

TECHNOLOGY IN THE PERCEPTION OF ENGLISH TEACHERS IN SOUTHERN BRAZIL SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the advance of technologies and the increase of their use around the world, it shows a need to include them in education, as tools that could help the current teaching methods. Taking into account that most English classes in Brazilian public schools have been happening in the same way for many years, and considering the importance of learning a foreign language in this new technological world scenario, the objective of this study, that is part of a Master Degree dissertation, is to understand the perception of Brazilian English teachers in relation to the use of games and digital technologies, in the practice of face to face and remote language teaching classes, in different educational environments. Based on the participation of English teachers in the research stages, it is possible to explore their experiences and points of view, directly related to the English teaching and the use of technologies and digital games. This research collected information through a focus group research method. In this way, it was possible to verify that teachers, together with technologies and digital games, are very important in the classroom and those are extremely important tools to be used in teaching, including English. It was also noticed that keeping learning and qualifications are very important for the updating and practice of teaching. In addition, it was possible to conclude that, through the planning of activities, visualizing the right moment to insert digital games and technologies in their classes, teachers have support tools in these, which will help to engage and motivate students in learning a new language.

KEYWORDS

English Language, English Education, Teaching-Learning, Digital Technology, Digital Games

1. INTRODUCTION

Languages are an integral part of the universal exchange of knowledge. The English language is one of the most needed languages across the world. It is considered the language of international communication and business because it is the official language of many countries, and it is being taught as a foreign/second language all over the world (Menni, 2020).

The English language has always had its importance throughout history, but it was globalization and technology that expanded horizons and brought new opportunities and also urgent needs. The more economies, technologies and societies are intertwined, the more a way to communicate externally is needed. Therefore, the use of English has spread around the world in recent decades, unevenly but incessantly (First, 2021). Today, English is probably the main example of a global language. It is used to communicate in areas such as workplaces, science and technology, arts and business world (Holden; Nobre, 2021). From the 2.5 billion English speakers in the world, only about 400 million have this language as their mother tongue. People are learning English because they realize its importance in different situations. English increases inclusion as it enables professional development and puts people from different backgrounds on the same level (First, 2021).

Much has changed and evolved over time, and the area of education has not been left behind. Approximately a decade ago, Prensky already stated that today's students are no longer the same people our educational system was developed for (PRENSKY, 2010). Then, it is necessary to realize the importance of using new tools to mediate knowledge for these new people. The digital natives, people who were born in the age of knowledge, in order to have meaningful learning, aspire for a teaching that includes a little of their life realities. Learning

a foreign language has become more accessible with the help of technology, which brings to hands several online resources, such as videos, audios and materials to learn wherever you are. With so many enabling devices, the ideal would be to connect what is taught in the classroom with what the world offers digitally.

Given the above and focusing on the importance of learning a second language, it is noticed the necessity to use auxiliary tools capable of encouraging students learning. Therefore, this study proposes a reflection on the current way of teaching English in schools, analyzing the perception of Brazilian English teachers in relation to the use of games and digital technologies, in the practice of language teaching using the focal group method, taking into account the reality of each teacher and technologies available.

Learning a language has become more accessible with the help of technology and, according to Anjos-Santos et al. (2014), the English language and digital technologies have assumed an increasingly important role in the contemporary world. Learning English today has become a fundamental requirement for citizenship. In the same way that the English language has become increasingly present, the use of different digital technologies has been incorporated into the most diverse contemporary social practices (Anjos-Santos; Gamero; Gimenez, 2014).

From this point, considering the English language learning and Technologies, as well as the use of digital games, the focus group method will be explained and how it was done with the participants' teachers.

2. FOCUS GROUP

The focus group is a technique that stimulates and favors the interaction between its participants. This interactivity facilitates the development of studies that seek to understand attitudes, preferences, needs and feelings (ROLOFF, 2021). It is the data collection mechanism based on group discussions focused on a specific topic. The direction, guaranteed by a moderator, must occur in a non-structured and natural way (Duarte, 2007). Another relevant point of this methodological approach is to enrich quantitative research, due to its power to scan issues that, not always, can be measurable numerically (Abreu; Baldanza; Gondim, 2009).

Focus group is defined, therefore, as a joint discussion, between six to twelve participants (maximum number of participants), guided by a moderator/facilitator. The moderator (which in the case of academic research should be the researcher himself) must be able to guide the progress of the discussion in order to respect opinions, avoiding introducing any preconceived ideas (Duarte, 2007).

The social distance resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the already emerging process of virtual connections between people, also bringing implications for conducting research. With the introduction of New Communication and Information Technologies, focal groups began to use virtual rooms. The online focus group is an information gathering method similar to the face-to-face focus group. Its main characteristic is that it is performed in a virtual environment, dispensing with the physical presence of the participants so that there is interaction and consequently communication between them. This differentiation is pointed out as one of the main advantages of online focus groups (Abreu; Baldanza; Gondim, 2009).

The main purpose of this research modality is to extract from the attitudes and responses of the group participants, feelings, opinions and reactions that would result in new knowledge. Through the observation of everyday things, it is possible to see what is hidden, hear what was not said and read what is not written (Gomes, 2005). From this knowledge about focus groups, it is important to explain about the online focus group conducted with the Brazilian teachers.

2.1 Brazilian Teachers Focus Group

When it comes to data collection, the focus group was used as a research resource. This was done through data and information from discussions in the online focus group, carried out with Brazilian English teachers from public and private schools, language schools, university and remote teaching.

In the second semester of 2021, English teachers from Torres, state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, and the region, were contacted to be invited to participate in the online focus group. From all these contacts, a positive response was obtained from ten teachers, who agreed to participate in the focus group. Of these ten respondents, seven of them participated in the focus group: two teachers from a language school, two teachers from public schools - two private online teachers, who have already taught in private and public schools - and one university

teacher, who works at the university of a native English speaking country, with experience in national and international language schools and private online classes.

Next is shown the analysis of the focus group results, performed with the teachers, a mediator and the author, responsible for the study. These are organized into three categories: Teaching practices and challenges, use of digital resources in the classroom and teachers' shared experiences, and each category is reasoned with some author's ideas.

2.1.1 Teaching Practices and Challenges

This category addressed how teachers see teaching English in their classes and what their biggest challenges are.

Teacher 1: teaching, like, it has a lot of positive parts, because I'm not teaching them to speak English, you know, I'm teaching them to write an introduction in English, I'm teaching them to do research and use bibliographic references, etc. So, the difficulty is the issue of the students' English level when they arrive, and another difficulty too, with the pandemic and such, and even before the pandemic as well, it was even a bit of the students' interest. Their motivation is also a difficulty for me here.

Teacher 2: A student doesn't want to spare even a little extra time to learn the language, so he/she hopes that magic will happen in the classroom. They need to expose themselves to the language in other environments, at other times, formally and informally, but they don't want that exposure, they say they don't have time, that they can't, that it's a lot, but they want to learn, they want to see the end result, but they don't want to work towards the learning outcome.

According to Holden and Nobre (2021), what students may not fully realize is that learning a foreign language requires a lot of work and requires practical and memorizing activities, as well as communicative and creative ones. Likewise, learning to play a musical instrument, or to drive a car, also requires extensive student practice.

Teacher 3: The most nerve-racking point of all, getting the students involved and getting them to understand that it's not magic, there's no miracle, if there's no effort. Learning a language, we know very well that it's not like that, right, it requires time, dedication, so for me, this was and will continue to be the teacher's great challenge, how to involve your students, how to bring all of them, you know, to accomplishing what needs to be done, it's a process, you know, it has stages, everything.

Widodo (2006, p. 122-141 apud Kurlishchuk, 2016, p. 88-89) reports numerous benefits of using games, such as increasing motivation among shy students who cannot express their feelings or talk in front of other people. By using games, students can be more active, autonomous and energetic, learn about the environment, the world they live in and get involved in the teaching-learning process (Kurlishchuk, 2016).

Teacher 4: Our methodologies are still very expositive due to the fact that our schools are not equipped, so we don't have an English-only room, we don't have the electrical equipment. These difficulties are crossed by the teaching of the English language, mainly in state schools. There are also several students who arrive throughout the year and as our city is a touristic city, them you are with that group that is already on the way, which has such a level, then a student arrives who don't know anything, you know, several students actually, or who don't like English because of a series of things that happened along their path, you know, at school.

Granito and Chernobilsky (2012 apud Rad, 2017, p. 9) suggests that inserting different forms of technology can help teachers create enjoyable and motivational classes for students of all levels (Rad, 2017).

Teacher 6: When we talk about a private course, right, that is extracurricular, we have a slightly higher level of interest, but still with this feeling that it is magical. In the classroom, what I noticed in addition to this issue, you know, wanting everything to happen, the student's lack of interest, there is also the issue of unevenness, so you work with a student who does not know what the verb to be is, and you already have that student who is already doing 5 years of language school and who is super advanced, and you have to make an interesting class for all these levels, right? So I see this as the greatest difficulty in the classroom, this issue of the student's unevenness.

"In the current educational context, being a teacher has become a challenging issue, since the classes are diverse, each with its own particular characteristics, which requires a more elaborate pedagogical work on the part of the educator. perfection of their practice."(Gomes et al., 2016, p. 90).

Teacher 7: Despite the dream, if you don't have the motivation, the dream is not enough, you have to have a motivation to learn and this issue of unevenness and we are always afraid of exposing ourselves, of talking about silly things. I think more than the use of technology, that it facilitates some things, you create new

activities, give this engagement, technology brings these opportunities, but it is not enough, because there is also a factor that I usually say in relation to my students, the experience of their lives. The use of collaborative technologies is advised to help English learners to participate more actively in their own learning. English students not only learn English, but also acquire more information and knowledge, improve their communication skills, make friends and expand their social contacts using English (Franco-Madrigal, 2016).

Teacher 8: I deal a lot with the difficulty of working in a school which is considered a school in a neighborhood on the outskirts here in the city, you know, there is a lot of prejudice in the issue of English, of teaching English, they don't think it is important because their reality is very different and I realize that there are few who are really interested in the language, you know. So I realize that we have to create a lot of that affectivity and playing things, if we don't have that, we lose the student, you know.

Socioeconomic inequality is still an important factor for the lack of meaning of discipline in classrooms. (Trevisan, 2018).

There are still some specific difficulties in relation to the work of English teachers that can be attributed to the use of a traditional methodology, as well as the lack of student awareness regarding the importance of learning a foreign language (Gomes et al., 2016).

It is understood, therefore, that teachers and students face many challenges in terms of teaching and learning English. There is resistance on the part of students to dedicate themselves and practice, as well as a lack of motivation and a sense of learning. To the teachers, the scarcity of materials and resources to try to innovate and involve all students.

2.1.2 Use of Digital Resources in the Classroom

In this category, the use of games and digital technologies in the practice of English language teaching, the importance of these digital tools for teachers, and whether there have been changes, comparing before and during the pandemic, with the use of technology and games.

Teacher 1: I always liked using games, when I taught English as a second language, but it's something that we have to take care of, too, not to get that pressure of always having to bring a game to the classroom, sometimes you can adapt that goal with a little game. But it is something that is important for us to think that the games are important, they are part of learning, the students end up getting more involved, but it can generate pressure for the teacher. So I think there has to be a little bit of balance, but I agree that games are very important and technology is there to help, right?

Teacher 2: One point that I think is that we always need to have a goal, which has also been mentioned, so playing Kahoot just for the sake of playing will not lead anywhere, it will make the student a little more coquettish, but what was the pedagogical objective of that activity? It's valid, but there has to be a dose, so I think we also have to know how to measure each thing, each activity that we do in the classroom, always with a purpose, to feel to know the class, to feel/know the student, then to know the class, there is a class that will do very well with more technological activities and games, another not so much, so I think you also have to know the reality of each student and each class, to know what to offer is very important too.

Teacher 3: I work 80% of the time with online, individual classes, so it's a very different thing, the technology I use are video conference platforms. I don't use games much, I use more interaction with students. But from the experience I had while I was a teacher, I remember well that I took the whole transition, I took the issue of technology being introduced, the need, the demands of the students, so I participated a lot in all the stages, the discussions, reality was changing. So if we are in a class with 30 children, 30 teenagers, the challenge is immense and these resources come to help us.

It is salutary to understand that digital technologies will not replace or diminish the importance of the role and function of the teacher, but rather that they serve as important tools to bring formal education closer to the new generations and expand and intensify the learning process (Cruz, 2021).

Teacher 4: So, we still use little digital technology in the classroom, we use a lot of technology, in the game that a colleague showed you, you also use the technology to print, to choose images. I have students who are very uneven, just like I have students who know a lot of English, I have students there who know almost nothing, so we have to make the necessary adaptations, I also do a lot of them creating their own games with other groups, organize themselves, learn, you know, so more in that sense that I use technology there.

According to a study by the British Council, English teachers say that didactic resources are more relevant in teaching their subject than in other subjects. They also state that English is a discipline that requires more playful, collective and interactive activities to generate student engagement and practical involvement with the language. Therefore, teaching resources, especially technological ones, are the main demand of teachers (Council, 2015).

Teacher 5: As soon as we jumped in there for these online classes, and from day to night we had to find a way, first we had to get on digital platforms, which was not our reality, you had to adapt everything, right, for that environment without ever having studied, thought or imagined that we were going to have to teach classes that way, right, so it was like that, it turns you around, so I wanted to show you something that is zero technological, but it was a crazy success with my students, here I hid the flashcards and the children had to find out what I was showing, so it's really needed.

Buckingham (2006 apud Cruz, 2021) warns that we need to have the courage to deal with and prepare students (and here we include teachers) for this new world, in which they can be active and critical. The focus on the use of games in learning situations is justified by allowing the development of different skills, such as autonomy, systemic and strategic thinking and problem solving (Cruz, 2021, p.151).

Teacher 6: When I was a student, technology was that movie on a TV tube they brought and dragged around the whole school until I got to the classroom to watch a movie, in terms of technology, that was it. So, I see it like this, really as a resource, an option that you can use, but it is very dangerous when used without purpose. Because I know that games facilitate the teaching-learning process. Another thing that worries me about the game is the competition. When you are going to make the students compete, I start to think about the anxiety, the frustration, of dealing with losing or winning. So I'm already starting to take this idea away from the competition and go more to the collaborative, to the cooperative.

The pedagogical use of digital games can go beyond the construction of knowledge in specific areas, treating them not as mere teaching machines, but rather as cultural artifacts, which exist within a context (social, cultural, economic, historical). This implies that, when digital games are used in a pedagogical initiative, the cultural character of these productions should not be ignored (Cruz, 2021, p.151).

Teacher 7: Before the pandemic I thought I mastered things on the internet, but with the pandemic I realized that there were many resources that I didn't know about. We had the opportunity to take a postgraduate course in education technology and we did it, and then I learned quite a lot. Because in classes when it was online, I analyzed myself a lot. I left a lot to be desired because of many things I didn't know. Now I realize that it's different, we also received computers for the municipal students, so they play online games and I see that they like it a lot, so I think it contributes to our reality in the classroom. I really like games. And I see that a lot of people are still stuck in that traditional education, even with the whole issue of technology.

With the decreed pandemic and the release of non-face-to-face activities, institutions or teaching networks, in order to carry out remote activities, needed changes in pedagogical practices, that is, the teacher needed pedagogical support that would provide conditions to act in this context. differentiated moment. Unfortunately, many were not able to include non-face-to-face activities and the use of methodologies for this teaching process, due to their initial professional training, which did not provide them with such skills (Cruz, 2021). Considering that the new scenario of technological innovation in education calls for a renewed posture of the teacher, with the role of guiding and mediating the students' learning, above all a guide, who explores the critical sense in everything that the student learns (Carvalho et al., 2020).

It is observed that, with the pandemic, technology entered the lives of students and teachers, breaking barriers and coming to stay. The educator's role goes far beyond teaching, and this was noted in the teachers' speeches. Technology needs to be seen as an ally for teaching, and teachers have to gather with it.

2.1.3 Teachers Shared Experiences

In this last category, the subject was developed regarding possible changes in teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, and perceptions of what can be improved in English language teaching, by teachers. "Analyzing challenges based on evidence is always a good starting point" (Council, 2019, p.6).

Teacher 1: We are continuously, constantly adapting and changing, you know, now I think it won't just be going back to what it was, there will be a lot of things that we will still miss, even the online part there that was easy, right, but in relation to one thing that could improve, especially in Brazil with this financially, the needy to have good access to the internet, because that's what made this inequality so wide open. So, thinking about a governmental issue, I think that an initiative to subsidize resources for needy students, so that they can

have access to the internet. I think it is an ideal world, right, but if I were to choose any thing, maybe that would be an interesting thing.

Teacher 2: I think that before the pandemic, in a way, some professionals managed to escape the use of technology a little bit and it worked and they made it happen, and after the pandemic this was no longer an option. I think that has changed, we learned a lot from it and I think what is left of teaching is that there is a lot of room for learning and training. So what remains is, we cannot escape the use of technology in the classroom, regardless of how this use will be, because it's already part of what our students are today and just as technology was very present in the pandemic and fundamental, I think affectivity is too.

It will be necessary to invest in teacher training as a language user and in more integrated teaching methodologies for the use of English. (Council, 2019, p.34).

Teacher 3: I think it changed everything, right, the teachers come out much better. So my admiration for everything you've done and are still doing in this period of pandemic, and overnight they had to learn and manage, and make things happen, you know, because the families were waiting, the students too, we know that a lot was lost in this period, especially those who are in the state school, many students were also lost. Last week, the result of a survey in Brazil regarding internet access was published and one third of the Brazilian population does not have any access. What we come out of this pandemic is that our country needs more equality. We have to always be looking, keep studying, searching.

Teachers struggle to deal with social issues and more the pedagogical one. This is in addition to the problems of infrastructure and access to inputs at school. That very traditional class, sometimes, is what is possible to do within a very complex context (Council, 2019, p.42).

Teacher 4: We are having the reality of high school, I'm with them, you know, and they are coming back in this post-pandemic, I don't know if it's a post-pandemic, right, but not all of them are coming back, so that makes it a lot difficult. What I'm trying to do is try to give a projection of the pedagogical for that cell phone, because they know how to use the cell phone, they use it all the time, but then doing things that will collaborate with their lives, they don't know. For example, producing a curriculum, which is there in high school, right, making a Powerpoint, a slide, a presentation on a topic, they don't know that, I think we have now to teach them to use their cell phones as a pedagogical resource.

Teacher 5: I think it was a moment to shake things up, you know, so there were a lot of people who were really accommodated there, I'm not going to say that they didn't, because they were really scared and didn't want to go through this evolution, but I think it was really very positive in the sense of it, that we were actually forced to enter the digital world, right, that was really cool and I think it was the opportunity for us to learn a lot. I think we are slowly coming back and I think we are, as professionals, even more strengthened. One thing that I found very interesting was the moment we started the online classes, we exposed our class, our day, our moment to the whole family, everyone started to participate in our classes, right, it was also a huge challenge for us to expose ourselves.

Teacher 6: I think that some initiatives are already being taken, I see from the micro to the macro, I saw some city halls, for example, they bought a lot of tablets but they don't know what to do with them because they think it's just changing the book for the tablet, it's not, because then you have to train the teacher, you have to think about how you can use that, so I see the biggest total disorganization like that. One thing that I noticed was that we couldn't teach the same online class time as the classroom time, so there's something wrong there. It seems that the face-to-face class has more contact there, the class is more productive, I felt that online people were very lost.

Teacher 7: On the issue of the pandemic, I think the municipality woke up a little, a lot of resources are coming, many students don't have this contact at home, so that's one more reason for them to go to school, because for many it is demotivating. Of course, many teachers are still thinking that the technology is difficult, and with the issue of age, they don't want to update themselves. It happened at my school, with teachers resigning because they didn't want to deal with technology, they got desperate because they didn't know when we would return face-to-face. I think that a teacher is an eternal construction. As I say to them, it's not just us who teach, they teach us a lot, right, and it's a nice exchange.

Based on the reports, an important movement can be noticed with regard to leaving the comfort zone and going in search of new knowledge. Teachers did everything possible and impossible to reach their students during the COVID 19 pandemic. Many went further and strengthened ties with their students through affection. There is still a lack of greater perception from government officials, to look at the urgent needs of public education classrooms, as well as the neediest students.

3. CONCLUSION

Based on the results obtained through the focus group, raising the practices of English language teaching and the experience lived by the teachers, as well as the use of digital resources in the classroom in formal schools of regular education and language schools, present that teachers have some knowledge about the use of technologies and digital games, and it was possible to see how much the pandemic accelerated, even forced, many times, the attempts and learning of new technologies by teachers. It was also noticed how essential the teacher's role is in the classroom, as mentioned by the participants' teachers.

In addition, it was found that the teacher, through the planning of classes and activities, visualizing exactly where to insert digital games and technologies, has support tools in them, which will help to facilitate, engage and motivate students. In learning a new language. York, Poole and DeHaan (2021) state that if the vision of games transforming education is to be realized, and if the use of games in the classroom is to be normalized, this will be done by teachers. Thus, research must turn its focus to the language classroom and how educators can teach with games. Opportunely mentioned, studies and qualifications are of paramount importance for updating and practicing teaching. Holden and Nobre (2021) state that, as teachers, it is necessary to continuously develop, and it is the teacher's responsibility to keep up to date and learn more about the language and different teaching methods. According to the reports of the focus group, in addition to technology, teachers opened their horizons for qualifications, in search of new learning related to their teaching, as well as for technologies to help them with remote classes.

After this study, it is concluded that technology and digital games are extremely important tools to be used in teaching, including the English language. There are several impediments that hinder this progress in the classroom, such as schools without inputs and teachers without the necessary qualifications. However, there was a strong desire for change on the part of the teachers, for themselves and for education and teaching in Brazil. This will be a daily work to change this scenario.

In the event that students do not have access to the internet at school, it is possible to survey who has the internet and cell phone and/or computer at home, and make games available as homework. The teacher can monitor the student's performance in the activity, as well as review the points in which he/she had greater difficulty. In case the student does not have internet and/or cell phone, the school does not have internet and computer, it is still possible to play some games on the teacher's computer (with its shared internet), games that are for the whole group, that do not need cell phones. There are many possibilities, even with few resources. May the teacher continue to plant seeds in the lives of his students. If he can get one to flourish, he has accomplished a great achievement.

For future studies, it is possible to think about training through an English cultural immersion for English teachers, which addresses different types of digital games and technologies. In this opportunity, teachers practice the target language and learn new game platforms to apply in their classes. Studies and meetings with other teachers also help in sharing experiences and ideas. As well, new research about offline games, that could include all students, in classes or at home. Technology sometimes distances people, but if used in the right way and at the right time, it brings them closer, helps to relax, motivate and make things more interesting.

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