Practices of an English language classroom from a postmethod perspective

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Practices of an English language classroom from a postmethod perspective

Práticas de uma sala de aula de língua inglesa a partir de uma perspectiva do pós-método

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Abstract:

What is language? What is the best approach to teach a language? These questions have guided numerous studies in the field of applied linguistics (Donato, 1994; Ellis, 1985; Figueiredo, 2018; Hall, 2003; Pennycook, 1989). However, by considering that the difficulties and necessities of the language learning process are always influenced by its context, we perceive the temporary answers offered as localized possibilities. Thus, this qualitative study has no intention of providing universal and totalizing answers to these inquiries. Nonetheless, the practices of an English language classroom are investigated in this research to provide empirical material for the discussion of these matters. The classes observed were grounded on premises of critical applied linguistics and critical language teacher education. In the interactions analyzed, the seven students who participated in the study problematized essays and literary texts written by subaltern bodies, such as Wong's (1980) and hooks's (1994), who represent marginalized US groups. The specific objectives of this research are: a) to observe and discuss the elements that stand out during the learners' interactions; and b) to investigate the students' perceptions of this experience. The study shows that, more than following a method, adopting an approach that focuses on interactions as a means of promoting both linguistic improvement and questioning of naturalized assumptions is an effective way to learn and teach a foreign/second language. Furthermore, the practices discussed are in accordance with the ideas expressed by Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012), for whom the postmethod perspective, connected with critical perspectives, seeks to equip student teachers with knowledge, attitudes and autonomy necessary to adopt a reflective posture towards their practices.

Keywords: English language learning, interactions, postmethod.

Resumo:

O que é língua? Qual é a melhor abordagem para ensinar uma língua? Estas questões têm orientado muitos estudos no campo da Linguística Aplicada (Donato, 1994; Ellis, 1985; Figueiredo, 2018; Hall, 2003; Pennycook, 1989). No entanto, levando-se em conta que as dificuldades e as necessidades do processo de aprendizagem de línguas serão sempre influenciadas pelo seu contexto, percebemos as respostas temporárias oferecidas como possibilidades localizadas. Assim, este estudo qualitativo não tem a intenção de fornecer respostas universais e totalizantes para essas indagações. No entanto, as práticas de uma sala de aula de língua inglesa são investigadas nesta pesquisa, na tentativa de fornecer material empírico para a discussão dessas questões. As aulas observadas foram fundamentadas em premissas da Linguística Aplicada Crítica e da Formação Crítica de Professoras/es de Línguas. Nas interações analisadas, as/os sete alunas/os que participaram da pesquisa problematizaram ensaios e textos literários escritos por corpos subalternos, como os de Wong (1980) e hooks (1994), representativos de grupos estadunidenses marginalizados. Os objetivos específicos desta pesquisa são: a) observar e discutir os elementos que se destacam durante as interações das/os aprendizes;

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e b) investigar as percepções das/os estudantes sobre a experiência. O estudo mostra que, mais do que seguir um método, adotar uma abordagem que enfoque as interações como forma de promover tanto o aprimoramento linguístico quanto o questionamento de pressupostos naturalizados é uma forma eficaz de aprender e ensinar uma língua estrangeira/segunda língua. Além disso, as práticas discutidas estão de acordo com as ideias expressas por Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012), para quem a perspectiva do pós-método, ligada a perspectivas críticas, procura proporcionar às/aos alunas/os conhecimentos, atitudes e autonomia necessários para adotar uma postura reflexiva em relação às suas práticas.

Palavras-chave: aprendizagem de língua inglesa, interações, pós-método.

Introduction [1]

What is language? What is the best approach to teach a language? These questions have been central to the field of applied linguistics. In this article, we also approach them in order to expand their discussion, but we argue that our findings represent localized possibilities we could perceive through the development of this research. In order to do so, we hold a brief discussion on particularly noticeable theories and methods that have influenced language education over the last decades (Ellis, 1985; Figueiredo, 2018; Rubin, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). This discussion culminates in the defense of a postmethod perspective, as we address its main aspects and implications for language education (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012). Finally, we draw parallels between this perspective and the practices of an English language classroom. Being applied linguists, we do not agree with a posture of going on "[...] thinking, questioning and seeking on a disciplinary level without ever engaging with problematic issues that real people actually experience" (Widdowson, 2019, p. 47). We thereby hope to encourage reflections based on this experience, especially on language education and language teacher education.

In methodological terms, this investigation is a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007), which was conducted in an English language classroom of a higher education course, that is, in a natural context. Accurately, this study is characterized as interpretative research, in which the construction of knowledge is perceived as a process that occurs through interpretative practices in the interactions among subjects (Moreira & Caleffe, 2006).

The English language classes observed were grounded on premises of critical applied linguistics (Fabrício, 2006; Moita Lopes, 2006a, 2006b, 2013; Pennycook, 1990, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010; Urzêda-Freitas & Pessoa, 2012) and critical language teacher education (Andrade, 2017; Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2006, 2012; Pessoa & Urzêda-Freitas, 2012; Silvestre, 2017). The latter is within the scope of the former, and both are concerned with the problematization of language and discourses related to issues of power, oppression, inequities, injustices, reproduction of the status quo, and the like – i.e., elements and aspects that cause human suffering.

In the interactions analyzed, the seven students who participated in the investigation problematized essays and literary texts written by subaltern bodies, such as Wong's (1980) and hooks's [2] (1994), bodies which represent marginalized US groups. The texts address some linguistic dilemmas faced by these groups and approach arguments about relations between language and power. In addition, based on their answers to a final semi-structured interview, the learners' reflections on these practices are also problematized. Therefore, based on ideas of "[...] a postmethod framework that recognizes that the nature of any language pedagogy should be socially-realistic and contextually-sensitive [...]" (Bautista Pérez, 2017, p. 162), we aim to discuss the interactions of classes in which a critical approach is adopted by the professor. As specific objectives, we seek: a) to observe and discuss the elements that stand out during the learners' interactions; and b) to investigate the students' perceptions of this experience.

In the next section, we present a discussion on theories for teaching and learning languages. This discussion is followed by the contextualization of this study. Then we concentrate on the classroom interactions addressed in this research. Finally, we make some final comments on the investigation.

Perspectives on language learning

The language learning and teaching process has been investigated in numerous theoretical and empirical studies. The investigations, in general, focus on the description and explanation of this process, as well as on the identification of internal and external factors that contribute to the learning process (Figueiredo, 2018). By presenting a brief review of seven prominent theories of second language acquisition, Ellis (1985) revises the ideas about the foundations of language learning, from which methods were formulated.

Concerning the Acculturation Model, Brown (1980, as cited in Ellis, 1985, p. 251) explains that it is defined as "[...] the process of becoming adapted to a new culture." Ellis (1985) underscores the importance of this theory when it comes to recognizing the power mechanisms imbedded in the process of language learning acquisition. The Accommodation Theory shares similarities with the Acculturation Model regarding the connection they establish between successful language learning and the relationships of the learner's social group and the target language community. From another perspective, Discourse Theory follows the premise that communication is the matrix of linguistic knowledge, considering the structure of a language reflects the function it serves. However, these three theories are criticized by Ellis (1985) due to their absence of explanations for the learner's internal assembly mechanisms.

The Monitor Theory, developed by Krashen (1982), which Ellis (1985) also addresses, consists of five basic hypotheses: the acquisition learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. From a different angle, but still considering internal and external aspects, the Variable Competence Model perceives language learning as a reflection of the way it is used (Ellis, 1985). The product of a language comprises planned and unplanned discourses. The Universal Hypothesis, on the other hand, "[...] explains SLA in terms of an independent language faculty" (Ellis, 1985, p. 270). By also considering internal mechanisms, the last theory discussed by the author is a branch of the Neurofunctional Theory, which establishes a connection between language function and neural anatomy. The assumption is that the right hemisphere function is responsible for holistic processing, and the left hemisphere function is responsible for creative language use.

All these theories provide information regarding how the process of learning a new language occurs, from different viewpoints. While some of them consider the internal mechanisms, like the Universal Theory and the Neurofunctional Theory, the Monitor Model and the Variable Competence Theory consider both the internal and external processes. It also seems that the Acculturation Model, Accommodation Theory, Discourse Theory, Monitor Theory and Variable Competence Theory seek to comprehend the social character of language. However, the central role of interaction to mental development is refined by Vygotsky (1978), for whom social interaction works as a mediator to the individual's cognitive development. Within this perspective, Figueiredo (2018, 2019) stresses that a person's development firstly occurs at the social level and secondly in the individual level. The author understands that the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined by Vygotsky (1978), is crucial to the comprehension of how interactions mediate the cognitive processes.

In Vygotsky's (1978, p. 86) words, the ZPD is "[...] the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer". The real and potential levels of development are, respectively, the intramental and intermental processes, according to Wertsch and Tulviste (1992). Figueiredo (2018, 2019) explains that the Vygotskyan theory highlights the aid that a more capable peer can offer to a less capable one. Therefore, the focus changes from what a person can do by oneself, to what one can do with someone else's help.

However, Wells (1999) argues that more important than one more capable peer it is the fact that when students work in groups, they solve problems that they would not be able to deal with by themselves. Through interaction, everybody can learn. According to Figueiredo (2018, 2019), the support structures known

as scaffolding promote the transition from other-regulation to self-regulation, which occurs in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) claim that structures of support must be gradual, contingent, and dialogical. Thus, they must be implicit and become explicit if necessary. Hence learners should have access to them through dialog.

From the perspective of scaffolding provided by an expert, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) characterize scaffolded help according to six features: 1) recruiting interest in the task; 2) simplifying the task; 3) maintaining pursuit of the goal; 4) accentuating critical features between what has been produced and the ideal solution; 5) controlling frustration; and 6) demonstrating an idealized version of the task that is supposed to be performed. These elements imply a continual reflection by the expert in order to respond to the emerging capabilities of the novice. In conformity with this understanding, Wertsch (1979a, as cited in Donato, 1994, p. 41) states that "[...] scaffolded performance is a dialogically constituted interpsychological mechanism that promotes the novice's internalization of knowledge co-constructed in shared activities."

Therefore, as one can see, dialog and collaboration are fundamental to the Vygotskyan theory. In consonance with these premises, Figueiredo (2018) stresses that in the process of communication, we transform our experience interpretations into knowledge structures. As a result, our definitions of our reality and ourselves are based on these structures. Rubin (1987) explains that human language is dependent on creative and critical faculties. For her, the creative faculty is unruly, that is, it operates unconsciously, and the critical faculty consists in the awareness of language. Thus, for the author, the critical faculty we use in communication is intrinsically related to the process of teaching and learning a language. She links the concept of monitoring to the critical faculty, indicating that, in order to learn, students have to be able to monitor their output "[...] and take actions to correct them when appropriate" (Rubin, 1987, p. 18).

From our viewpoint, the foregoing notions, concepts, theories and methods produced from them are better utilized when their contributions are considered as complementary, instead of unrelated to each other. This statement implies the idea that instead of adopting one single theory or method, the implementation of a variety of practices and techniques originated from diverse sources can facilitate a more vibrant learning environment. Although the importance of interaction and communication are vital elements underscored by the frameworks mentioned and presented in this section, we endorse the view that transmission models have several limitations (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012).

As Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 9) asserts, from a post-transmission perspective, the focus changes from information-oriented to inquiry-oriented approaches, and he adds that, "[i]n the specific context of L2 teaching and teacher education, transcending the limitations of transmission models also means going beyond the concept of method." Pennycook (1989) and Kumaravadivelu (2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006) outline that the concept of method itself reflects a particular view of the world – or, in other words, more explicitly, that it is a colonial concept of the West. Thus, the interests of specific power relations are articulated. Additionally, Kumaravadivelu (2006, 2012) underlines that the needs of language learning and teaching are unpredictably numerous. The emergence of students' and teachers' wants and situations that are created in their contexts are related to those needs. Consequently, no idealized method can predict all possible variables and challenges that teachers might face.

In order to present a postmethod pedagogy, Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012) proposes a three-dimension system organized in principles defined as particularity, practicality, and possibility. For the author, the principle of particularity concerns a situational understanding constructed through holistic interpretation of situations. Thus, local resources and limitations are considered. Furthermore, the teacher must be prepared to develop the knowledge needed to understand local needs, observe and assess her/his teaching practices, identify problems, and find solutions. As a result, particularity is deeply connected with practicality.

According to the author, the principle of practicality is largely related to the intersection between theory and practice and aims to break the division established between the teacher and the theorist, that is, between

who produces and who consumes knowledge. Pedagogical knowledge, in order to have any relevance, should emerge from daily teaching practice, and teachers should be able to theorize about their practice. Thus, teaching becomes understood as a process of transforming learners in and out of the classroom. In this vein, the principle of practicality merges with the principle of possibility.

For the author, the principle of possibility is fundamentally derived from critical pedagogy, according to which discourses and practices can serve as instruments to create or sustain social inequalities. Critical pedagogy has philosophical foundations for the empowerment and professionalization of teachers, and it has as a purpose the socioeconomic mobility of apprentices. From this standpoint, the classroom is comprehended as a constructed and historically determined reality and, consequently, a context to combat the social and historical forces that maintain unequal and unjust power structures. This understanding produces the necessity of a pedagogy that enables the empowerment of the participants to critically appropriate knowledge beyond their immediate experience.

In this sense, the pedagogy of possibility is intimately concerned with individual identity. For the author, language education classrooms provide students and teachers with challenges and opportunities for a continuous inquiry into subjectivity and self-identity. Second language education promotes contact between language and cultures, and this contact might result in identity conflicts. Hence, language teachers have to be aware of the sociocultural reality that influences identity formation in the classroom as well as sensible to the fact that it is not possible to separate the linguistic needs of learners from their social needs.

Kumaravadivelu's (1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012) postmethod framework has had a significant influence upon the work of researchers around the world (Ahmadian & Rad, 2014; Akiran, 2006; Banegas, 2014; Bautista Pérez, 2017; Bell, 2003; Gouveia, 2017; Grilli, 2019; Karimvand, Hessamy, & Hemmati, 2014; Menegazzo & Xavier, 2004; Redondo, 2015; Soto, 2014). Specifically, in this article, the three principles – particularity, practicality, and possibility – defended by the author as part of a work guided by the postmethod perspective, seem to support the opinions expressed by the learners that participated in this study regarding the professor's practices, as the reader will see in the following sections. In their answers, they highlight that her practices were contextual and questioned elements that involved inequalities. Furthermore, ideas related to empowerment and professionalization, also expounded by Kumaravadivelu (2006, 2012), are latent in the students' responses presented and discussed in the empirical material.

It is essential to add, however, that knowing different theories, approaches, methods and techniques of language teaching and learning is crucial for teachers to broaden their knowledge and develop their critical awareness so they can better do their work in their local contexts (Figueiredo & Oliveira, 2017). In order to effectively question matters that involve language learning and teaching, firstly one should know them well. We argue that a comprehensive knowledge of them provides teachers with the possibility of learning and unlearning, and thus building and rebuilding their practice along the way, according to their needs and their students'.

The study: its context and participants

For this study, we selected pieces of the empirical material generated from the first author master's research (Ferreira, 2018). The study took place in an English Oral Practice 2 class, which is a first-year discipline of an English teacher education undergraduate course (Letras: Inglês) of a federal university, located in the Central-West region of Brazil. The generation of the empirical material in the classroom began on October 20 and ended on December 22, 2016, while the individual interviews with the learners occurred between April 07 and May 10, 2017. Five female and two male students, the professor and the first author of this article, who was the researcher and supporting professor, participated in the investigation. The learners' ages ranged from 19 to 32 years old. All the participants signed an informed consent form and chose fictitious names. The pseudonyms here utilized were chosen by them.

The guiding principle of the English Oral Practice 2 discipline is the development of oral skills. For the development of these skills, the professor proposed a practice which consisted in the problematization of essays and literary texts that were supposed to be read at home. The topic of the texts was language, and it was chosen together with the students in a feedback session that took place on October 20, when the learners suggested themes that interested them, as requested by the professor. In most of the cases, after reading the text, the professor would ask the students to phonemically transcribe words they were not certain how to pronounce, define unknown words, and create questions about the texts. Each student should prepare ten questions and, in the classroom, ask their classmates those questions. As a consequence, their doubts about the text and the questions prepared by them would lead the debates.

The professor, who is an experienced professional, has developed research in the field of critical applied linguistics for around two decades. She made use of texts written by authors who represent marginalized US groups in order to approach the topic 'language'. In this article, however, we analyze just two interactions that took place during the discussions of two texts.

The first interaction occurred when the text The struggle to be an all American girl was discussed. The author of it is Elizabeth Wong (1980), who is a playwright, writer, social essayist, and associate professor at the University of Southern California (USC) at Theater School. In the text, she describes the challenging experience of growing up in a bicultural environment of Chinatown in Los Angeles. Wong (1980) reports that, as children, she and her brother were both forced by their mother to attend a Chinese school. However, they rejected all the aspects of that culture. She also states that, for her, the use of Chinese was a form of constraint and, because of that, she tried to disassociate herself from it. Thus, both for her and her brother, described by herself as 'fanatical' about the English language, speaking English fluently was the main priority. Nevertheless, at the end of the text, she regrets distancing herself from the culture of her ancestors.

The second interaction concerns the discussion about the text Language: teaching new worlds/new words, written by bell hooks (1994). Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as bell hooks, is an author, feminist, and activist. In the text, the author questions the use of standard English and consequent oppressions faced by other languages in the United States. Hence, hooks (1994) emphasizes the role of language in relations of power and proposes a resignification of language use as a form of emancipation. For her, standard English represents the language of conquest and domination. She also argues that the colonized peoples reinvented the language, and that English spoken by black people became a different language, a counterlanguage. For this reason, in her view, we need to change our perspective on language in order to create spaces to make our voices heard.

The two interactions, analyzed here, are interconnected with some answers to the fourth question of the individual semi-structured interview held at the end. The interview was designed to listen to the students' perceptions in order to explore some aspects that the researcher (first author of this article) considered relevant for her study and to focus on pedagogical and educational issues. The questions asked during the interview were: 1. What do you understand by language? 2. Do you remember the meanings of language that were discussed during the classroom interactions? 3. Why do you think we discuss conceptions of language in an English language teacher education course? 4. Do you think that discussions such as those held in the classroom influence or can influence the pedagogical practices of student teachers? How? 5. What were the activities done with the texts in the classroom like? And in the test, what was evaluated? What did you think of the pedagogical practices and assessment of the discipline? Explain it [3].

It is relevant to add that, as the researcher resorted to the use of a semi-structured interview, some minor changes were made in the questions during her interactions with the participants. The excerpts here discussed were transcribed verbatim, and all translations from Portuguese into English were made by us. In the next section, we problematize the empirical material [4], insofar as we consider the aforementioned aspects.

Promoting linguistic knowledge in interactions

In the following excerpt, while discussing The struggle to be an all American girl (Wong, 1980), it is possible to see how the interactions in the classroom promoted linguistic knowledge, while a range of linguistic aspects is discussed with the professor's assistance. This interaction occurs after the transcription and the discussion of some definitions of words suggested by the students. At that moment, the professor tells the learners to ask their classmates some questions related to the text:

> [1] Professor: Ok, so let's move on to the questions?
> Several students: Yes, please!
> Batman: Why her brother show so much fanatism about the English language?
> Professor: Is the question correct? Why?
> Batman: Her brother show so much fanatism about the English language?
> Professor: Why her brother? What about the auxiliary?
> Mariana: Did her brother...
> Professor: Why did her brother show so much fanaticism about the English language? Is it fanaticism? Is it a good word?
> Joana: Yes, it's because they use this word.
> Mariana: Yes, the text use the word 'fanatical'.
> Joana: 'My brother was even more fanatical than I.'
> Mariana: Maybe he thought she was better than her mother. He know speak English.
> Professor: He didn't?
> Mariana: No, he know!
> Professor: Ah, he knows how to speak English.
> Joana: I think it is because he wanted to be accepted / ə#sept#d / to the community.
> Professor: Aham, accepted / ək#sept#d / in the community.
> Joana: Yes, is this, isn't it?
> Professor: Yes, I think you should do this: Everybody! Accepted / ək#sept#d /! [she pronounces the word distinctly] Let's transcribe 'accept' because my students in English 5, five or four students were pronouncing...
> Joana: I never know how to pronounce this too, / ək#sept#t /?
> Professor: / ək#sept#d /.
> [The teacher transcribes the word on the board] (Interaction in the classroom, November 24, 2016).

In the first excerpt, we can verify the existence of various forms of assistance. According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p. 30), "[...] what best aids language instruction is a combination of various types of language assistance." The authors propose the concept of 'tapestry teachers', whose focus is on "[...] supporting learners' efforts to communicate [...]", insofar as teachers provide language assistance that can aid learners to "[...] stretch their linguistic abilities [...]" during interactions (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p. 30). They highlight the importance of the concept of the zone of proximal development and individual personalities, stressing that they are the two main foundations of the Tapestry Approach. In this perspective, Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p. 31) underline "[...] that students are highly distinct individuals even within the same classroom context and that, in many instances, they need different kinds of assistance from the teacher in order to perform most effectively."

In the excerpt, it is possible to identify different kinds of assistance provided by the professor. After creating a question with the wrong structure, Batman is questioned by the professor. Mariana then tries to construct the sentence but skips the auxiliary, and hence the professor provides the correct structure. After that, she stimulates semantic discussions, an attitude that leads the learners to check the text to support their ideas. Finally, the professor assists the students with phonemic input, which is a technique that helps learners to understand a more structural aspect of the language. Accordingly, she aids the students in understanding the output by asking questions and activating schemata. Therefore, she helps to foster interaction using a variety of conversational features and elicitation techniques (Tharp & Galimmore, 1988, 1989, as cited in Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Some of them are confirmation, comprehension, and clarification checks, together with direct teaching. When the students cannot use the structure expected, she presents the correct one, and after

noticing a pronunciation problem, she transcribes the word on the board. Thus, interaction is encouraged by the mediation of the educator, who provides the learners with a variety of scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976). Similarly, Hall (2003, p. 176) draws our attention to the importance of teachers following up students' "[...] responses with affirmations, elaborations, and other utterances that [serve] to keep the discussion alive."

Another important aspect is that the interactions took place in a learning environment, identified by Ellis (1985) as a formal context. For Sousa, Tiraboschi, Lago and Figueiredo (2019, p. 267), in this kind of context, "[...] learning another language requires a conscious knowledge of the rules of the target language, which is aided by the correction of mistakes and errors." From the excerpt, it is possible to see this kind of correction, made by the professor, in order to make the students aware of them so that they could internalize the rules in question. We can also perceive that even though the classes had as their focus the interactions, working on structural aspects of the language is also part of the professor's practice. More than that, we can note, from the example presented, that structural aspects of the language are taught throughout the interactions. Therefore, it seems that instead of employing a specific method, she utilizes a variety of techniques to teach her students.

In the final interview, the learners were supposed to reflect on the professor's practices and evaluation in order to explore some pedagogical and educational issues concerning their English language learning. As responses, the undergraduates Mariana and Superman highlighted their linguistic improvement as a consequence of the interactions and the choice of the topics that guided those interactions:

[2] Researcher: And what did you think of these practices and the assessment of the discipline?
    Mariana: Look, I know that from the beginning of last year to the end of the year I improved my English exponentially. There is no comparison between how comfortable I am now with the language in relation to how I was before. I think everyone in the classroom could see the improvement of my performance. And I am grateful to [the professor] for most of it because she worked with us on these themes, and they were more complex subjects, and so we had to struggle a lot to participate. [...] So it made me take part in a context where I had to use the language to talk about issues we discuss every day. So I think this has greatly developed my ability to speak English [5] (Interview, April 07, 2017).

Mariana, while talking about her improvement, mentions the importance of the themes discussed in the classroom. She points out she had to make a great effort so she could partake in the discussions, implying that the focus of the interactions required study and preparation on the part of the students, so that they could use their argumentation appropriately. She also underlines that the discussions were based on current issues that were part of her reality, and that, consequently, she felt encouraged to talk about them. This statement is directly related to the in-depth discussion held by Kumaravadivelu (2006, 2012), who distinguishes the traditional approaches of language teaching, in which the model of knowledge transmission prevails, from the post-structuralist perspective, in which the goal is the education of reflective professionals, who think deeply about the principles, classroom practices, and processes in which they are involved. Thus, the abilities of these professionals include a considerable degree of creativity and contextual sensitivity, to the detriment of pre-established knowledge. The choice of the topics is also something mentioned by Superman as a decisive factor of the interactions:

[3] Researcher: And what did you think of these practices and the evaluation of the discipline?
    Superman: Because she made the lesson interesting, it was not like the professor was the only one speaking, talking and talking, and we should just listen. She made us learn English in interesting ways. She would ask us, "What themes do you want to work on?" [...] I think that by discussing these interesting themes and themes from our reality, which we like to discuss, we do not learn the language in a structural way and just its rules [...]. We learn the language by talking about things with which we feel comfortable, things we like to discuss. I think this is a great way to learn, to get in touch with the language, to keep practicing it [6] (Interview, April 07, 2017).

By discussing topics suggested by the students, themes which they considered interesting, the professor displayed contextual sensitivity, characterized by Kumaravadivelu (2012) as a feature of professionals who adopt a post-structuralist perspective. The principle of particularity – defined by the author as the capacity to consider the objectives of a particular group, their demands and experiences – was also present in the practices

adopted by the professor. The author argues that, in education, sensitivity to individual, local, institutional, social, and cultural contexts – in which the teaching and learning process takes place – is indispensable. The student praises the fact that language was studied with attention to discussing their realities by means of interactions and not focused on the study of grammar, thus making the class more attractive to them.

Expanding perspectives through interactions

Regarding the importance of interactions in language classrooms, Hall (2003) adds that languages are inherently social actions, as they just exist in communication. Therefore, the author objects to the understanding of language learning as a solely internal process, asserting that languages are "[...] embodied in and constitutive of our everyday communicative activities and practices" (Hall, 2003, p. 169). For her, classrooms are fundamental locations of learning, as the interactions between teacher and students and between students and students constitute the primary means of language learning. According to Hall (2003), research interested in interaction and learning from a social perspective focused on describing the patterns of interaction and the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) exchange was identified as a basic unit of classroom interaction. This unit is characterized by three parts: the first one is the elicitation of information by the teacher. The teacher asks known-answer questions, expecting a brief response from learners, being the response the second part. Finally, the response is evaluated.

However, the IRE unit was the object of criticism of many studies (Barnes, 1992; Cazden, 1988; Nystrand et al., 1997, as cited in Hall, 2003) concerned with the investigation of classroom interaction. In Hall's (2003, p. 172) words, "[s]tudents whose classroom interaction was almost exclusively limited to the IRE pattern were less able to recall and understand the topical content than were the students who were involved in more complex patterns of interaction."

The author highlights that a change in the third part of IRE sequences revealed enthusiastic and extended student participation in classroom: instead of closed-ended questions, the teacher would follow up students' answers (F) [7], asking them to elaborate on or clarify them. In the following excerpt there are examples of this kind of questions. The interactions that occurred while the professor and the learners talked about bell hooks's text (1994) were characterized by the discussion of meanings, which were encouraged by the professor's questions:

> [4] Professor: Black English, it's really nice, isn't it...
> Joana: I loved because I really love bell hooks and the way that she writes, like in a passionate way, and I like that. Very poetical too, and it is easy to understand and because this theme about the variation of English, variation of language really interests me. Teacher, I saw, and it goes with the text, I saw on Facebook, a news about one term, one expression that Oxford dictionary include, it the expression, is a black expression...
> Professor: Black English?
> Joana: Not Black English, it was a racist term, but they change the term, the term is 'bama' – abbreviation of Alabama – and it means, it was mean like caipira [yokel] and um negro caipira [a black yokel], something like that, and because of the formation, the music of Beyoncé, this term is include like "good has to use" on Oxford...
> Bruna: The term 'formation'?
> Joana: No, 'bama' ...
> Professor: 'Alabama'?
> Joana: No, just 'bama' called from Alabama. It means... the expression that is a caipira [yokel] come from Alabama, from the South.
> Professor: Yes, but now it's used to refer to the people and the country?
> Joana: No, now, before was a bad thing to say...
> Professor: Criticizing people from Alabama...
> Joana: Yes, criticizing people from Alabama, caipiras [yokels] and now it means another thing; means a good thing. It means that the people likes your identity from Alabama, from South, and from black ancient. And it goes with what the author says.
> Professor: Yes. Ok. What else? Did you like the text, Mariana?

Mariana: I didn't read.
Professor: And you [looking at Batman], have you read it?
Batman: Yes.
Professor: Did you like it?
Batman: Yes. Actually, it brings me, it brought me a new concept of language, and I think the best thing about it is that it comes from someone who suffer from oppression, so it makes it legitimate (Interaction in the classroom, December 20, 2016).

This interaction was extracted from the beginning of the discussion of the text. At that moment, the professor wanted to know the students' first impressions of it. Concerning learning interaction, Hall (2003) emphasizes that teachers who ask learners to expand on their ideas, clarify their opinions, comment on others' contributions, and make connections between what they are studying and their experiences contribute to creating learning opportunities through interactions. In the excerpt in question, Joana gives her opinion about the text and makes connections with some news she saw on social media about a neologism. After that, Bruna makes a guess about the new word, by asking a question, but although Joana answers it, the doubt persists. The professor hence asks her to clarify her comment, and the student presents arguments to elucidate the information mentioned during the interaction. In this respect, Hall (2003) argues that when teachers treat students' contributions as relevant and legitimate irrespective of their correct linguistic structure, participation in cognitively and communicatively fruitful interactions is promoted. As one can see, in the interaction previously shown, concern with form, structure and accuracy are put aside in order to foster communication.

The professor's posture towards her students' linguistic mistakes is related to the principle of possibility, from the postmethod framework, inasmuch as she values their utterances and discourses regardless of the structures used by them. Instead of undermining their confidence while they are speaking, she shows interest in their contributions; and consequently, as the learners feel that their linguistic production is not being judged, they feel comfortable sharing their ideas. This stance is strongly connected with the notion of empowerment of apprentices endorsed by Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2012), insofar as the professor's attitude contributes to fostering it.

After Joana's explanation, other students are questioned, and another issue concerning language conceptions is addressed by Batman. The latter student's speech is followed by the professor's explanation:

[5] Professor: Yes, what's the following question? It's interesting that Batman mentioned that it's a new, a different conception of language, yes? We haven't discussed it before 'cause in the texts, we saw language as identity, as culture, as… but of course power involves all of them, yes? We are going to make this relation, ok? So, I want you to think about this idea of language as power and see how it applies to the other texts we have read, yes? Ok, but this is very interesting because here it's very clear: she says that language is power, how language disrupts. And we never think about it. But in English lessons it happens a lot, doesn't it? How? In your lessons, in the lessons you give or in the lessons you take part?
Batman: Sometimes I ask them [his students] for ahn… and I just realize, really, that sometimes I demand my students a standard English, you know? I think they, normally the material that I offer is very, how can I say? It's very, it's only from the UK or the United States. Normally I don't choose Africa, for example, or I don't know, or women, or, you know? These kinds of things (Interaction in the classroom, December 20, 2016).

The professor shows inquisitiveness about the student's comment and elaborates on the idea so the whole class can reflect on it, which is something that, according to Hall (2003), facilitates students' learning through interactions. For the author, such response creates rich environments and opportunities for further contributions, including the appropriation of new words and ideas. From the statement of the student, it is also possible to conclude that the text made him reflect on his practice as a teacher. He questions the choice of the materials he uses, showing a comprehension linked to hooks's (1994) ideas about the necessity of changing our perspective on language in order to create spaces to make other voices heard.

Moreover, along with the development of communication, one can see that, as the professor values the student's comment, her attitude leads him to reflect on his identity as a teacher. According to the principle

of practicality presented by Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012), teachers should have the capacity to reflect on and theorize about their practices and, besides that, pedagogical knowledge should come out of daily teaching practice. It seems that the discussions contributed to making him perceive his choices retroactively so as to cognitively rebuild his practice in an intelligent and flexible manner (Lago & Cintra, 2016).

In the final interview, when asked about her impressions of the professor's practices, Maria stresses that she felt comfortable expressing her opinions, since her comments were taken into account:

> [6] Researcher: What did you think of the assessment and pedagogical practices?
> Maria: Look, I really like the way [the professor] works because it's a way in which we learn without constraints. It's not authoritarian. It's not closed. Discussing is important. Listening to students is important. So we felt really comfortable with the way she assessed the content [8] (Interview, May 10, 2017).

According to Borelli (2018), language education should go beyond the development of speakers of a specific language, since it should prioritize dialog and encouragement of spaces of speech in knowledge construction. Silvestre (2017) understands the creation of spaces of speech as a decolonial effort to promote a moment and a place of resistance, insofar as listening to various voices and knowledges in the construction of meanings is paramount. In the same vein, as Ferraz (2015) underlines, when the educator allows the coexistence of 'truths', s/he acknowledges that other spaces can be created and discussed. Thus, based on the latter author's assertations, in this study, we observe that the professor allows the emergence of different 'truths', as she stimulates both the processes of construction of meanings and the rupture of preestablished realities. This construction of meanings made in a collaborative way seems to have guided her practices. These ideas can be associated with the principles of a postmethod perspective formulated by Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2006, 2012), which consider the learners' social realities and hence foster the work with the students' viewpoints.

Furthermore, the discussions in the classroom were responsible for the denaturalization of conceptions that allowed the learners to see language from other perspectives. These other possibilities of seeing and understanding language are also stressed by Bruna and Joana:

> [7] Bruna: I thought I improved a lot, just as I said, both my English and my way of thinking. We thought about many things, things that we did not think about before. 'How does a variation emerge?' It's the first thing I think of today: 'How does a variation emerge?' [...] 'Is it a form of resistance, like Black English?' I think like this, 'Where did it come from? Why?' [9] (Interview, April 07, 2017).
> [8] Joana: I liked it a lot because I think she [the professor] managed to show us a broader view of how language works. Language is not only this set of rules, which you have to memorize and use, to speak properly. It is much more than that. So she was able to show a much broader view of language learning. And I think it was one of the best disciplines [of the semester] [10] (Interview, April 27, 2017).

Both students highlight changes in their way of comprehending language. Bruna points out that she improved her English and her way of thinking. She started to think about variations and language as resistance. Joana, similarly, started to perceive that language is not just a set of rules that one must memorize, and that led her to conceive language in a broader sense. Besides, she underscores the improvement of her knowledge about her practice as a teacher, showing an example in which it is possible to see the connection established between academic theorizations and practice (Lago & Cintra, 2016).

From this experience, one could claim that they commence perceiving language from a more critical perspective, a characteristic present in a postmethod framework (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012). The principle of particularity is defined by the author as a pedagogy that provides its participants with challenges and opportunities to grasp relevant knowledge connected with their necessities as professionals critically. Silvestre (2017) adds that it is necessary to foster discussions that broaden conceptions of language in order to understand it as social practice. From the empirical material

presented, one can perceive that the underlying assumption of language as a structural and neutral entity was questioned, and its relation to social aspects was discussed by the students, with the professor's assistance. Therefore, the conceptions of language itself were destabilized by virtue of the interactions.

Final considerations

In this research, elements of interactions from a class of English Oral Practice 2 were discussed. The students' reflections on these interactions and the practices of the professor were addressed. The study shows that, more than following a method, adopting an approach that focuses on interactions as a way to promote both linguistic improvement and questioning of naturalized assumptions is an effective way to learn and teach a foreign language. From the empirical material presented in this article, one can observe a variety of language assistance provided by the professor, who helped the learners not just to improve their argumentative capacity, but also to reflect on their conceptions of language. Furthermore, some students even showed that they could reflect on issues that involve teaching and learning a language.

In the practices addressed here there are several examples in which structural and social aspects of the English language were approached, in a context where the objective of the interactions was to foster critical reflection on issues concerning language and society and to promote linguistic development. In this perspective, as the students read and discussed texts written by subaltern bodies, they could problematize their conceptions of language, which started to be more connected with social aspects than with structural ones. These changes, for some of them, also made them reflect on their identity as language teachers. We also stress that the structural aspects of language were not neglected by the professor, who asked them to make phonemic transcriptions and vocabulary searches and to practice grammar structures, as they were supposed to prepare questions about the texts. Therefore, the classes sought to approach language from a holistic perspective.

These practices are in accordance with the ideas conveyed by Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2012), for whom the postmethod perspective, linked to critical perspectives, seeks to equip student teachers with knowledge, attitudes and autonomy necessary to adopt a reflective posture towards their practices. That will enable them to analyze and evaluate their teaching procedures so they can promote changes and monitor their effects and outcomes. The knowledge provided in the discussions is closely related to the needs of the current world, as the challenges that teachers face require an awareness of the particularities of the contexts in which they work and of global demands to which they need to respond.

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Notes

[1] Thanks to the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) for its financial support in order to develop this study.

[2] The author insists that her name be written in lower case so that readers focus on her ideas rather than herself.

[3] The questions of the interview were originally asked in Portuguese.

[4] The interactions and interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first author of this article. Taking into account that the use of symbols in the transcription was made in a very intuitive way, we do not present a table of symbols.

[5] Original quote: "Olha, eu sei que do início do ano passado para o fim do ano eu cresci exponencialmente em inglês. Não tem comparação a facilidade da língua que tenho agora ao que eu tinha antes. Eu acho que todo mundo na sala de aula acompanhou esse meu desempenho, e grande parte eu posso ser grata pela [professora], porque ela trabalhava essas temáticas e eram temáticas mais complexas, e que a gente tinha que se desdobrar para estar participando. [...] Então me forçou a estar dentro de um contexto em que teria que usar a língua para falar sobre questões em que a gente debate o tempo todo. Então eu acho que isso ampliou muito a minha capacidade de falar inglês".

[6] Original quote: "Porque ela tornava a aula interessante, não era uma coisa que o professor falava, falava e falava e a gente ficava lá escutando. Ela fazia a gente aprender inglês de formas interessantes. Ela perguntava pra gente: que temas vocês querem trabalhar? [...] Eu acho que trazendo esses temas interessantes e esses temas da nossa realidade, que a gente gosta de discutir, a gente não aprende a língua de uma forma estrutural e regrinhas [...]. A gente aprende a língua conversando coisas que a gente se sente confortável, que a gente gosta de discutir. Eu acho essa uma ótima forma de aprender, de entrar em contato com a língua, de continuar praticando ela".

[7] Thus, IRE turns into IRF: Initiation-Response-Follow-up.

[8] Original quote: "Olha, eu gosto muito do jeito que a [professora] trabalha, porque é uma forma em que a gente aprende livremente. Não é impositiva, não é fechada. Discutir é importante, ouvir o aluno é importante. E então, assim, a gente se sentia bem confortável com o modo que ela cobrava o conteúdo da gente".

[9] Original quote: "Achei que melhorou muito, igual eu falei, tanto o meu inglês, quanto a minha forma de pensar. A gente pensa em muitas coisas, em coisas que você não pensava antes. 'Como que uma variação surge?' É a primeira coisa que eu penso hoje: 'como que uma variação surge? [...] É uma forma de resistência, igual o Black English?' Eu penso assim, 'de onde que surgiu, por quê?'"

[10] Original quote: "Eu gostei muito, porque eu acho que ela [a professora] conseguiu dar uma visão mais ampla para gente, como é que funciona a língua. A língua não é só esse conjunto de regras, que você tem que decorar e falar direito. É muito mais que isso. Então, ela conseguiu dar uma visão muito mais ampla para gente do que é o aprendizado de língua. E eu acho que foi uma das melhores matérias [do semestre]".