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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ESL AS MEANS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION – ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND INEQUALITY IN BRAZIL

***Ana Lucia Magalhaes**

State of Sao Paulo Technological College – (Fatec-Cruzeiro)

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*Corresponding author: Ana Lucia Magalhaes,

ABSTRACT

Brazil is an emergent country that has made remarkable progress in social inclusion in the past twenty years. However, people from disadvantaged backgrounds face a major hurdle in their social ascension process: the difficulty experienced in acquiring good command of English. Virtually all management positions in major corporations demand fluent English of the candidates and many other doors are closed for professionals who are not fluent in English. A piece of research carried out in a college showed that students from humble backgrounds, after studying three semesters of English, could not come close to the performance of middle-class freshmen. Poverty in Brazil had its origins in slavery, and affects ESL learning ability in two ways: a culture of poverty that ignores that there is a world outside Brazil and the unsatisfactory quality of public schools. English is also seen by a significant number of educational authorities as the language of the oppressor, and this is also detrimental to the teaching of English in public schools. Though the problem can only be solved through a sweeping change in society, cleverly designed remedial courses could mitigate the difficulty.

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INTRODUCTION

Brazil is an emergent country. According to 2019 World Bank ranking, Brazil has the 9th GDP in the world, ahead of Canada (10th) and the Netherlands (17th). Brazil is also a very unequal society. According to the 2018 issue of the World Inequality Report, the richest 10% of the population get 55% of the national income while the bottom 50% get 12.3%. Much has been said and studied about the situation reflected in those numbers. In this article, we examine which role ESL plays in such context and what would the solutions be. In short, we found that any effort has to be general – society must change in certain ways and there is no sharp, specific solution to decisively improve the results of ESL teaching in Brazil. The problem is made clear by examining a couple of facts.

Facts: In order to show how the acquisition of prowess in English is part of the path to social ascension, we may present two facts. One is relatively recent: in January 2014, a search in the website of Michael Page, a leading professional recruitment consultancy, showed that 93% of management positions available in sizeable corporations required fluent English – not merely understandable, not intermediate, but fluent.

The second fact is worth a close look. In December 2004, the Brazilian Government issued a law on admission criteria for candidates seeking admission to the Diplomatic Training Program. There was a big novelty in that law: candidates with poor performance in the English exam could no longer be eliminated. An intense argument followed – one cannot imagine a diplomat in the 21st century not in good command of English (Senado Federal, 2005). The reason for the law showed up in the debate: the poor, no matter how hard they studied, almost always failed the English exam. The allegation of those who favored the law was that the majority of the population was not represented in the Foreign Service. Those two pieces of evidence show that ESL is a major hurdle for people of disadvantaged backgrounds who want to break out of the path designed for them by the existing social order. More than that, people who would otherwise be in a position to compete for a management position or for a career with the Foreign Service face a barrier caused by their difficulty in learning English. We performed a qualitative piece of research to verify how this problem shows up in a college environment. The section that follows concisely shows methodology, results and analysis.

Qualitative research: The research was carried out among freshmen and seniors of The State of Sao Paulo Technological

College. It is a higher learning institution with a competitive entrance exam (typically five candidates per place – FATEC, 2014). Since the college does not charge tuition, the students who do pass the exam come from diverse social backgrounds (Pontes, 2013). The very fact that they managed to get in indicates that they have the capacity to study and retain knowledge. Sao Paulo is a relatively prosperous state, heavily industrialized, meaning that there are opportunities and incentive to excel in school. The population researched comprised 134 Business Administration juniors and 105 seniors. The hypothesis for the study was: ESL learning abilities are directly related to family background. The English test respondents were inquired about family income and profession of parents, and asked to reply to 12 questions. Six of those questions were easy, like chose he correct form of a verb in a simple sentence, and six were more elaborate, like translating into English a short business e-mail (the answer was considered correct with two or less mistakes). The plots that follow show the results for freshmen and seniors. Seniors went through six semesters of English classes.

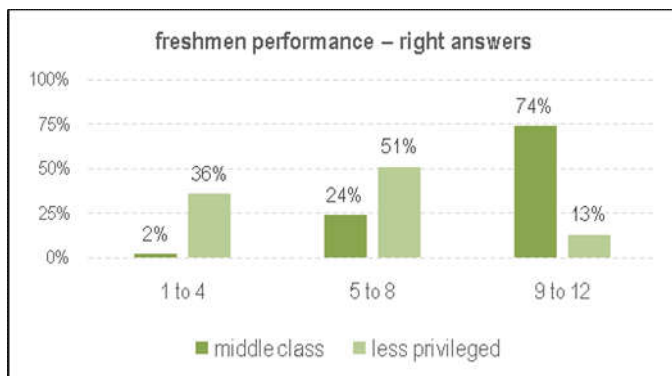


Figure 1. Right answers by freshmen

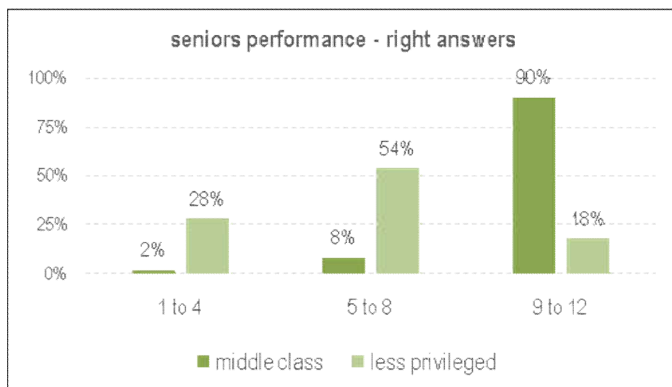


Figure 2. Right answers by seniors

As expected, performance difference as a function of family background became apparent. After six semesters of English classes, both groups showed some improvement, but the difference remains blatant. More than that, the students from poorer families, after six semesters of studying English, still show worse performance than middle class freshmen do. The causes for this discrepancy in foreign language skill can be explained by historical, educational, and (unavoidably) political causes. The political causes, with one exception, will not be studied here.

Causes – historical: The historical causes are inevitably related to slavery and consequential chronic poverty (Fragoso & Florentino, 1993). Poverty and illiteracy, as everywhere

else, are strongly interrelated. The following 2010 statement by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) summarizes such interrelation and its mechanisms.

Illiteracy and poverty constitute a mutually reinforcing vicious cycle that is difficult to break. People with low levels of literacy are more likely to earn less and experience poverty or extreme poverty; moreover, their opportunities are limited in all spheres of life (work, education, housing and access to health care) and their children risk falling into the same cycle by attending poor quality schools and dropping out of school at an early stage.

Slave illiteracy in Brazil is better understood when compared to what happened in the United States. Even though in Southern States there were laws forbidding teaching a slave to read or write, there were pockets of tolerance. For example, in 1743 Anglican ministers established a school for the slaves in South Carolina. Often, slaveholders motivated by Christian convictions promoted literacy to enable Bible reading among slaves. In the North, slave education was not forbidden and slaves were encouraged to learn, to do tasks like bookkeeping (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). Slave holding by Quakers was a contradiction, since Quakers embraced moral honesty, education as a fundamental right and action against social injustice. As an attempt to face such contradiction, Quakers established programs for slave literacy. The Quaker Reading Society, in particular, printed and edited autobiographies by former slaves, the so-called “slave narratives”. In Brazil, there are no records of efforts to promote slave literacy. One of the reasons was that most slave owners were illiterate themselves. The 1872 census shows 84% of the general population as not being able to read and write. Slaves were 99% illiterate (Oliveira, 2003). The predominant religious view at the time was that slaves would reach paradise through meekness and sufferance (Catholic Church, 2000) – reading the Bible was not deemed necessary. A German Educator, Ina von Binzer, who worked in Brazil when slavery was about to be abolished, wrote that very difficult times would be coming, since the slaves were not prepared to be free, as they had not received any formal education whatsoever (Bizner, 1994). In one of her letters, she wrote:

The 1871 emancipation law determines that slave owners must teach all children born of slave parents to read and write. In the whole country, however, probably less than ten homes comply with that law. In the farms, compliance is close to impossible.

With the end of slavery (1888), the economy started a major shift towards industrialization and services. Slaves were ill equipped for that, since they were not only illiterate but also their training was suited to an economy that had simply disappeared. Their descendants are the core of poverty, having in general missed the waves of social upward mobility since then, with the notable exception of the most recent one, which started in 1994 with the end of runaway inflation. English, however, remains an obstacle. Poverty, in Brazil, affects education in two basic ways: cultural and educational. People of humble backgrounds do not have the habit of reading books and there are houses with no books at all. Most movies on TV are dubbed, and people do not practice listening to foreign

languages or reading subscripts. Poor parents are usually happy enough that their children go to school and do not argue about quality of teaching, as shown later in this paper. The educational component has to do with the quality of government schools.

Public education in Brazil: The quality of government schools that offer primary and secondary education is far below world average. Middle class children go in general to private primary and secondary schools. Brazil presently ranks 58th in 65 countries in student performance as measured by PISA (Program for International Student Assessment). The causes are subject to a lot of debate, but some facts can be considered as established. Money spent is not a factor that can explain the poor performance of Brazilian students – this is made clear with the comparison between Brazil and Poland as far as PISA goes. Brazil applies in education 5.1% of its Gross Domestic Product and Poland spends slightly less, 4.9%. The table that follows summarizes the results for the two countries.

Table 1. GDP (source: World Bank) and PISA results for Brazil and Poland

Result		Brazil	Poland
% GDP spent in education		5.1%	4.9%
Mean PISA performance results	Mathematics	413	516
	Reading	384	512
	Science	404	511

Parent satisfaction with their children's school is another face of the culture of poverty. Table 2 summarizes the results of a public opinion research conducted in 2018 by IBOPE, a major independent research institution. The question reply was: "What is your opinion about the quality of basic education provided by government?"

Table 2: Public schools quality perception survey (source: IBOPE – major research institution)

Opinion on school quality	Proportion
Excellent	7%
Good	34%
Fair	35%
Poor	11%
Below poor	13%
Does not know/does not want to reply	1%

The results show that only about a quarter of the parents are aware of the poor quality of the schools. This means that the remaining 75% is not likely to demand improvement of schools financed by their taxes. Part of the problem resides on the way society treats teachers, who have low salaries and low social prestige. That in general discourages bright students to follow teaching careers in basic education. Table 3 shows a social status index of teachers of 20 countries, as calculated by the Varkey GEMS Foundation, a non-profit organization established to improve the standards of education for underprivileged children. The index is calculated, for each country, through replies of a representative sample of society to four simple questions: 1. Ranking primary school teachers against other professions; 2. Ranking secondary school teachers against other professions; 3. Ranking of teachers according to their relative status based on the most similar comparative profession and 4. Rating perceived pupil respect for teachers (Dolton, 2013).

Table 3: Status index and salary of teachers in 20 countries

Ranking	country	status index	Salary (US\$)
1	China	100	\$17,730
2	Greece	73.7	\$23,341
3	Turkey	68.0	\$25,378
4	SouthKorea	62.0	\$43,874
5	NewZealand	54.0	\$28,438
6	Egypt	49.3	\$10,604
7	Singapore	46.3	\$45,755
8	Netherlands	40.3	\$37,218
9	USA	38.4	\$44,917
10	UK	36.7	\$33,377
11	France	32.3	\$28,828
12	Spain	30.7	\$29,475
13	Finland	28.9	\$28,780
14	Portugal	26.0	\$23,614
15	Switzerland	23.8	\$39,326
16	Germany	21.6	\$42,254
17	Japan	16.2	\$43,775
18	Italy	13.0	\$28,603
19	CzechRepublic	12.1	\$19,953
20	Brazil	2.4	\$18,550

Brazil, besides ranked last in teacher social status at a large distance of the second worst, pays the second lowest salary to primary and secondary school teachers. Since the problem is not the amount of funding, as shown in Table 1 - the numbers point decisively to poor management. The reasons are largely political, beyond the scope of this paper. The one political reason judged worth mentioning is the subject of the next section.

The language of the oppressor: In some circles (and heavily in teachers' unions), English is the language of "linguistic imperialism". There is, therefore, a resistance to teaching English. It stems from a century-old anti-Americanism that still has its followers who did manage to get positions of power in the educational system. A 2009 scholarly paper (Mott-Fernandez, 2009) reads:

... identifies the influence of the English language as linguistic imperialism, representing a way of domination by inner circle countries over expanding circle countries, what would necessarily mean a threat to the existence of national languages"

This point of view had one major victory: English is not mandatory in the Secondary School National Exam, a national exam that evaluates secondary education in Brazil. Students' grades generate their schools' scores, so that the Ministry of Education of Brazil is able to rank the schools. The exam is also used by many universities as an entrance exam. Students can choose between English and Spanish and many do prefer Spanish, similar to Portuguese and perceived as much easier.

ESL and age: It has been demonstrated that poverty in Brazil leads lack of opportunities for good basic education. This does not mean that some people cannot, through effort and willingness to improve, acquire culture and skills. Even for those, English poses as a major barrier. The reason for the difficulty relates to age: if a foreign language is not learned during childhood, the search for proficiency in that language becomes harder as people grow older. The plot below shows the results of two studies on age and learning ability. Johnson & Newport (1989) carried out a proficiency evaluation with Chinese and Korean immigrants and recorded the scores as a function of the age of arrival in the United States. Birdsong &

Molis (2001) applied the very same test with Spanish immigrants.

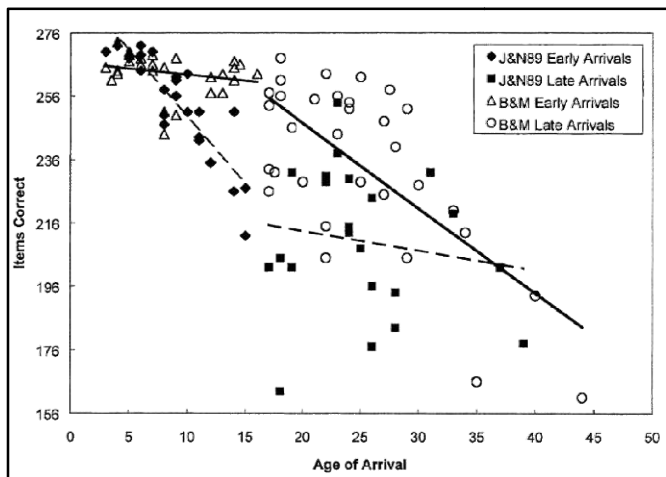


Figure 3. Age and ESL learning capacity. Source: Birdsong & Molis (2001)

The plots eloquently show that the ability to learn foreign languages has, in general, a peak at seven years of age and declines sharply after the age of ten. If school fails to teach English during the basic education years, difficulties are to be expected when English becomes a necessary skill.

Solutions: For ESL to cease being a reason for social exclusion, society would have to mature: poverty should be greatly reduced (advances have been made in the last 20 years) and, even more difficult, the culture of poverty must end or at least, be substantially modified. People from disadvantaged background should be empowered through more access to information to trigger a process of broadening horizons. The educational system should be unpoliticized and concentrate in the teaching and learning process, rather than on political ideology. Since this is a very slow, multigenerational development, the problem must be mitigated through a change in methodology of teaching English to adults. Presently, there are in Brazil two dominant methodologies: the quick fix and the traditional method. The quick fix is dominant in private, extracurricular, for-profit courses: they promise that the student will be speaking fluently in some number of quarters, and try to teach conversation without much attention to grammar or style. Though this instant gratification approach does not have good results to its credit, people still buy into the idea. The English learned through this methodology can seldom be classified as fluent. The other usual way to teach English to adults is simply the same way used to teach children, sometimes with minor changes in vocabulary. For reasons shown before, the results are not much better than the quick fix attempts. The solution might reside in the remedial approach. ESL adult students should be recognized as people with an intellectual handicap, though possibly otherwise perfectly intelligent. The remedial approach has the guidelines that follow.

Individually designed programs: Tolstoy once wrote, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”. This holds for grasp of a foreign language: people who have it are all more or less alike in that respect, and they can improve easily. People who are not in good command of the foreign language usually have their own strengths, weaknesses and prior educational experiences.

Regular classrooms with students listening and trying to interact with the teacher cannot be efficient if every student has his own knowledge and needs. Each student has to have his needs assessed by a trained teacher and students shall be given assignments to be discussed with the teacher in some setting different from the traditional classroom.

Teaching of study skills: such skills are useful for any kind of study, but crucially necessary for adults learning a foreign language. Teachers should possess understanding of the proper techniques and be adequately trained.

Emphasis in reading: it is impossible to teach writing without simultaneously teaching reading (Kroll, 1993). Writing, as well as speaking, cannot be isolated from familiarity with the language, and that is acquired through reading. Reading can be done at one’s own pace and is obviously less demanding than writing. It has to be encouraged and tests on text interpretation must be done much more frequently than the common practice in teaching children.

Setting of goals: for each student, for each semester. These programs are to be the basis for teaching of English in colleges, since the students who manage to be admitted to colleges are the ones who will need most some degree of proficiency in English.

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