

**POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE MAINTENANCE OF
THE HEGEMONY OF ENGLISH IN THE BRAZILIAN SCHOOL
CURRICULUM**

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There are two explanatory models for the emergence of the school subjects: a sociological and a philosophical one. According to the philosophical perspective, an intellectual discipline is created and systematically defined by a community of scholars located in a university department, being afterwards translated or simplified for the use of schools. The sociological perspective, in turn, sees education in a capitalist society as an instrument of the ruling class, for only the kind of knowledge available for certain groups reach the status of a school subject, while others don't. Thus, the way how society selects, classifies, distributes and transmits the educational knowledge which is held to be public is related to the distribution of power and the principles of social control.

Although the sociological perspective is acceptable in a general way, the fact is that the school subjects themselves represent substantial groups of interests, being necessary to clarify the role exerted by all those involved in their maintenance or promotion in history, for they are autonomous communities which are frequently divorced from an academic discipline (GOODSON, 1990).

Questioning the common sense according to which schools transmit in a simplified way sciences which were produced in other locations, Chervel (1990) states that this conception is related to the general idea of pedagogy: as a means to arrange the methods for an efficient and fast assimilation by the students. A conception like this, in fact, doesn't allow the autonomous existence of the school disciplines, reducing them to

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their methodologies. Besides, it doesn't take into account an evident historical precedence: that of the school subjects in relation to some academic disciplines. The classic and modern languages, for example, until the nineteenth century, were only elementary or preparatory studies for the access to the universities (HOWATT, 1994).

The concept of "school discipline", from that perspective, defines the role of schools not as transmitters of knowledge, but as institutions in which knowledge is produced, taught and learned. Likewise, the methods are held less as a pedagogical science than as one of the components of teaching. However, the notion of school discipline involves not only the teaching practices, but also the great purposes which presides its constitution and the phenomenon of mass acculturation, what makes it an object not restricted to educational history, but open to researches in the field of cultural history or cultural studies.

Another aspect which differentiates school disciplines from academic ones is its relation to the formation of young people's spirit, which implies its link with the aims of the political state. Here we can notice a problem in the explanatory model elaborated by Chervel (1990): the excessive autonomy given to schools, as well as to school disciplines, which causes its dissociation from educational policies, even when the great purposes – religious, social, psychological, cultural – are considered.

Hamilton (1989) proposes a conciliating solution in which schooling¹ and society are examined in their mutual relations, once teachers and students are both targets of the aims of the political state and the active medium through which those aims can be reached. Thus, although theorists of schooling acknowledge that state

¹ By schooling I mean the process through which its main components – time, space, division of students into groups, professionalization of teachers, curriculum, textbooks – are organized, something which can only be conceived historically (Vincent, Lahire e Thin, 2001), as well as an instrument of the political state, that is, "an agency charged with the transformation of immature human beings into appropriately-socialized adult citizens" (Hamilton, 1989: vii). Thus, its formation implies the configuration of the school disciplines and of their great purposes and aims, with all their didactic and methodological apparatus.

intervention falls short of its goals, their diagnosis remain within the realm of systems engineering, making school reform a permanent solution. From such a perspective, the day to day practices of schooling are socially-constructed and historically-located: “their shape derives as much, for instance, from the changing expectations of priests and politicians as it does from the pre-given circumstances of school architecture and textbook availability” (HAMILTON, 1989: 151).

In the case of school disciplines, their great purposes or the aims of state policies are intimately related to the “pedagogical reality” (CHERVEL, 1990). However, it doesn’t mean that they simply reflect or reproduce those aims and purposes, but that in their process of configuration the concrete practices of teaching interact with their explicit purposes or aims, redefining regulations and thus assuming their shape.

This was the case of the institutionalization of English teaching in Brasil. The purpose of the law of 1809 signed by D. João, which officialized the teaching of French and English in the country and made possible the professionalization of public teachers, was giving prosperity to public education and taming the students to speak and write well both languages, in order to make them able to know their style and taste in their translations (OLIVEIRA, 1999).

However, if we consider the social and intellectual representation of both languages, as well as their late inclusion in the curriculum of secondary schools, in 1837, the Portuguese state doesn’t reach its aims. First of all, being, at that period, the language of the enemy, French could be less praised or appreciated than English, but its preeminence as a “universal language” was implied in the law of 1809, which stated that the models to be translated should be those of the century of Louis XIV, king of France during the period of its political and intellectual supremacy, when even the Lord

Chancellor of England would say that “French is almost naturalized through Europe”, although it was not taught in grammar schools (apud HOWATT, 1994: 53).

Another explicit aim of the law of 1809 was the utility of state and prosperity of public education, which was based on the fact that French and English, by their notoriously known necessity, were the most distinct among the modern foreign languages. But their utility were much more related to the access of a very restricted social group to the colleges and universities, to which those subjects were mandatory, than to the prosperity of public education. Thus, any “great purpose” of the regulation of the teaching of foreign languages in Brasil had to be adapted to their instrumental function in the system of schooling of the time: giving the students the grammatical basis for the necessary translation of foreign books in their courses in higher education.

By the reports of the ministers of the Empire we can see that the number of public teachers of English in the court and provinces of the country was much smaller than those of French. But this wasn't due to a lack of conscience about the importance of the English language, in a professional or educational level. The first English grammars directed to Portuguese speakers, both in Portugal and Brasil, always emphasized the utilitarian aspect of the language, especially in commerce.

Teles de Menezes, for example, in his *Gramatica inglesa ordenada em portuguez* (1762), believed that the main purpose of the teaching of English was the knowledge of great authors who had published in that language. According to the author, in England there were many Portuguese grammars, although the interest of those who wanted to learn the language was directed to commerce, and not to the Portuguese authors. This couldn't be an impediment to Portugal, once the nobler the motive of learning a language the more laudable would be its study. Besides, if it was useful to other “civilized” nations, to Portugal it would be necessary, for the Portuguese had

long-term commercial relations with the English, being inexcusable to treat their language with indifference, unlike some others to which, according to the author, Portugal shouldn't give so much importance (OLIVEIRA, 2006).

Among these other languages was French, whose status of “universal language” was already established. This was a basic premise in the discourses of the authors of English grammars of the period. Manoel de Freitas Brasileiro, in the prologue of his *Nova grammatica portugueza e ingleza*, printed in Liverpool in 1812, stated that the English language should be considered one of the “universal” ones, like Latin and French. According to Brasileiro, in English there were all kinds of reading, those which embellish our thoughts as well as those which expand our ideas, and this was enough to motivate him to divulge this language to his compatriots. However, the author doesn't forget to emphasize the commercial utility of the language, especially in a moment when the Brazilian ports were franked to England. Some years later, Brasileiro published another grammar, *Compendio da grammatica ingleza e portugueza*, printed in Rio de Janeiro in 1820. Signing Manoel José de Freitas, the author defended again the idea that the study of the English language was as important as that of Latin and French. Its knowledge, being useful to commerce and “civil traffic”, would serve to scientific, moral and educational reading (OLIVEIRA, 1999).

Another significant example of the lack of proportion of the political importance English was assuming in Brazil and its slow process of configuration as a school discipline can be seen in the discussion about the preparatory subjects of the Brazilian law courses, which took place in the Chamber of Deputies in 1826. French and English, according to Ferreira França, one of the deputies, were means to acquire enlightenment. Between the two languages, he preferred English, for it was the language of a nation where liberty and the best form of government were planted. His Anglophile

perspective is reinforced in his praise of the moral quality of the English, as well as of the practical and concise character of their language, which, unlike French, could express ideas without pompous and superficial ornaments (OLIVEIRA, 2006).

This sympathy for the English was patent in the ministry of foreign affairs, and can be read as a rhetorical device to justify the treatise of acknowledgement of Brazilian independence, of which the English took a great advantage, as an office of 1826 suggests. In the following year, the ministry of the empire approved the statutes of the English Reading Cabinet, an institution proposed by two English merchants: Stewart Mackay and Charles Spence. But it seems Ferreira França's speech didn't work, for the law which created the first Brazilian law courses, in 1827, only referred to Latin and French as preparatory subjects.

Nevertheless, in the same year, Guilherme Tilbury, English master of the queen and princesses of Portugal, published his *Arte ingleza*, defending the idea that the study of English could serve as an antidote against the excessive liberalism of the French, whose philosophy threatened the altar and the throne. According to the author, who was a catholic priest, among the revolutionaries who had disturbed the peace of the country, very few knew English (OLIVEIRA, 2006).

The institution of public examinations of English, something which occurred in 1831, constitutes a fundamental component in its configuration as a school discipline, for the organization of the preparatory classes – valid to all the existing faculties or academies – and their later gathering in an architecturally organized establishment will provide the basis for the implementation of secondary education in Brasil, symbolized by the creation of the first official institution of this kind, Colégio de Pedro II, founded in 1837.

However, the facilities of the public examinations, as well as of the market, which was much more profitable to those who taught the grammatical rudiments of the languages required to the access to higher education, caused the delay of the implementation of secondary establishments in the provinces of the empire and of the constitution of the school disciplines. This was the main reason why, until the 1860's, French and English – and sometimes Latin – were taught by the same teacher in the preparatory classes. Nevertheless, the preponderance of French in relation to English showed itself in the request of students for French examinations and in the greater availability of French teachers.

Since then, the successive decrees of the nineteenth century which reformed the Colégio de Pedro II, that was the official model upon which every Brazilian establishment of the kind should be organized, redistributed the disciplines and changed the purposes of the institution, but English was kept close to its practical and instrumental aims, requiring from the students the grammatical rudiments necessary to the translation of the texts of the examinations.

The educational reforms of the republic didn't change the situation until 1931, when, for the first time, a law specified the objectives, content and methodology of the modern foreign languages. With the new regulation, the phonetic system was emphasized, for an official method was elected: the “direct method”, according to which the foreign languages should be taught in the foreign languages (OLIVEIRA, 1999).

With the law on the Brazilian Education Guidelines and Bases published in 1961, however, the study of modern languages was no longer compulsory in secondary schools, and their inclusion in the curriculum came to be dependent on the state councils. Likewise, ten years later, the law 5.692, of 1971, introduced a common core

for the curricula of basic education, but the modern foreign languages remained optional, their introduction depending on the conditions of each establishment.

It's important to mention that during this period English had already assumed a hegemonic position among the foreign languages. This process began in the first half of the twentieth century, when the new forms of mass culture – the radio, cinema, tv and other media – contributed to the americanization of the world. After the World Wars, indeed, the place occupied by the United States, both economically and politically, not to mention its preponderance in cultural industry, was fundamental in the propagation of English throughout the world. This hegemony is patent in many fields: in academy, or in the world of research, making English a kind of “scientific language”; in culture – in its American version – and in the digital field, as the constant advancements of the World Wide Web, in which the use of the English language is almost necessary, can attest.

This necessity obviously had to be reflected in schooling. In the case of Brasil, although the modern foreign languages weren't mandatory in the curriculum of basic education, the teaching of English at schools increased. But this advancement seems very modest when compared with the great amount of private courses which were founded. Besides, in some public schools of the country, French was still taught, dividing with English the role reserved in the complementary curriculum to the foreign languages.

Under the new Guidelines and Bases Law (LDB) promulgated in 1996, the foreign languages regained the educational status they had in the previous century. Now a part of the field of Languages, Codes and Related Technologies – according to the National Curriculum Parameters for secondary education –, they have become an integral part of the curriculum of basic education (BRASIL, 1998).

A document published in 2006 – Curriculum Orientations for Secondary Education – raised a question which is hardly touched in the discussion about English teaching: the conflict between the aims of foreign languages in basic education and in private courses. If in these courses English is restricted to its linguistic or instrumental aspects, attending the demands of the professional market, at regular schools it has cultural and educational purposes, imposed not only by the political state in its legislation, parameters or orientations, but also by the concrete practices of teaching (BRASIL, 2006).

This question can give us the dimension of the differences between two different processes: the hegemonic ascension of English in a globalized world and its configuration as a school discipline. From this perspective, the problem is how to conciliate the teaching of foreign languages with education, or with schooling, emphasizing their contribution to the “development of citizenship” (BRASIL, 2006). One way of solving it is observing the relative autonomy of schooling in relation to State policies, as well as to any scientific or academic knowledge which is elaborated outside schools.

In the case of English, even when we think about the demands of the professional market, due to its hegemonic position in a world ruled by a globalized economy, or of the developments in the field of applied linguistics, we must not forget that its configuration as a school discipline will also depend on the material conditions of the process of schooling: the pre-given circumstances of school architecture, professionalization and remuneration of teachers, technology and textbook availability.

Having won a struggle not only against French after the World Wars, but also against the prejudices which had maintained the foreign languages outside the formative purposes of secondary education, now English as a school discipline has to face another

challenge: Spanish, whose offering was made compulsory in secondary education by a law of 2005. This challenge is already pointed out in the National Curriculum Parameters for foreign languages which, after recognizing English as the hegemonic foreign language, because of its political implications, state that the choice of the foreign language to be included in the curriculum must consider the linguistic necessities of society, its “economic priorities” and geopolitical significance, what suggests the new historical circumstances represented by the Mercosul (BRASIL, 1998).

In the Curriculum Orientations published in 2006, this suggestion becomes evident, for a specific chapter of the document is dedicated to Spanish, unlike the other foreign languages, which are treated collectively. Although only the offering of the discipline was made mandatory, being optional its choice by the student, the special treatment of the government, which has made some investments in the formation of teachers and in didactic material, aroused the recent claim of the Brazilian associations of English teachers, which, even recognizing the importance of Spanish, demanded equal political treatment, basing their arguments on the representation of English as an economic and cultural capital, indispensable in a society which aspires its international insertion.

However, the challenge Spanish represents for the maintenance of the hegemony of English in the Brazilian school curriculum must be thought in terms of its adaptation in the process of schooling. If the frailty of English resides in the risk of excess provoked by the immense power of the United States (LE BRETON, 2005), the limitations of the maintenance of its hegemony in the Brazilian school curriculum are much more related to the confusion between its educational and instrumental aims, something which is caused by the incomprehension of its place in the process of

schooling, than to a threaten represented by Spanish, because of the economic and political relations of the Brazilian government with other Hispanic countries.

As for the possibilities, they will depend on the configuration of Spanish as a school discipline, for sometimes, as some historical experiences show, schools refuse, or expel after a round, new elements which are introduced in their curriculum, and not because of the lack of competence of the teachers, but because the role of schooling resides in another place, and schools wouldn't accomplish their mission if they just transposed or transmitted something strange to its own processes.

Only time will be able to answer these questions, but thinking about them demands the awareness that schools can be both conservative and transforming. It doesn't mean that we must maintain what is already silted, or position ourselves against any kind of innovation in the name of a conservatism dressed in theoretical support, but that we must rethink the curriculum reformations considering not only the political and economic circumstances and the advancements or transformations of academic knowledge, but also the role of schooling in all this process, as well as of their main agents: teachers and students.

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