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The teaching of English as a foreign language in the context of Brazilian regular schools: a retrospective and prospective view of policies and practices

O ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira no contexto das escolas brasileiras: uma visão retrospectiva e prospectiva de políticas e práticas

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses government policies for the teaching of English as a foreign language in Brazilian regular schools, in relation to the practices and identities developed by the teachers working in this context. Starting with an historical analysis of the practices, propositions, and policies, since the second half of the last century, the article evaluates the impact of official documents upon the process of teaching English in Brazil. The tension between resistance and willingness to change, as well as between the identities of the teacher as either educator or instructor underlies the analysis, which also aims to point out possible paths for the future of our profession in regular schools.

KEYWORDS: Language policies; English as a Foreign Language; Brazilian regular schools.

RESUMO: Este trabalho tem por objetivo discutir políticas governamentais para o ensino de Inglês como língua estrangeira nas escolas brasileiras em relação com as práticas e identidades desenvolvidas por professores trabalhando nesse contexto. Partindo de uma análise histórica das práticas, propostas e políticas educacionais, desde a segunda metade do século passado, este artigo pretende avaliar o impacto dos documentos oficiais sobre o processo de ensino de inglês no Brasil. A tensão entre resistência e desejo de mudança, bem como entre as identidades do professor como educador ou instrutor, subjaz a análise, que também tenta apontar caminhos para o futuro de nossa profissão nas escolas regulares.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: políticas linguísticas; inglês como Língua Estrangeira; escolas brasileiras.

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Introduction

The movement towards a more meaningful approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language in Brazilian regular schools¹ reached its climax in the 20th century with the publication of the Brazilian National Curricular Parameters (PCN) for the teaching of foreign languages² at basic education level. Since then, the community of teachers has been divided into those who welcomed the contents, views and propositions of the document, and the ones who believed that the suggestions it contained were inappropriate. At the center of this controversy was the importance given by the official policies to the teaching of reading, as opposed to an approach, borrowed from private language institutes, which historically favored a focus on the oral skills.

More than a decade after the publication of the Parameters, this controversy is far from being resolved. Insufficient provision of in-service teacher education on the part of the government, along with contradictions (which can be read into later official documents) helped keep the argument alive. To make things even more complicated, many teachers who welcomed the focus on reading now feel that it is high time to find a way of broadening the scope of their teaching, and incorporate other skills into their practices. After all, the world is changing fast, and the growth of Brazilian users of the Internet provides a new context of use and social relevance for English as a foreign language.

It is the aim of this paper to discuss the movements of governmental policies (including the publication of the Curricular Orientations for Midlevel

¹ Throughout this paper I will use the term “regular schools” to refer to both private and public schools which provide for the teaching of the official curriculum of Brazilian education. The term will be used in opposition to “language institutes”, which refer exclusively to private language courses. Although I am basically concerned with the opposition between “regular schools” and “language institutes”, some governmental policies (such as the buying and distribution of teaching materials) concern exclusively the public segment of Brazilian regular schools. Whenever this is the case, I will use the term “public schools” instead.

² Although this paper is concerned specifically with the teaching of English as a foreign language in Brazil, the documents discussed here (namely the PCN and the OCEM) aim to inform the teaching of any foreign language in the context of Brazilian regular schools. Therefore, I will use the expression foreign language teaching (instead of English language teaching) whenever it seems necessary to reflect the content of the documents with greater accuracy.

Education (OCEM) in 2006 and the implementation of the National Program of Didactic Books (PNLD) – a program that buys and distributes materials for the public schools – in 2011 and 2012), as well as analyzing what is behind the dispute among teachers as to what kind of teaching is desirable in the context of our regular schools. More important, it is my goal to point out some possible ways to move forward, without losing sight of the social and educational factors that led to the development of the Parameters in the 1990s.

The perspective presented here necessarily owes a lot to my professional beliefs and identity, which have developed over almost twenty years of practice, first as a teacher of EFL at the city of Rio de Janeiro public system, from 1992 to 2002, and later as a teacher educator at Fluminense Federal University (UFF), in Niterói-RJ, from 2002 on.

A brief overview of the recent history of elt in Brazilian regular schools

During the 1970s, the so-called audiolingual method, based on behaviorist and structuralist assumptions, was still considered the only scientific way of teaching a foreign language. Its emphasis on the oral skills and on the exhaustive repetition of structural exercises seemed to work well in the contexts of private language institutes. Those contexts were characterized by the gathering of small numbers of highly motivated students per class, a weekly time-table superior in the number of hours to the one adopted in regular schools, and plenty of audiovisual resources. Questionable in itself, both because of its results (which in time were revealed to be less efficient than believed, especially in terms of fluency) and its theoretical assumptions, the method ended up being adopted by regular schools due to its positive reputation at the time. The failure of the methodology in this context would soon become evident, generating extreme frustration both amongst teachers and students.

From the 1980s on, with the spread of ideas connected to the so-called communicative approach and the growth of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the community of researchers and teachers interested in the context of regular schools started reviewing the assumptions and logic of English Language Teaching (ELT). Recognizing that each and every school discipline needs to justify its presence in the curriculum socially and educationally, this movement identified the skill of reading as the most relevant one for the students attending the majority of Brazilian regular schools. This understanding was achieved by considering not only the possibility of real use outside school, but

also the role this approach could play in the achievement of other educational goals, such as the improvement of student's reading abilities in Portuguese as a mother tongue (see MOITA LOPES, 1996). This movement reached its climax with the publication of the Brazilian National Curricular Parameters (PCN) for the teaching of foreign languages at basic education level by the end of the 1990s. The document recommended the focus on the teaching of reading within a view of language as discourse. However, it did not close the door on the teaching of any other skill, as long as the context made it possible and relevant.

It is important at this point to clarify a few things about the emergence of this educational policy. First of all, it was not formulated apart from the community of teachers and researchers and then imposed upon them. On the contrary, great names in Brazilian Applied Linguistics, such as Luiz Paulo da Moita Lopes and Maria Antonieta Celani among others, were involved in the formulation of the Parameters. Even more important than that, a lot of teachers, individually or collectively, with or without supervision, were already trying the focus on reading as an alternative to the failure of previous practices before the Parameters were elaborated. Two well-known examples are those from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In São Paulo, The Catholic University (PUC-SP) became a national center for foreign language teacher education, through the development of a Brazilian ESP project focusing on reading (CELANI, 2005). In Rio de Janeiro, a discussion conducted by the city educational authorities and the teachers in public schools (concerning the contents and methodology of each school discipline), during the administrations of Saturnino Braga and Marcelo Alencar, led to the proposition that the focus on reading for foreign language teaching reflected the will of most teachers who participated in the discussion.

Another important characteristic of the Parameters that should not be overlooked is their emphasis on teacher's autonomy. This emphasis can be seen clearly in the fact that no content or method is imposed upon the teachers. What one can find are suggestions and relevant information for teachers to make their own decisions, taking into consideration the context within which they work. In other words, the Parameters do not force any teacher to limit their focus on the teaching of reading, if they believe they can go further than that.

In spite of all these positive points, since their publication, it is possible to identify a strong resistance to the focus on reading on the part of many teachers. The reasons for this resistance will be discussed in the following sections of this paper.

To be or not to be: professional identities and beliefs

When asked why they were against the focus on reading, most teachers who take this position, told me that they considered the teaching of reading to be “not enough”. Most of them also added that if the teaching of reading was designed to fit a context where one cannot effectively teach the oral skills, then we should not adapt ourselves to that context, but rather demand the improvements that would make more feasible the teaching of the so-called four skills.

Let us consider these statements more closely. The first one is about quantity, that is, by teaching “only” the reading skill, the teacher would be denying her/his students the opportunity for learning all the other skills. They would be denied the opportunity for learning to *speak* English, which is, after all, assumed to be the real goal of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Reasonable and democratic as it may seem, such an argument fails to take into consideration at least one extremely relevant issue: the fact that in Brazil there are virtually no reports of successful teaching of the four skills in contexts other than the private language institutes. Before the mid-1980s, several different attempts were made to make ELT work out at regular schools, but only those which completely changed the characteristics of the classes (making them look almost exactly like the small, homogeneous classes of the private institutes) were able to achieve some (questionable) level of success. In other words, the integrative approach to ELT, with its claim of teaching the four skills, focusing especially on the oral skills, has never been successful in our regular schools, including most of the private ones, with very few exceptions. If that is indeed the case, then it makes very little sense to speak of giving our students more or less of something that they never really had. And even if we are to speak in such terms, then it is extremely clear (at least for those who tried it) that the communicative³ teaching of one skill is definitely better (and more) than the pantomime of allegedly teaching the four skills, which was never successful in the context of Brazilian schools.

³ The use of the label “communicative” here does not mean adherence to any specific method of language teaching. Rather it refers to a view of language which values its discursive dimension over its structural features. Surely adopting such a perspective has clear implications for language teaching. It does not, however, mean (necessarily) advocating for one or another specific method for ELT.

As far as the second statement is concerned, that is, that we should not adapt to a context that is less than adequate, but fight to change it, I can only say that I could not agree more. It is my belief that Brazilian teachers, no matter what they teach, have more than the right to fight for better conditions to work; they have the duty to do so, not only because we deserve better places to work, but also because our students deserve better schools.

However, what is not addressed by such a statement is: what should we do while the ideal context is not achieved? Should we go to school and do nothing but complain to our students and their parents? Should we engage in the same old pantomime of focusing on oral skills, despite the fact that we know that the odds are against any acceptable results? Or even worse: go back to a grammar-translation (sometimes just grammar without translation) rationale?

The answer for all these questions is clear: [N]o, definitely not! Fighting for better conditions for teaching and learning implies a commitment to do the best teaching one can within the actual conditions one faces in one's daily work. It is this commitment that legitimizes, politically and ethically, the demands for a school that is equipped with whatever is considered necessary for the achievement of optimum levels of learning. Without building a reputation of commitment to her/his students, no teacher will be able to convince a single parent of the fairness (or need) to go on a strike, for example, even if it is the only possible way for fighting for some dignity given a certain context. Once more, working with a discursive view of language and focusing on the teaching of reading in all contexts where the other skills are neither possible, nor relevant, seem to be the best path.

But it is not only what is stated by the second argument against the Parameters that matters. What it silences is probably even more important. The PCN present at least three groups of reasons why the focus on reading seems to be more applicable to the majority of Brazilian schools: Social, educational, and practical considerations should be taken into account. Social reasons have to do with the possibility and need for using the language outside school. As can be read in the document:

In Brazil (...) only a small portion of the population has the opportunity of using foreign languages as an instrument of oral communication (...). Even in the great centers, the number of people who use the knowledge of the oral skills of a foreign language in their place of work is relatively small. (...) With the exception of specific situations of some touristic

regions or some multilingual communities, the use of a foreign language seem to be, in general, more connected with the reading of technical literature or for leisure (PCN, 1998, p. 20).⁴

This has to do with the fact that, in Brazil, English is not a second language; it is a foreign language. And it has to be taught as such. We are not talking about a context where our students will be facing the need to use the oral skills outside schools or language institutes. In other words, in terms of social relevance, it makes very little sense to focus on the oral skills. In fact, two years before the publication of the Parameters, Moita Lopes had already discussed the issue in these terms:

One of the difficulties faced by FLs in the curriculum is precisely the one of socially justifying their presence. Contrary to what mass media communication say in order to propagate the importance of learning English in contemporary world (...), only a small minority of the population will have the chance to use English as a medium for oral communication inside or outside the country. Besides, there are not enough jobs (of interpreters, receptionists, etc.) in the Brazilian labor market to which the performance in FL oral skills is necessary. Research, in fact, has shown that even teachers of English in Brazil rarely have the chance to use English both inside and outside the classroom (see TÍLIO, 1980, p. 279 e 431). So, considering English in Brazil as a resource for oral communication seems to deny any social relevance for its learning (MOITA LOPES, 1996, p. 130).⁵

⁴ My translation. In the original text: “No Brasil (...) somente uma pequena parcela da população tem a oportunidade de usar línguas estrangeiras como instrumento de comunicação oral (...). Mesmo nos grandes centros, o número de pessoas que utilizam o conhecimento das habilidades orais de uma língua estrangeira em situação de trabalho é relativamente pequeno. (...) Com exceção da situação específica de algumas regiões turísticas ou de algumas comunidades plurilíngues, o uso de uma língua estrangeira parece estar, no geral, mais vinculado à leitura de literatura técnica ou de lazer.”

⁵ My translation. In the original text: “Uma das dificuldades enfrentadas pelas LEs no currículo é justamente a de justificar socialmente sua presença. Ao contrário do que os meios de comunicação de massa explicitam ao divulgar a importância de se aprender inglês no mundo contemporâneo (...), só uma pequena minoria da população terá a chance de usar inglês como meio de comunicação oral tanto dentro como fora do país. Além disso, não há empregos (de intérpretes, recepcionistas etc.) suficientes no mercado brasileiro para os quais o desempenho em habilidades orais

So, what is being discussed here has nothing to do with conforming or not conforming to the “‘lack-of-it-all’ scenario of the public school” (ASSIS-PETERSON, 2003, p. 3). It has to do with the social relevance for teaching EFL. And this is usually completely ignored by the critics of the Parameters.⁶ These critics also fail to address issues of educational relevance. According to the Parameters:

(...) the only formal examinations in Foreign Language (vestibular⁷ and admission to post-graduation courses) require the mastery of the reading skill. (...) Besides, the learning of reading in a Foreign Language may help develop the student’s literacy as a whole. Reading has a primary function at school and learning to read in another language may support the performance of the student as a reader in her/his mother tongue (PCN, 1998, p. 20).⁸

Similar arguments are developed by Moita Lopes, adding that the skill of reading in one’s mother tongue is, in fact, a source of many problems that the children face at school in each and every discipline (MOITA LOPES,

em LE seja necessário. A pesquisa, na verdade, apontou que mesmo os professores de inglês no Brasil raramente têm a chance de usar inglês tanto dentro de sala de aula quanto fora dela (cf. TÍLIO, 1980, p. 279 e 431). Portanto, considerar o inglês no Brasil como recurso para a comunicação oral parece negar qualquer relevância social para a sua aprendizagem.”

⁶ Of course, it could be argued that the texts I quote in this paper were written during the 1990s, and maybe Brazilian society and education have changed since then. I cannot but agree with that, and that is why I am going to address this issue later in this paper, with an eye to formulating future perspectives for ELT in Brazilian regular schools. However, my point at this precise moment of my argumentation is that the critics of the Parameters, from the beginning, decided to forget the social and educational reasons for the focus on reading, pretending that it was just a matter of conforming or not conforming to the “poor” contexts of regular (especially public) schools.

⁷ Vestibular: examination for the admission to Brazilian graduation courses.

⁸ My translation. In the original text: “(...) os únicos exames formais em Língua Estrangeira (vestibular e admissão a cursos de pós-graduação) requerem o domínio da habilidade da leitura. (...) Além disso, a aprendizagem de leitura em Língua Estrangeira pode ajudar o desenvolvimento integral do letramento do aluno. A leitura tem função primordial na escola e aprender a ler em outra língua pode colaborar no desempenho do aluno como leitor em sua língua materna.”

1996, p. 132). This makes the educational relevance of the focus on reading even more apparent.

However, as stated earlier, the social and educational aspects of the discussion were (and still are) systematically silenced by the critics of the Parameters. They would like to believe (and have us believe) that what is at stake is just a matter of accepting the practical constraints of Brazilian schools. However, as I believe was shown here, the question is not so simple. What the Parameters challenge in a lot of Brazilian teachers of EFL is their sense of professional identity, along with the beliefs proper to the process which has built that identity.

As far as language education is concerned, most Brazilian teachers of EFL have had a history in which the private language institutes played a major part. Virtually every one of us has attended one or more of those courses, before entering University. Many of us also came back to them to work as teachers. It is thus only to be expected that the ideologies (educational and otherwise) of those institutions were to leave a mark in our identities as teachers of English, as well as in other aspects of our lives.

Moreover, for many of us, language institutes also mean audiolingualism. This happens to be so, because before the decade of 1980, almost every single language institute in Brazil based its teaching upon the premises of the audiolingual method. Even today, a great many of them continue to do so. This means that many teachers of EFL in Brazil take it for granted that the main goal of any language program is speaking. The very concept of this not being the ultimate goal of a language program tends, it seems, to threaten everything they believe in.

But rethinking the goals of ELT in the context of our regular schools is precisely what one needs to do, if one wants to avoid the perpetuation of meaningless pedagogical practices. This holds particularly true in regular schools, where the teacher of English cannot afford to (or at least should not) cling to the role of language *instructor*, which is exactly what she/he is at most language institutes. In a regular school, the language teacher should perceive her/his role as an *educator*. In the words of Pedro Garcez:

[...] language institutes are fine. The issue is they do not have to be in the least committed to an educational agenda (...) Foreign language teachers in the regular school system, on the other hand, might want to view their role and their goals within the larger frame of foreign language education, of language education, of education. If we are

indeed to act as educators, we must set our goals, plan our activities and develop our identity accordingly. It doesn't make good educational sense to me if these activities, these goals and ultimately this identity are set by non-educational institutions such as the *cursos livres*.⁹ (...) foreign language educators must work with fellow educators from various disciplinary backgrounds, a practice which *cursolivreteachers* can do without. That way they also don't need to worry about issues that go beyond linguistic proficiency, which any educator must. Of course that is if we want to be doing true education in a society aspiring to be democratic (ASSIS-PETERSON, 2003, p. 3).

Having to assume the identity of educator, rather than the one of instructor, also threatens the professional beliefs of many teachers of EFL in the sense that it involves the awareness of the fact that "language proficiency is only one of the possible outcomes of foreign language teaching" (ASSIS-PETERSON, 2003, p. 3). Thus, it should be seen as "one concern among others" (ASSIS-PETERSON, 2003, p. 3).

Again, according to Pedro Garcez:

(...) the PCN is an important first step in our journey toward thinking and redefining what it is we want to achieve and toward reframing our identity and our practice as foreign language educators, language educators, educators (ASSIS-PETERSON, 2003, p. 5).

However, it is important that we acknowledge (and think about) this tension between the identities generated by the language institutes and those necessary if we are to work meaningfully in the context of regular schools. It is Garcez once more who tells us: "we are starting to consider the implications of this contrast which are quite specific to the *LínguaEstrangeira*¹⁰ community of educators in this country. Maybe we should think harder about what it does to our practice" (ASSIS-PETERSON, 2003, p. 5).

Thinking harder about the development of our professional identities, we may say that younger generations may have had the advantage of encountering more critical teacher educators at the universities than the ones that had taught their colleagues from older generations. It is also possible, although not certain, that they have attended a non-audioligual language

⁹ *Cursos livres* refer to private language institutes.

¹⁰ Foreign Language.

institute. On the other hand, though, they lack the experience of seeing (and being part of) the failure of the attempt to transplant the practices of language institutes into the context of regular schools. This may help explain resistance to and uninformed criticism of the PCN, especially in pre-service education.

Older generations, for their part, were taught the audiolingual creed, but many of them have worked in regular schools before the publication of the Parameters. Surely, many of them were dissatisfied with their teaching and some of them have tried to change the way they taught. That was what happened with those involved in the Brazilian ESP Project, conducted under the supervision of the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), mentioned previously. As the teachers felt that they had autonomy in the process of designing the changes, resistance was replaced by a sense of ownership. This sense of ownership was crucial for the success of the project:

(...) the main characteristic of the Project was its participatory philosophy, inviting teachers to reflect on the nature of the context that they were operating in and on the best ways of satisfying the needs therein. This close participation in a non-prescriptive set-up gradually created a feeling of ownership which was one of the main assets of the Project. If before the Project started there were the feelings of near refusal to be involved in ESP teaching, referred to above, as the Project progressed, however, teachers seemed to have developed a positive identity as ESP practitioners. (CELANI, 2005, p. 17)

So, the development of new practices and identities involve active participation, leading to a sense of ownership. If that is correct, then maybe much of the resistance to the propositions of the Parameters which still exist could be related to flaws in the policies of in-service teacher education that followed their publication. On the one hand, failure to reach a greater number of teachers through projects and workshops could explain their misunderstanding. On the other hand, and even more prejudicial, it could be argued that the respect for the autonomy of the teacher, an essential part of the PCN, does not seem to have been respected in other policy developments. Freedom and respect for teacher autonomy seem to have been replaced by a need of control, apparent in some of the criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of teaching materials in the National Program of Didactic Books (PNLD), discussed later in this paper. Without understanding and respecting teachers as one of the most important part of any educational policy, successful change is almost unachievable.

Moving forward or backwards?

In 2006 a new policy for the teaching of foreign languages for Brazilian midlevel schools was released: the OCEM (Curricular Orientations for Midlevel Education). The document, like the first PCN, was not designed with a prescriptive intent. Although the credits mentioned fewer people than those of the PCN, they mentioned several respected members of our community. The name of Vera Lúcia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva, among the team of critical readers of the document, certainly deserves to be mentioned. Luiz Paulo da Moita Lopes and Roxane Rojo appear in the Bibliography with a text for discussion. This text was discussed in a national seminar that followed several regional ones.

The section dedicated to the teaching of foreign languages took into consideration research which presented the beliefs of students and researchers themselves about the results of ELT in regular schools and language institutes. This research echoed the complaint against the PCN by teachers whose professional identity owes a lot to language institutes:

(...) one can deduce that the speeches of the students and the researchers defend the view that learning of a foreign language happens only in language institutes, making us infer that there is no such expectation in relation to the regular school. Safeguarding the interpretative possibilities of the mentioned speeches, we understand that the frames described by them express the desire that the schools have more favorable conditions for the teaching of languages (...) (OCEM, 2006, p. 89).¹¹

These comments serve as a prelude to a discussion of the different goals for teaching a FL in language institutes and regular schools. One can be sure that the OCEM do not fall for the logic of teaching as instruction. However, as we also know, different people read different things into the same text. Thus, the fact that the document starts the discussion by quoting research (a discursive genre which is socially empowered with an aura of legitimacy) and researchers

¹¹ My translation. In the original text: "(...) depreende-se que as falas dos alunos e dos pesquisadores defendem que o aprendizado de uma língua estrangeira se concretiza em cursos de idiomas, levando-nos a inferir que não há essa expectativa quanto à escola regular. Ressalvando as possibilidades interpretativas das mencionadas falas, entendemos que os quadros descritos por meio delas expressam o desejo de que as escolas dispunham de condições mais favoráveis para o ensino de idiomas (...)"

that seem to give voice to beliefs that are typical of the language institute culture may have influenced teachers' interpretations.

As far as the theories supporting the pedagogical orientations are concerned, the focus of this document is on literacy and multi-literacy, with a special emphasis on the role played by Internet genres, multimodality and hypertext. The conception of literacy as socio-cultural practice and the need to develop one's capacity to deal with language practices in context lead to the recognition that in order to participate actively and critically in contemporary society, one needs to develop her/his literacy in many different "languages", so to speak. It is a matter of recognizing that language practices in context always present a heterogeneous quality that tends to be overlooked by the theories that see language and culture as simple and stable unities.

For example, in order to participate in a "conversation" in English using MSN and the Internet, one needs not only to be able to read and write in English, but also to use the language in that particular genre and situation. One will have to deal with static pictures, sounds, and moving pictures with sounds (all of the variations of the so-called emoticons). Besides, abbreviations typical of the context, different spelling of the words, conventions for capital letters, and various other features come into play in this practice, generating a complex genre, which in spite of its expression (at least in part) through the written medium, has much more in common with oral dialogues, but goes beyond them.

With this in mind, it becomes apparent that even reading is no longer what it used to be. And certainly, if we are to adopt the paradigm of complexity,¹² the teaching of a foreign language cannot be restricted to a perspective that is framed by the so-called four skills.

I believe that considerations about the role of the Internet and its genres in contemporary society should inevitably be at the core of the production of pedagogical practices that could take us beyond the teaching of reading (I will return to this argument later in this essay). So, I do not disagree with OCEM for they recommend practices that include reading, oral communication and

¹² The paradigm of complexity suggests that nothing is really isolated in the Universe and that everything exists only in relation to everything else. Thus complexity can be found wherever an entanglement of actions, interactions and retroactions is produced (cf. MORIN, 1996, p. 274-275). One of its implications for language teaching is that one cannot consider language as a homogeneous and idealized unity anymore, but should recognize the importance of variation and situated meaning instead (see OCEM, 2006).

written practice, instead of restating the focus on reading as did the PCN.

There are, however, a few problems with the way this is done in the document. First of all, it incorporates old terminology that inevitably activates the framework of the four skills for many readers. And since there is no longer the focus on the teaching of reading, many “instructor-teachers” may read in the OCEM a confirmation of their previous beliefs, no matter how the text tries to warn us that this is not the case:

In the spirit of the process of recontextualization and transformation that we have described, it would be incoherent to completely abandon the previous knowledge of the readers of this document and simply replace it by the “new”. With this intent, in the orientations that follow, we keep the existing terminology as *oral communication, reading, and written practice*. However, these terms need to be understood not as conceptual parts of the previous perspective of four skills within a view of language as a homogeneous whole, but with the alternative view of open and socio-culturally contextualized heterogeneities. (OCEM, 2006, p. 110).¹³

Research needs to be done to actually find out how the intended readers of the OCEM understand these terms in their daily discursive and professional practices.

Another problem has to do with what can be described as an excessive necessity felt by the authors to differentiate critical literacy from critical reading.¹⁴

¹³ My translation. In the original text: “No espírito do processo de recontextualização e transformação que acabamos de descrever, seria incoerente abandonar por completo o conhecimento anterior dos leitores deste documento e simplesmente substituí-lo pelo “novo”. Com esse intuito, nas orientações que se seguem, mantemos a terminologia já existente como *leitura, comunicação oral e prática escrita*. Porém esses termos precisam ser entendidos não como partes conceituais da concepção anterior de quatro habilidades numa visão de linguagem como totalidade homogênea, mas sim na visão alternativa de heterogeneidades abertas e socioculturalmente contextualizadas.”

¹⁴ The document tries to establish the difference between critical reading and critical literacy, by stating that the first one sees meaning as something which is encoded in the way a text is written, while the second perspective treats language as socio-cultural practice (see OCEM, 2006, p. 115-116). The need for such a distinction is questionable though, since the PCN already considered reading as a socio-cultural practice, therefore rejecting the idea of stable meanings encoded in texts.

Although they mention that the “new” proposition takes into consideration what had been done at schools in terms of reading since the publication of the PCN, the OCEM include tables that intend to make clear the alleged differences between one procedure and the other. Even though they admit that more studies should be done about the matter, the way it is presented is likely to have an effect on the reader. And the effect may go against what, from my point of view, should be much more emphasized than it is in the OCEM: **the fact that the focus on reading was a huge step forward** in trying to make the teaching of FLs relevant in our regular schools.

As far as the reintroduction of “oral communication” is concerned, the OCEM use arguments that are dangerously similar to those of the early, audiolingual critics of the PCN. The surveys taken into consideration in order to highlight the relevance of the oral skills include narratives of teachers of EFL about their disappointment for not having learned “conversation” at the time they were students in regular schools. If the discussion in this paper about teacher’s different professional identities has any value, then one cannot be but cautious about interpreting the data as indicative of the relevance of the oral skills.

But the major problem of the OCEM is that the document presents a whole new orientation for the teaching of FLs less than a decade after the publication of the first PCN. It is, to say the least, a policy that does not take into consideration research about change in education and teacher cognition (see ALMEIDA, 2009). The teachers were simply not given enough time to review old practices, become informed about the propositions of the PCN, and try out some small steps towards the teaching of reading within the frame of language as discourse. Successful changes in education take time. And teachers do not review their beliefs and practices overnight. The breaking of a new paradigm maybe an exciting moment for researchers and the academy, but change in every day practices takes some considerable time, before any consistent change becomes apparent. In this sense, it was perhaps unwise to review the PCN so soon.

On the other hand, the OCEM are positive in the sense that, like the PCN, they are not prescriptive. This is very important if one believes not in global solutions but in local ones. Preserving the autonomy of the teacher is essential to a pedagogical practice capable of establishing its meaningfulness in the context it is designed to work (see KUMARAVADIVELU, 2006). It is the teacher, equipped with relevant information about theories of language and society, methodologies for teaching, and the characteristics that are unique

to her/his students and their context, that will be able to decide what and how to teach. This kind of freedom was preserved by both the PCN and the OCEM.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the criteria established by educational federal authorities for accepting or rejecting materials to be used in public schools. Paradoxically enough, an old desire of our community was achieved (the inclusion of FLs in the PNLD¹⁵), but the rules imposed upon the collections represented serious limitations to the choice of the teachers. In spite of including a lot of socially and educationally relevant items for the evaluation of such collections, the Program also stipulated that: (1) every collection should present an audio CD, and (2) the integration of the four different skills as well as the work with every one of them would constitute criteria for the evaluation of the books.

So, without an audio CD, the collections would not make it to the very first phase of the process: the evaluation by a team of university and non-university teachers hired by the government. I wonder why there should be such an obligation. Again, one cannot but suspect that what is really behind this is the belief that learning a language must always, necessarily, mean learning to speak. One clue to the kind of belief that underlies this demand may be found in the fact that no such CD is demanded for the collections of Portuguese as a mother tongue, though similar assumptions about heterogeneity and variation support the orientations for its teaching.

Moreover, if the theories of literacy, multi-literacy, multimodality and hypertext that support the OCEM for FLs were really to be taken into consideration, then it would make much better sense to demand a multimedia CD-ROM rather than an audio CD. Again, what seems to be happening is that the teaching of the four skills, whatever view of language is implied, is becoming more than a recommendation now. Control is replacing autonomy.

And if the obligation of the audio CD were not enough to keep out the Program collections that maintain their focus on reading, then the criteria involving the integration and evaluation of the four skills would do the trick. Evaluators would have no choice but to exclude them from the Program, since the evaluation has to follow the rules. One may like a collection as a whole, but if those criteria are not met, then it is out of the PNLD.

¹⁵ The criteria I discuss in the paragraph refer to the editions of 2011 and 2012 of the Program.

I am not saying here that I am against the inclusion of collections which work with the four skills. Nor am I saying that audio CDs should be prohibited. What I am saying is that choosing such a collection or any other should be left to the actual teachers in public schools. In other words, if a teacher still believes that the best thing she/he could do for her/his students is to focus on reading, she/he should be able to find a few collections with this purpose on the Program. What was done by the PNLD was, as a matter of fact, enforcing control over teaching practices, thus perverting the non-prescriptive character of the recommendations of the OCEM.

Where do we go from here?

Any attempt to establish new policies for the teaching of EFL at Brazilian regular schools should start with the recognition that the PCN were a very important step towards meaningful foreign language education in this context. Without such recognition, there will always be the suspicion that the old beliefs connected to the professional identity of the teacher as an instructor are coming back.

Surely, we do not want to teach only reading forever. But sound attempts to go forward in enhancing the relevance of our teaching should start with the discussion of the three groups of reasons that justified the propositions of the PCN. The focus on reading was considered the most adequate for the majority of our schools because of (1) practical considerations about our working conditions, (2) social relevance, and (3) educational relevance.

As far as practical conditions and educational relevance are concerned, virtually no major change has occurred in order to justify reframing our teaching. However, in what concerns social relevance, it is undeniable that the growth of the Internet has provided a new context for the use of the English language outside schools. For that reason, it is my belief that skills other than reading may now be taught in our classes without representing a return to a rationale that is alien to our schools. The teaching of writing in the context of Internet genres and practices is definitely necessary, if we want our students to have their own voice, becoming able to project their own local identities in global contexts.

Certainly the theories of literacy, multi-literacy, multimodality and of hypertext, discussed in the OCEM will play an important part in this (re)introduction of skills. After all, internet genres and practices have

characteristics that mix elements of written and oral communication, while also using multi-semiotic means to help (and make even more complex) the interaction. However, if we keep old terminology, with all the effects of meaning it brings, then it should be clear that written skills are still more relevant than the oral ones for the majority of Brazilian regular schools. And, for that matter, listening is more relevant than speaking for most of the social practices that our students engage in outside the classroom.

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