

## **THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TEACHER**

The teaching of English as foreign language and literature mainly at public schools in Brazil has been inefficient. This can be verified at the university when students cannot perform basic knowledge in English although they had studied the language for more than four years before university. The linguistic baggage they carry should provide them with capacity to read texts, which is one of the focuses of Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (PCNs) and of Proposta Curricular de Santa Catarina (PC/SC).

Nevertheless, this is not what instructors verify when receiving students at university. One could explain part of the problem by invoking motivation or interest; however, we are led to search for other reasons when we face a group of students who can barely dominate *verb to be* but intend to graduate from English language and literature, that is, wish to master the language, what can be considered a great reason to keep interest in learning.

In this way, we should ask questions about the fulfillment of the objectives for the teaching of foreign language and literature in elementary school established by the guiding documents PCNs and PC/SC, as well as other texts. By asking the following questions, we could get a diagnosis of the reality of teaching: Why is it so difficult to learn English (language and literature) as a foreign language in public schools? This question leads us to other questions such as: Does the work with the English language and literature have theoretical and methodological support? Which would it be? Would the approach established in the PCNs and in the PC/SC be present in the English language and literature classes? Is the theoretical and methodological support constructed during the undergraduate course present in the English language and literature classes?

Beginning from these questions, we investigated the situation of the teaching of English language and literature in the surrounding area of Chapecó/SC.

As a general objective we wanted the diagnosis and the analysis of the theoretical and methodological conceptions that regulate the teaching of English language and literature in the final years of public elementary school in the surrounding area of Chapecó/SC considering the practice of PCNs, PC/SC, as well as the theoretical and methodological knowledge constructed during graduation. As specific objectives, we wanted to identify the methodological approach used for teaching, to observe if the PCNs and the PC/SC were applied in the English language and literature classes, and to analyze how teachers articulated, in their practice, the theoretical knowledge built during graduation.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education in Brazil published the new edition of the PCNs of foreign language for elementary and secondary school, which has a fundamental role for teachers in public and private schools. It has as its objectives to center on the discursive engagement of the learner, that is, on the capacity of communication so that he can act in the social world. According to the PCNs, this function is mainly related to the use of the foreign language via reading, although it can also consider other communicative abilities.

Three criteria are pointed out for the inclusion of a foreign language in the curriculum, considering the difficulty to include a lot of disciplines in the curriculum and the lack of teachers: factors related to history, to local communities and to tradition. As social justification for the inclusion of the foreign language at elementary school, the PCNs expose that the inclusion must be determined by the function that the language performs in society since in Brazil only a small percentage of the population has the chance to use foreign languages as instrument for communication.

Although the capacity of reading is the greatest objective of the PCNs, we know this does not happen in public schools. What is wrong? Which practice should be modified or improved so that it happens?

In many regions, the objectives prioritize the development of the ability of reading comprehension and grammar but this does not seem to be the consequence of an analysis of the students' needs. One also finds contradictions among the approaches to the abilities and suggested activities. Teachers and schools affirm that they follow the official documents; however, at practice we see exercises that only explore grammatical structures.

We should also consider the conditions of the classrooms in most Brazilian schools (reduced timetable, crowded classes, little control of the oral abilities by the part of the teachers, reduced didactic material), what can make the teaching of communicative abilities impossible to happen, as well as the work with reading comprehension considering the existing variety in terms of language or even types of text.

According to the PCNs, the student that gets to elementary school has already overcome the challenges to learn his mother tongue, he is already a competent speaker of his language, having also internalized its socio-interactive nature and is starting to build knowledge of meta-linguistic nature. The learning of a foreign language will increase knowledge about language through comparisons between the foreign language and the mother tongue and will provide an opportunity for the student, when he gets involved in processes of construction of meanings in the foreign language, to constitute himself into a discursive being in the use of it. At practice, the comparison between these two languages and the process of construction of meanings does not occur in a satisfactory way and with satisfactory intensity. Because of this, to the student, the foreign language is something very distant from his reality showing that he is not conscious of the importance of his learning.

The PC/SC, just like the PCNs, has as its conception of learning, the socio-interactionist theory. The social practice of language must be practiced in a significant way, aiming at the interaction in the social relations, making the student know the world through varied material, with information about the countries where the language is spoken, bringing to the classroom newspapers, magazines, packaging, product labels, etc. It is necessary that the student live effectively in the world of written language. In this way, the class will focus on language as social function providing the real use of language. Supervising, requests and commands should be conducted in the foreign language. As a foreign language learner, the student must be active, participate in the process of written and oral comprehension and production, raise hypotheses, produce meaning and socialize his previous knowledge.

Starting from the presupposition that the foreign language can enlarge the cultural universe of the student or make it possible to question one's own identity, how can this be so if students finish elementary school without the domain of reading, and in the majority of times, without any ability? Considering the number of students per group and the hours of the discipline, it is understood, via PC/SC that it is better to prioritize the teaching of the abilities of reading and writing, not restricting though, the possibilities for learning, but making learning efficient at least in one modality.

Within the realm of public and private educational politics in Brazil, there has been some attempt to propose a more communicative approach to the teaching/learning of English in which the students should get sociolinguistic competence. This means that besides teaching the four abilities, the teacher should also make use of cultural issues inherent in the second language. In this way, the student should be able to establish links between his culture and the culture of the other. This should also contribute to a larger awareness of the student in relation to his own language and culture. Here, the literary text should be included in the teaching of English

because it brings with it an awareness of culture that is important in the acquisition of a language.

First of all, it seems necessary to define, very briefly, what literature is. It is interesting that the same movement does not seem to be a need for language studies. Literature and language – why is it that the second term seems to hold a scientific realm of its own with no necessity for definition, while the first – literature – always needs to be defined, redefined, show its existence and how it exists? Is this due to a philosophical characteristic inherent in the first term? Anyway, the distinction seems to be necessary because the objective of this text is also to review the inclusion of literature in the English class; therefore, for the purpose here and also for knowledge arrangement and categorization, they are distinct in nature but not opposite.

When we attempt to define literature, it is always necessary to choose one approach. The approach chosen here is the one by Terry Eagleton who states that, the definition of literature depends on the way through which someone decides to read, and not on the nature of what is read ... some texts are born literary, others reach the condition of being literary, and on others the condition is imposed ... what matters is not the text's origin but the way through which people consider it. If they decide that it is literature, so it will be, no matter what the author may have thought.

Marisa Grigoletto ( 2001) revises the teaching/learning of reading in English classes and relationships between teacher and student involved in such a process. She thinks that years and years of teaching reading via a teacher-centered kind of class provokes a very passive attitude or posture from the part of the student. Diversity, instead, should be the center of the situation of enunciation in class and the literary text is a privileged vehicle for it.

Alan Maley, in the introduction of his book entitled *Literature* (1997), declares that the role of literature in the teaching/learning of a language has been interpreted in different ways in the last 100 years. First, when the model grammar-translation was 'sovereign', literary texts were

common in the teaching of a foreign language, representing, at the same time, models of good writing and illustrations of grammatical rules of the language.

Still, according to Maley, during the period of structural dominance, literature was only on one side; the formal properties of the language became essential and it was seen as being part of the 'traditional' methods. It became difficult, then, to justify the use of literary texts in a world where so much emphasis was given to vocabulary and grammatical structures.

For a while, the communicative method also ignored literature. The emphasis was placed on pragmatic and efficient communication. Literature seemed irrelevant. Even so, over the last 15 years, there has been a memorable reemergence of the interest in literature as one of the available resources in the teaching/learning of a language.

#### *Why literature?*

According to Maley, there are essentially three types of justification for the use of literary texts in the teaching of a language: linguistic, methodological and motivational.

- In terms of language, literary texts offer genuine examples of a great variety of styles, registers and types of text in various degrees of difficulties. For this only reason, literary texts deserve consideration.
- The fact that literary texts are, in their essence, open to multiple interpretations signifies that very rarely, two readers will understand and react identically to a determined text. The differences in individual interpretation can be approximated via genuine interaction.
- Literary texts are not trivial in the sense that they deal with subjects that worry the writer sufficiently to make him write about the subject. In this sense, literary texts are different from many other forms of *input* in the teaching of a language, *inputs* which frequently trifle with experiences at the service of pedagogy. This 'genuine sensation' of literary

texts is a powerful motivator especially when allied with the fact that literary texts treat social and personal themes and, therefore, students can react towards them from their own experience.

### *Cultural difficulties*

Maley affirms that it is notoriously difficult to define cultural difficulties, although a lot has been said about that in the last years. We know it is impossible for an 'outsider' completely share all the range of references of an 'insider' and cultural factors really offer difficulties to the understanding of a text. However, to say that nothing, because of that difficulty, can be extracted from a text on the part of the 'outsider' is too hasty.

Now, besides advocating for using literature in the English class, the text revises the four abilities alongside literature.

One of the ways to teach the verb tense system in English is via the literary text. We, as language teachers, tend to make use only of isolated sentences to explain the verb structure in English. Not much attention is given to the literary text.

Getting in touch with a literary text, that is, reading a literary text, especially aloud, provides a pleasurable experience: it is often one of the things we remember most fondly about our school days. Obviously any school experience needs to be more than just fun and a warm memory, but that certainly is a good place to begin. Students learn more when they are relaxed. Few academical expectations are made during the initial read-aloud time. This lowers a listener's "affective filter" (Krashen, 1988), reducing the stress often associated with learning tasks. This allows the listener to psychologically remain more open to the input.

The teacher who decides to make use of literature in the teaching of grammar, in the specific case of teaching the tense system in English, should choose the text carefully: it should not be too long and, most of all, it should be in accordance with the students' level of knowledge. I believe that short stories are of this sort. They are concise and have all the elements present in a

novel: plot, characters, setting, tone, etc. Choosing a literary text that provides the teacher with the verb tense that is being taught in a determined class helps solidify the learning process.

In a class in which the purpose is to explain the use of the verb tense system in English via the literary text, it is important to develop strategies. David Nunan (1999) states that background knowledge actively helps comprehension: the reader's perceptions of cohesive relationships (logical, referential, lexical) start working. The practical implication of this statement is that training students to make links between the text and what they already know can facilitate comprehension. This is explained by the "schema theory": we interpret what we read in terms of what we already know, and we integrate what we already know with the content of what we are reading. Thus, explaining the verb structure via a text can initiate the students' comprehension of the structures of the language being taught by the use of their background knowledge.

Sandra Lee McKay (2003) writes in favor of using literary texts to integrate skills. According to McKay, using literature as content provides an ideal way to integrate the development of the four skills. She states that "encouraging students to carefully examine a literary text to support their interpretations promotes students' close reading of texts, a skill which will benefit their reading of other material".

When read aloud, literature also offers an excellent context for developing global listening skills. The many books available on audio can be used as a basis for an extensive listening library. According to McKay, one clear advantage of encouraging students to listen to literature read by professionals is that such material exposes students to a variety of dialects and voice qualities.

McKay acknowledges that 'perhaps the greatest benefit of using literature in the language classroom lies in its potential for developing students' speaking skills, particularly their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence'. Unlike dialogues written for traditional language



learning texts, story dialogues typically offer a detailed account of the speakers' backgrounds and role relationships. Such dialogues provide students with a basis for judging the appropriateness of language use. Teachers can also use literary texts as a basis for having students write their own dialogues.

Literature can be used to develop students' writing abilities by having students react in personal journals and formal essays to the literary texts they read. Using writing in this way offers two benefits. First, it provides students with a way to express their personal interpretation of a story, thus promoting the type of aesthetic response to reading literary texts referred to earlier. Second, to the extent that students are asked to refer to the text to justify their conclusions about the literary selection, they learn to support their opinions with relevant information, an important skill for various types of academic writing.

Finally, above all approaches to teaching English, diversity should be the center of the situation of enunciation in class and not the didactic book the only sovereign instrument for teaching all skills. The next lines are dedicated to report on the research in the surrounding area of Chapecó/SC considering all the elements discussed before.

The English language and literature teachers participating in the research had between five and twenty one years of experience in the classroom. Some had initiated their career even before graduating. When asked about the period of graduation, a lot of teachers pointed out as a problem the fact that their course gave them a degree in two areas, in Portuguese and in English. There was not enough time to work, in a more complex way, with the two languages and, for the most part, the teachers opted for what they considered easier, in their case, the Portuguese language and literature.

The fact that the teachers have experience in teaching prevents advance in a way because many believe they do not need improvement. Regarding the theoretical conception and the theoreticians studied, the interviewed teachers declared that they did not remember any and

added that their graduation teachers asked them to do differently but their classes used the traditional method. When the interviewed teachers could remember theoreticians, the names cited were Piaget, Vygotsky, Chomsky and Saussure.

The didactic book is used by seven of the nine teachers interviewed, others use study outlines that are prepared in the beginning of the year. There are many complaints about the lack of pedagogical material in the English language; most books are low cost so that students can buy them. Such books, according to the teachers, do not provide students with what they need for learning a foreign language. One teacher suggested a meeting among the English language and literature teachers in public schools to select a didactic book for all schools and, in this way, there would not be problems in relation to materials when a student was transferred from one school to another. We can observe that the didactic book is an inspiring source and guide for teachers, without it, there is no possibility of teaching.

According to their reports, the teachers try to develop the four basic abilities (listening, speaking, reading e writing). The abilities of reading and speaking are developed through argumentative texts, dialogues, dramatization, panels, and comic books. Besides these texts and activities, others are included in the classes, such as: newspapers, magazines and songs. For the development of writing, the teachers determine a subject on which the students are going to write and sometimes it is the student himself that chooses the theme. The themes are normally subjects already studied in class. One teacher reported having asked students to write about the grammatical aspect they were studying. Another teacher defines writing as copy informing that students copy and develop only dialogues. The oral production normally takes place via reading, drama, personal questions, interviews, dialogues and word repetition. Two teachers reported that they consider speaking the most difficult and complicated ability to be developed although one of teachers stated that if there was stimulus, the students interacted and accepted producing

orally. In relation to grammar, most answers reported work through texts and never in an isolated way.

One can notice, from the answers, that the integrated work with the abilities does not occur easily and, in a way, the PCNs and the PC/SC are forgotten. Only one teacher commented not having studied the PC/SC and that only had contact with the document when studying for a teacher examination. One teacher declared that the PC/SC is only a document, being its application impossible because it is distant from the reality of the students. The PCNs were not mentioned during the interviews. We observed that these teachers work with trials and errors and when they see something at work, they continue using the technique over and over again.

Some difficulties in the process of teaching English language and literature were emphasized. The first one refers to the lack of didactic material mentioned by all the teachers, followed by lack of general resources at school and pedagogical materials. The nonexistence of parents' support, the excessive number of students in a group, full-time schedule, the misunderstanding of the discipline by the part of the students and few courses directed at improving teaching skills offered by the government were also problems mentioned by the teachers.

Although these teachers do not seem to have a theoretical and methodological basis, in general terms, they seem to be reflective. The reflective teacher, according to Zeichner and Listonatestem (apud Lee Mckay, 2003), has the following characteristics: he tries to solve classrooms problems, he is sensitive to the institutional and cultural context in which he teaches, participates in the curricular development and gets involved in the school projects, assumes responsibility for his own professional development, and so on.

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