to use the same materials and adopt the same practices when teaching students at Rocinha, a favela in the south region of the city, and those at Bangu, a large working class district in the west area of Rio de Janeiro, for example.

At Rocinha, most students are familiar with the presence of foreign tourists, so it is fair to suppose that they may have a real need for oral communication. Their community is located in a noble area of Rio de Janeiro, near the famous beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema. Bangu, on the other hand, is located in the periphery of city, far away from the beaches or any other major tourist attraction in Rio. I taught English in the public system there from 1992 to 2002, and I can testify that most students there do not have any real need (or possibility) to use the oral skills outside the school. Even international events, such as Fifa's World Cup or the Olympic Games, are not likely to have an impact there, since those events happen in places which are extremely far from Bangu. The justification for ELT to focus on face to face oral interaction in such a context can only be based on the ideological social beliefs that knowing English is important in itself and that knowing a language can only mean being able to speak the language. But as far as real needs are concerned, the focus on interaction through multimodal digital texts would make much more sense for those students.

I must emphasize at this point that my concern here is about what could be meaningful to the students at the moment when they are attending "ensino fundamental", because this may have a positive effect in their motivation for learning. Considerations about future job opportunities, for example, seem to have very little impact on them, as any experienced teacher working in the public system can confirm.

As far as the textbook adopted by the program is concerned, it hardly contributes to make ELT meaningful for Brazilian young pupils at public schools. The textbook collection "Zip from Zog", produced by *Learning Factory* and adopted by Rio Global Child, according to the site *LF Educational*, presents the character Zip, who leaves his planet Zog and arrives on Earth using English to communicate with children.

It is not my intent to analyze the textbook's principles and procedures, neither to deny its positive characteristics. For example, the human characters presented in the book deserve the recognition of every language educator worried about issues such as diversity and local representation in ELT. They are clearly Brazilian children. The colors of their skin, for example, are representative of the ethnic multiplicity and mixture of our people. There are girls and boys, including one in a wheelchair. The choice of an extraterrestrial as its main character is not in itself a negative one, since a character like that helps creating the atmosphere of playful learning quite appropriate to child education.

However, as far as meaningfulness and social relevance of ELT for Brazilian urban children is concerned, the textbook seems to be inadequate. Instead of presenting situations where communicative skills in English could help the students (such as using the language for communication or research on the internet, or talking to foreign tourists), the collection introduces a world of fantasy where an alien comes to Earth, possibly Brazil, and uses English to talk to the children. The decision to create a world of fantasy can be justified, as acknowledged above, by the

desire to make the process of learning English more fun to the children. On the other hand, it may also be the case that the adoption of an alien as the main character helps reinforcing the characterization of the English language as something very distant from Brazilian children's reality. This seems to be the impression of a teacher working in the program who was interviewed by Barbosa (2016, 60). When asked if she would like to make any changes in the materials, the teacher answered that she would like to change the main characters of the book:

I would make changes, indeed. (...) the student (...), facing a lot of difficulties with his/her L1, thinks that English is something belonging to another planet. The characters Zip and Stella only reinforce this idea, since both are ET's. (my translation)

It is important, at this point of the article, to acknowledge the small amount of data generated by independent scientific research on the program. Apart from the case study conducted by Barbosa (2016) quoted above, it is very difficult to find articles, dissertations or thesis already published about the theme. It is easier to find works which are only indirectly related to the program, such as Costa (2015) or Terra Nova & Ribeiro (2014). The first one is a dissertation which investigates the adequacy of the textbook *Zip from Zog* for the fifth year of "ensino fundamental" to the program of learning acceleration known as "Acelera Brasil", while the latter is an article about another program within Rio Global Child: the Bilingual Project, which aims to implement bilingual education in a few schools of the city educational system. The reasons for this lack of scientific data about the program are unclear and open to speculation. For the purposes of this article, though, what matters is that the present state of investigations about the program helps explain the eventual use of anecdotal evidence. Hopefully, future investigations will provide enough data to (dis)confirm the understandings generated by the evidence used here.

As far as the role of the teachers in this program is concerned, it is not, as stated above, that of the educator anymore. Rather, they have been trained to act as instructors, as required by the culture of method (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). When a method takes over the whole organization of language teaching, the good teacher becomes the one who has good pronunciation and fluency in the language, and is able and willing to implement the procedures prescribed by the method. Teacher autonomy for theoretically informed and responsible pedagogical decision-making is seen more as an obstacle for the implementation of the method than as an expected and valued feature of the professional.

It is unfortunate that *Cultura Inglesa*, an institution that helped to create Exploratory Practice, now prevents public teachers from applying its principles in their classes. According to Dick Allwright himself, in teacher training, one acquires techniques, in teacher education s/he acquires knowledge, and in teacher development s/he builds understanding (Allwright, 2001). Reports of ex-students of mine who are now teachers at Rio's public system indicate that what was happening there was training. They were instructed in how to use the materials, they learned to operate the puppets that come with the teacher's materials, but there was neither theoretical discussion, nor classroom research. More recently, discussion about classroom experiences was introduced in the qualification meetings, a fact that can be seen as a positive turn towards the concept of teacher development, but the obligation to apply the material is still central in program. The selection of new teachers was also administered by *Cultura Inglesa*. Accordingly, the main focus was not on pedagogical knowledge, but on oral skills, such as good pronunciation and fluency.

As far as pre-service teacher education is concerned, a problematic issue for ELT in any Brazilian primary school is the fact that our future teachers do not learn much about young

children's cognition or education. Since Brazilian policies established that foreign languages be taught only from the sixth year on, such a concern was never a part of language teacher educators' concern. Sometimes, this is used as an argument to justify the partnerships with commercial language courses, rather than with public universities. However, this scenario will probably change in the next few years, as long as the tendency of teaching foreign languages at primary schools remains, as is likely to occur.

The problem right now is that language course staff are by no means better equipped than university teachers to provide the language teacher with the knowledge necessary to responsibly work with young children. And it seems that University teacher educators and researchers' contributions are not welcome by the program. An example of this just happened this year. The foreign language teacher educators (myself included) from our university department offered Rio de Janeiro's administration a project, with no cost whatsoever, to provide in-service teacher education for their language teachers. By phone, they answered that they would be very glad to accept our offer as far as Spanish and French teachers were concerned, but they were not willing to do the same for their English teachers.

Finally, in terms of achieved results so far, there are no data that suggest any meaningful improvement either in the development of linguistic skills, or in the fostering of critical thinking. On the contrary, I have got very little positive feedback from my ex-students who work in the system. The stories they tell me are almost always about the inadequacy of the method and materials to fit the realities of their students.

This also seems to be the case of the teacher interviewed by Barbosa (2016), who considered that the materials of the program "do not fit the needs because in a lot of classes, a lot of students display a strong dislike of the books" (Barbosa, 2016, p. 58) (my translation). The same teacher, who works in the program, is skeptical about the possibility of Rio Global Child promoting bilingualism:

Look: if it is for the child to have a brief contact with the language, it works. Now, if it is for the child to become bilingual, than it does not work. (...) Classes are overcrowded, the children yell all the time. (...) There are classes who will not shut up even for a minute, for you to play a CD or explain something. So, I do not think it works" (Barbosa, 2016, p. 64) (my translation)

Again, improving working conditions seems to be perceived as the major obstacle to be dealt with. And this seems to be a prerequisite for ELT to be successful in Rio's system, no matter if it starts at the first or the sixth year of basic education.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have described Brazilian policies for foreign language teaching, emphasizing that the obligation to teach a FL only starts at the sixth year of basic education. I also argued that the Brazilian ELT community is historically divided between those whose professional identities owe much to private language course ideologies, and those who developed new identities due to their interest in the specificities of ELT in the context of public schools. This context has always been characterized by insufficient or inadequate working conditions, referred to, by many, as a "lack-of-it-all" context.

Then I pointed out that there is an observable tendency in the Brazilian public system to start ELT from the very first year of basic education, supported by the questionable social belief that young children learn foreign languages better than teenagers. I also suggested, quoting Gimenez

(2013), that it is fair to suppose that most projects for ELT at primary public schools involve private interests of publishing houses and language courses. Finally I discussed the case of Rio Global Child 2016, pointing out the contradictions and limitations of the partnership between Rio's administration and *Cultura Inglesa*.

I believe it is fair to conclude that the unsatisfactory results of ELT in our context are not related to the moment when pupils start learning the language, but rather to the poor working conditions of the context. Finally, it is important to admit that, although it is by no means a solution, starting ELT at primary schools is not in itself a problem at all. It is important, though, that commercial interests do not overcome educational ones, that universities review their language teacher education courses (both pre-service and in-service education), and that the primary language teacher is empowered with the necessary autonomy for local decision making.

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