



Critical literacy for difference: teachers' perceptions of the english language curriculum in Brazil

Letramento crítico para diferença: percepção de professores sobre o currículo de língua inglesa no Brasil

Letramento crítico para diferencia: percepción de profesores sobre el currículo de lengua inglesa en Brasil

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Resumo

Esta pesquisa investiga a percepção de professores brasileiros sobre o currículo de língua inglesa, nos cursos de graduação, relacionado à questão de diversidade, bem como o caminho que eles negociam com esta questão no seu cotidiano. Os dados foram analisados pela lente do letramento crítico. O estudo envolve o uso de questionário aberto aplicado a vinte três professores educadores de língua inglesa. Dentro de uma metodologia interpretativista, a análise identificou percepções que emergiram da resposta dos participantes. Os dados sugerem que o currículo de ensino de língua inglesa foca ainda o conteúdo. Professores acreditam que eles não foram adequadamente preparados para lidar com a diversidade no contexto educacional, porém alguns tratam deste tópico intuitivamente (gênero/etnicidade). Outros já discutem diversidades com seus alunos para aumentar a consciência deles sobre diferenças culturais. Este estudo apresenta algumas implicações para o uso da perspectiva do letramento crítico para a formação de professores, e ressalta a necessidade de revisão dos programas de ensino de língua inglesa no ensino superior para abranger questões relacionadas com a diversidade.

Palavras-Chave: Letramento crítico, diversidade, formação de professor

Abstract

This research investigates Brazilian teachers' perceptions about the English language curriculum in their undergraduate courses as related to the issue of diversity, as well as the way they deal with this issue in their daily routine. Data is analyzed through a critical literacy lens. The study involved the use of an open questionnaire with twenty-three English language educators. Through an interpretative research methodology, the analysis identified perceptions that emerged from participants' answers. Data suggests that the ELT pre-service teacher curriculum focuses on content. Teachers also believe they have not been adequately prepared to face diversity in their educational settings, but some claim to cope with this topic intuitively (gender, ethnicity). Others have been discussing diversity with their students to raise their awareness of cultural differences. This study presents implications for the use of critical literacy in teacher education, and highlights the need for reviewing ELT programs in higher education to encompass diversity-related issues.

Keywords: Critical literacy, diversity, teacher education.



Resumen

Esta investigación examina la percepción de profesores brasileños sobre el currículo de lengua inglesa, en los cursos de graduación, relacionado a la cuestión de diversidad, así como el camino que ellos negocian con esta cuestión en su cotidiano. Los datos fueron analizados desde la perspectiva del letramento crítico. El estudio implica el uso de cuestionario abierto aplicado a veintitrés profesores educadores de lengua inglesa. Dentro de una metodología interpretativista, el análisis identificó percepciones que emergieron de la respuesta de los participantes. Los datos sugieren que el currículo de enseñanza de lengua inglesa enfoca aun el contenido. Profesores creen que no los prepararon adecuadamente para manejar la diversidad en el contexto educacional, sin embargo algunos tratan este tópico intuitivamente (género/etnicidad). Otros ya discuten diversidades con sus alumnos para aumentarles la conciencia sobre diferencias culturales. Este estudio presenta algunas implicaciones para el uso de la perspectiva del letramento crítico para la formación de profesores, y resalta la necesidad de revisión de los programas de enseñanza de lengua inglesa en la universidad para abarcar cuestiones relacionadas a la diversidad.

Palabras Clave: Letramento crítico, diversidad, formación de profesor

Introduction

In the past decade, the issue of difference has been addressed through various theoretical perspectives (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000; MONTE MÓR, 2008; MENEZES DE SOUSA; ANDREOTTI, 2008), which clearly demonstrates the need to question and understand our social lives in a supposedly globalized world. English Language Training (ELT) research has shown that the English language classroom has become a rich scenario to develop studies which focus on critical education¹ and which reassess language teaching practices and curricula in a way that is more responsive to diversity (MONTE MÓR, 2007; SILVA, 2011). There is a need to understand the impact of this issue in the curriculum and how it is based on critical literacy².

These theoretical trends have suggested changes to educational curricula in teacher training courses developed throughout the world. In Brazil, for instance, educational policies have given importance to multicultural themes such as ethnicity, sexual identities, and cultural diversity by legally incorporating the Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) to teacher education programs. Therefore, there are mandatory subjects in teacher education undergraduate courses. Despite the advancement of such policies, ELT

1 Critical education examines how political ideologies shape educational settings as a way of perpetuating hegemonic, mainstream notions (Marxist view). In this sense, critical education seeks to stimulate education as an instrument of social change and as a means of obtaining social, cultural, and economic equity.

2 In recent years, critical literacy has amplified Paulo Freire's ideas, and the critical literacy curriculum is usually associated with his work. Following its premise that language is always used in power relationships and that all texts are spoken or written by someone for a particular purpose, a curriculum based on this orientation does not consider language as transparent and strives to help students understand texts' discursive mechanisms. It is constructed, in short, to raise students' awareness about political issues.



teachers' pre-service courses continue to produce curricula based on the four traditional communicative skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and on well-defined grammar sequences. This type of curriculum maintains a linear view of learning, avoiding the complexity of the issue of diversity in ELT contexts.

This paper derives partly from my dissatisfaction with ELT teacher education in general. This has acted as a stimulus for reflecting upon education and the issue of 'difference', which is becoming increasingly evident in contemporary education but which schools rarely seem to take into account. In a number of situations teachers may feel insecure about dealing with topics related to 'difference', while in others they may be prejudiced or simply not interested. Perhaps as a result of teaching a culture which is too concerned about the rationality of homogenizing our students, we generally tend to neglect their diverse forms of behaviour.

Taking this into account, I realized there are few research studies on Brazilian ELT teachers' curriculum-related perceptions³, particularly considering the evidence associated with the issue of 'difference' – involving cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and other factors in English language teaching contexts. With this in mind, I decided to focus on the development of English teacher courses in Brazilian universities.

Recent research in Brazil has shown the need to investigate this topic with the importance it deserves, specifically in terms of the effect on pre-service English teachers' perceptions on language teaching/learning. Special consideration is given to one of the most critical realities of contemporary education, i.e. how to deal with 'otherness' in an educational setting. Within this framework, teachers need to manage knowledge which is seen as relational, negotiated, and fluid (KALANTZIS & COPE, 2006). Following on from this idea, the notion of meaning becomes plural and is markedly influenced by 'difference'. Any curriculum embracing this assumption needs to take into account that conflict is an integral element in the *modus operandi*. Any interpretation of this bias should be regarded as contingent. It is in such complex sociocultural circumstances that an understanding of the dialectical relationship between the local and the global is built. In other words, locality is not just about space, it also reveals divergence of meaning which involves heterogeneity, i.e. it is not necessarily connected to a universal knowledge created by our globalized world (BRYDON, 2011). Any understanding of 'difference' poses an extraordinary challenge for language teachers around the world, even in Brazil, where students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds engage in the mainstream curriculum. Therefore, it is crucial to produce a curriculum which values the notion of 'difference' and its various social, political, and cultural manifestations.

3 Perception is not only a cognitive process in which one recognizes and repeats sensory stimuli. In this paper, it is also understood as a social, cultural, and political representation of the world. In other words, our perception is not fixed, but changeable, and it is constructed in our daily social interaction.



Within the field of multiliteracies there are limited examples of how teachers develop their understanding of teacher education curriculum and 'difference', as well as their impact on teaching. This research concentrates on teachers' perceptions about curriculum and 'difference' and the implications of teaching ELT to develop a critical perspective about language. Moreover, it proposes a theoretical and empirical analysis of data collected with the aim of improving the quality of teacher education in Brazil and coping with local problems to foster a more critical education. In this respect, I believe that education should widen its acceptance of diversity. We live in troubled times when traditional truths are under constant challenge. In dealing with such questions, it is important that educators insist on dealing with 'difference'. Tensions in this area may in part be explained by the fact that teachers are generally insecure in managing the practical side of 'difference'. In summary, my aim is to promote a deeper understanding of critical literacy theory, to elaborate on an approach which contributes to the teaching of English as a second/foreign language, and to collaborate with projects that raise awareness about diversity.

I begin by summarizing the theoretical section. It presents some concepts linked to critical literacy and critical curriculum and how they relate to my research. Finally, in the concluding part of this paper, I discuss findings and their implications for teacher education.

1. Critical literacy for difference

Over the past few years, many language researchers (KALANTZIS; COPE, 2000; KALANTZIS; COPE, 2006; 2012; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2006; MONTE MÓR, 2007; MENEZES SOUZA, 2011; MONTE MÓR, 2011) have taken into consideration the importance of critical language teaching in the school syllabus, and the social and political dimensions have been regarded as inseparable aspects of language teaching and learning. However, there is still relatively little detailed empirical research examining the efficiency of critical education in English language teaching in Brazil (MONTE MÓR; 2007; SILVA, 2011). Likewise, there is an evident lack of the practical experience which promotes conditions that enable schools to develop critical literacy practices.

The challenge in teacher education to approach thematic issues surrounding the diversities in English language teaching goes beyond its social or even educational relevance. It is increasingly common for undergraduate students to raise questions about teaching and 'difference'. They usually do not know how to deal with prejudice and symbolic violence (BOURDIEU, 1998/2012) in the classroom. They perceive a gap between government claims and the aims of critical literacy in education. In this case, symbolic violence should be understood as unconscious acts of violence which seek to discipline individuals according to hegemonic behavior. This type of violence is a way of legitimizing heteronormativist, monolingualist or racist discourses. One of the strategies of symbolic violence is to give attention to the visibility of differences, for example, how people speak, behave, and dress. This strategy usually makes gender/racial/linguistic/cultural dichotomies visible to reinforce the hegemonic position and legitimize the norms



of conventional cultural ideas of gender/race/language/culture. This situation inspires the need to deconstruct norms in terms of gender, race, language, and culture.

I believe it is very important to rebuild educational practices in Brazil, and teachers need to understand the importance of redirecting their teaching to a more open attitude towards their work and responsibilities in a contemporary world influenced by various social and technological changes in the last few decades. We are diverse. Our social performance relies, to a greater or lesser extent, on the possible ways of being human along dimensions of similarity and difference. Many of us may be close to the ideal-type culture in many ways, but, all in all, we often feel like outsiders in many other situations (LEMKE, 2010).

In Brazil, the concept of literacy (KLEIMAN, 1995) started being used to differ from the social impact of writing in relation to non-formal educational settings, particularly with regard to illiterate adults. Thus, literacy was the name given to Brazilian federal programmes for non-formal instruction. Recently, this notion has embraced the idea of multiliteracies and critical literacy (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011) and is now defined by plural, social, and situated practices which reflect on the cultural, political, ideological, and linguistic value of a certain social group. Thus, 'multiliteracies' is a term which refers to meaning-making, an aspect strongly marked by multimodal communications, revealing new forms of social agency in the world. By employing it, Kalantzis and Cope (2014) claim that our technological society has been characterized by the spread of a massified culture of images and other modes of expression. Such images are not neutral; they produce meaning which may reinforce or question stereotypes. Magazines, for example, show models who represent a globalization and standardization of beauty ideals that eliminate all types of bodily 'imperfections'. Multimodality also includes meaning-making processes that flow from one mode to another, such as visual, spatial, gestural, written, and audio modes (KALANTZIS; COPE, 2014). Therefore, it would be naive to consider an image as a simple illustration of a text. These pluralities of meaning – known as multiliteracies – also evoke a teaching practice based on issues of 'otherness', heterogeneity, and power relations in dominant and subaltern literacies (MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2010). In this sense, I recognize the need to broaden the scope of school views so it may encompass 'differences' and their multisemiotics; their political and sociocultural aspects.

Thus, we chose the perspective of critical literacy and multiliteracies as theoretical tools which can be put into practice and help researchers interested in understanding the heterogeneity of human interaction. A curriculum that stresses 'difference' is crucial in constructing a new educational ethos which accepts individuals' diverse manifestations on any given subject. In the name of inclusive discourse, this can mean transforming the issue through folklore themes. For example, Brazil celebrates Indian Day and Slavery Abolition Day. These practices have the potential to highlight the binary poles (homosexual and heterosexual, black and white) which are a source of stigmatization in our society. This polarization rejects the wide range of human expression; for instance, in terms of gender perception, men tend to be shown as naturally robust and dominant, whereas women are gentle and delicate. Gender studies (XXXX, 2012), on the other



hand, argue that some individuals may establish an identity with different labels, depending on their social contexts.

Similarly, the notion of race has been historically constructed to distinguish ethnic groups and to establish inequality between people with different ethnic backgrounds. In addition, this binary concept of the world has also supported the notions of canonical and non-canonical culture. Thus, Western cultures are seen as prestigious, whereas African ones are considered exotic. In other words, the problem of dividing humans into categories of men and women, black and white, exotic and familiar is quite arbitrary and tends to promote an oversimplified vision of the world. In this sense, teachers should cautiously consider how to employ inclusive discourses so that they avoid promoting discrimination inadvertently and actively foster diversity.

Literacy for 'difference' demands understanding language within the sphere of social practices which are not only symbolic, but which relate to the way our own world is organized. Social discourse practices influence the 'identity' of individuals and their social relationships, representations, and knowledge. Hence power relations and ideologies are essential to understanding the social dimensions of literacy (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2000).

2. Critical curriculum for ELT: English teaching for difference

The school curriculum, understood as a list of topics to be covered by the teacher, has always served as a guide for educational practices within the school. In the case of foreign language teaching, the curriculum is usually based on textbooks which cover well-defined grammar sequences, ranging from the most simple, generally the verb 'to be', to more complex ones like the present perfect tense. Oral activities are presented to introduce a real-life context for the target language using the linguistic topics studied throughout the book. This whole process is mediated by a cultural view that is based on the perspective of an ideal English native speaker, often describing differing versions of an utopic Anglo-Saxon world.

This concept of curriculum is currently being questioned, especially after the advent of the Internet, which has motivated the rise of new textual genres that have, in turn, dramatically changed our social interactions in relation to knowledge in general (COPE & KALANTZIS, 2000). These transformations may be seen in virtual communities, in chat rooms or in on-line discussion forums inspired by a new time and space order. This new trend is actually modifying the way we see ourselves.

Individuals who wish to participate in this new multimodal reality need to be aware of this culture's new signs and how this context is constantly being reinterpreted by new cyberspace communities. In this respect, the dawning of the digital culture has not been the same for everyone. Thus, heterogeneity is unavoidable among individuals who take part in the digital environment (CASTELL, 2003).

This argument has foregrounded the fact that the teaching and learning of English is more than a naive vision of the four traditional communicative skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). The theory of critical literacy illustrates that there are new forms of literacies



which include multimodal and multisemiotic elements in language learning (COPE, B & KALANTZIS, 2000). For this reason, a curriculum incorporating such new multiliteracy issues should necessarily include their cultural varieties. As such, this view offers an alternative to the asocial and, therefore, abstract and decontextualized representations of language that have been typical of, for instance, the mainstream tradition in English language teaching.

According to this view, studies based on multiliteracies, critical literacy, and literacy for 'difference' may provide resources for a curriculum supported by both the 'difference' and conventional approaches. It is not merely intended to include questions related to homosexuality and racism, as well as linguistic varieties which are apparently self-evident. Curricula would be founded on tolerance or on the simple binary questions of right and wrong, and it is well to take into account the fact that students' attitudes seem to encourage the categories of abnormal or normal between individuals when they are confronted with something different (JESUS, 2012). Thus, a critical curriculum – in English language teaching – would not focus strictly on grammar aspects or linguistic skills, but also be concerned with a multiplicity of meanings that are manifested within power struggles, and how the reader takes a position in his/her interpretation of this reality (MONTE MÓR, 2010).

In a critical language curriculum, the notion of dialogue seems to be essential (FREIRE, 1970), involving more than the acceptance of ideas from others. Dialogue in Freire's notion relates to freeing education for both the oppressed and the oppressor. The critical literacy perspective has redefined dialogue as an inquiry approach that examines multiple perspectives (INNEY, 2014). As a result, the critical curriculum seeks to problematize different views in order to understand why people relate to various loci of enunciation, i.e. how they stand in relation to sociopolitical issues and the consequence of this positioning. The notion of dialogue invites us to consider a wide variety of discourses which allow learners to develop the language of critique. Thus, they may also learn how readers are positioned by texts. In this type of language teaching, there are no truths because they are contingent and situated. A teacher who assumes this paradigm may be more open-minded to deal with 'difference'. Once faced with the fact that we live in a heterogeneous world, students might widen their scope of learning to understand how power relationships are formed in society.

3. Methodological perspective

This work is based on an interpretative view of research (ERICKSON, 1986/1990), which assumes that the natural context and participants define what takes place in a given social situation. The aim of this approach is to clarify the meaning of actions in social life, as well as to share an interpretation of the interaction between the various members of the environment studied. Erickson (1986/1990) considers that the goal of interpretive research is to comprehend the universe of human language microscopically. Despite focusing on the microstructure, this approach considers the macrostructure. By observing microroutines we can also understand the overall macrostructure, so the



relationship between micro- and macro- proceeds dialectically. This research approach also claims that each individual's sociocultural environment determines his/her social behaviour. It has been applied to educational research because teachers' experiences are neither homogeneous nor easily controlled or predictable. This approach provides information about teachers' perceptions on language teacher education curriculum and 'difference' and also their personal reflections about their work and diversity.

Data was collected via a questionnaire sent by e-mail to teachers (Appendix A) from September to October 2014. The main goal was to understand their perceptions about language teacher curriculum as well as the impact of this curriculum in their practices in relation to the issue of 'difference'. Data analysis began with a thorough familiarization with teachers' discourses in order to establish a thematic framework. Themes were identified following King and Horrocks' (2010) guidelines. Firstly, the authors suggest that data analysis always involves choosing what to include, what to discard, and how to interpret participants' words. Secondly, themes imply some degree of repetition in the data. Thirdly, such themes should be distinct from each other. Therefore, they are 'recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question' (KING; HORROCKS, 2010). Prominent themes were established and then used as a reference point for the questionnaire's subsequent analysis. Following, I focused on a critical literacy approach and on theories about difference in the school because I believe these theoretical lenses promote a critical look at teachers' discourses that are common in the ELT area in Brazil.

Discourse, according to Fairclough (1992/2001), is understood as a set of social practices which are not only symbolic, but which relate to the way group worlds are perceived. Discursive social practices help compose the 'identity' of individuals and their social relationships, representations, and knowledge. In this perspective, power relationships and ideological standpoints are essential in understanding the social dimensions of teachers' perceptions. An ideology in this sense should be understood as that which constructs reality through the dimensions of discursive practices and their contribution to the production, reproduction or transformation in relationships. Discursive practices constitute the dimension of language in use, which in turn is involved in a process of production, distribution, and consumption of texts, which naturally vary according to the types of discourses and social factors involved.

At the beginning of September 2014, I sent messages to Brazilian teachers who were in my friends' list on Facebook. I provided them with a brief description of the research, including purpose, procedures, and confidentiality. Those interested chose to take part in it. The investigation involved a total of twenty-three English language teachers with varying critical literacy knowledge and experience. Teachers were already familiar with critical teaching. Their age ranged from 25 to 50 and they were from different cultural and social backgrounds, as well as from different Brazilian states. All had graduated from ELT programs in Brazil. Ten of them had been working as teacher trainees, eight were



enrolled in graduate courses, and five had just finished their undergraduate course. All of them were teachers, hence they had developed professional identities as teachers. This data could give a brief insight into the ELT community in Brazil. Interpretative research, of course, involves analytical limits. In that sense, the understanding of teachers' discourse and my comprehension of their voices should be viewed as partial, practiced from within subject positions in the production of particular discursive power relations.

Two research questions guided the present investigation:

1. How do teachers perceive the issue of diversity in the ELT curriculum?
2. How do teachers perceive the issue of diversity in the classroom as a learning context?

4. Results

4.1 How the English language curriculum in higher education is perceived by English language teachers

The ELT curriculum⁴ still seems to privilege content, for knowledge continues to be guided by the notions of repetition, reproduction, and transmission. Students are required to portray facts from memory, for example, reciting verbs or reproducing canonical texts. In this pedagogical approach, learners have to prove their knowledge with empirical facts by repeating the correct answers (KALANTZIS & COPE, 2012). They are passive, whereas the teacher is regarded as the source of knowledge. This educational practice in the ELT context is also evident in whole-class recitation activities, question-answer tasks, multiple-choice tests, etc.

It tends to have a traditional orientation with well-defined grammar sequences and a biased view of an ideal English native speaker. Topics are normally organized in continuous and sequential syllabi (English Language 1, English Language 2, etc.). Furthermore, the traditional curriculum is inflexible and does not allow students to choose their subjects. Such inflexibility is also due to the widespread belief that future teachers should learn content. Consequently, students have few interdisciplinary experiences, regardless of their major. However, the Brazilian Ministry of Education has recently stimulated changes in higher education, incorporating issues of diversity, as well as increased the number of teachers who are interested in critical language teaching. This situation is directly tied to teacher education, as is shown by the following excerpts (emphasis added):

4 Almost all research participants stated that the curriculum in their ELT undergraduate courses was content-focused.



1. **Although the coordinator of the course is very accessible** I still feel the curriculum for the course has a great deal of traditional paradigm. That is perceived when they describe the role of the professor towards the students, that is, the only one in class who has the knowledge, instead of that one who mediates it. I have the impression the **undergraduate program doesn't consider the students as autonomous people, full of experiences, and that they are also responsible for their knowledge building** (Teacher Cristina⁵).
2. **Most of the undergraduate curriculum is still focus on a traditional paradigm.** When I deal with teachers in teacher trainings, I try to insert **critical thinking into the discussions, through questions that are not usually present in Didactic Materials or in the curriculum elaboration.** I believe that, by doing this, it is possible to start some kind of change, but, in a nutshell, it seems to be still hard to use a more critical approach, once students and teachers in training still expect more traditional approaches, with very objective questions and 'right' answers (Teacher Maria).
3. In relation to the undergraduate curriculum, **I think the approach of teaching was through the traditional paradigm,** due to lack of flexibility in the choice of subjects to be attended, however, with respect to class I **think that is focused on a critical approach because in many of them criticism and reflection were present through debates, discussions and group dynamics** (Teacher Carlos).
4. If I consider the curriculum I can affirm it didn't offer me great professional perspectives related to diversity issues. I recently pursued my masters' degree which was about the critical literacies theories and teaching education and I now **I can say that my undergraduate in Letras was not focus on a critical perspective.** Of course we became more critical when we begin to study at university. It seems a natural process. But if I take in consideration the teaching approach **I had been in contact I never had something close to the critical approach.** I learned about those theories in my masters (Teacher Elaine).

In the previous excerpts, the ELT teachers seem to admit that the Brazilian higher education curriculum is still remarkably fragmented and unresponsive to a critical approach. All of them consider teaching to be teacher-centered: 'the undergraduate program doesn't consider the students as autonomous people.' This concept can, therefore, be described as a way of teaching in which students are seen as passive recipients of information. Consequently, teacher education programs may be expressly marked by the idea that the aim of training is merely to produce technically and linguistically competent teachers and to provide them with pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills. Monte Mor (2011) believes the restrictive goals of isolated practices in educational settings aim to reinforce values in which pedagogical efficiency and effectiveness are mediated by a technique-methodology competence. Such technicist thinking, according to Kleiman and Silva (1999), may enhance curriculum

5 Teachers' names in the excerpts are pseudonyms.



fragmentation. This view reveals that this type of curriculum may seek to homogenize students and does not value their individual differences.

Despite the dominant paradigm in the ELT curriculum, research participants have become more aware of the critical issue and have brought forth a potential prospect to rethink the curriculum. However, this new discussion still seems to be restricted to graduate courses ('I learned about those theories in my masters') or to pioneering teachers who have been implementing the new syllabi to encourage students to build knowledge ('I try to insert critical thinking into the discussions'). In this framework, the aim of the curriculum is dialogic teaching (FREIRE, 1970) as the result of a symmetrical relationship between teachers and students. This does not mean that power relations disappear, since people are socially situated. In other words, people represent the world according to how they stand in relation to sociopolitical issues.

As the fragmentation of the university curriculum still predominates, ELT teachers may feel lost in dealing with 'difference'. Within this framework, teacher education has become dissociated from the issue of 'othernesses', and perhaps this is one of the reasons why teachers avoid engaging with conflicts related to issues of 'difference'. The following excerpts are further examples of such dissociation (emphasis added):

1. Back in my undergraduate days, I guess the focus was more on people with disabilities. Diversity regarding gender, for example, didn't get any approach. Overall, **I don't think it prepared us in any particular way to deal with differences**. Classes were pretty teacher-centered, though some teachers tried to pass a different image of this (Teacher Eduardo).
2. In terms of diversity I never had a discipline or a learning program which brings this topic specifically. In fact **I had a lot of difficulties when I start to teach professionally**. My first professional experience was in Adults Education (EJA) context and when I was at university **I never had the chance to study or discuss about this kind of teaching modality. The students had a different background**. It was hard in the beginning but it was an amazing experience. I already have participated in courses and lectures about culture and gender but mainly in terms of gender I don't feel comfortable enough to bring those aspects in my classroom (Teacher Elaine).
3. Although I had some professors who were really open-minded to many kinds of discussions, **I can surely affirm that I wasn't prepared during my undergraduate course to deal with the diversity, neither cultural, ethnic and gender differences. At the time, we used to listen to many things being discussed on the media about inclusion, but my undergraduate colleagues and I weren't prepared for that**. The poor information I got was by reading some articles on the internet. So, definitely, I was prepared to deal with any cultural, ethnic and gender differences (Teacher Cristina).
4. Not really. When I took my undergraduate course the discussions about diversity **were still mainly about physical disabilities (deafness)**. We had specific classes to learn how to deal with these students, but discussions about the several types of diversity we **face nowadays were not the main topic** (Teacher Elis).



Teachers claim they acquired a fairly limited knowledge of how to deal with the issue of diversity in their classrooms. Eduardo states his concern about his lack of preparation for working with this topic: 'I don't think it prepared us in any particular way to deal with differences.' Elaine, in turn, states that at the beginning of her career she did not have a clear idea about how to negotiate with students from different social backgrounds; she declares she learned by herself. Cristina observes that a similar situation happened to her, and she heard about diversity through the media. In many cases, diversity is regarded as a way to deal with disabled students, as Elis reports.

To tackle the stigmatization of Afro-Brazilian culture, the Brazilian Ministry of Education has created policies to implement proposal guidelines which discuss ethnicity-related issues. However, diversity should not be limited to race or disability. Changing family composition, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. all are evident in the classroom. Teachers, on the other hand, do not know how to engage with these situations, given that their culture may be very different from that of students (ERICKSON, 1986/1990).

Given that many ELT courses are content-oriented, this seems to produce a neutral education where teachers are seen as carriers of knowledge who explain curriculum contents rationally (MONTE MÓR, 2000). However, as Fairclough (1992/2001) points out, apparent neutrality in traditional education is an illusion, revealing instead ideological acts in which teachers and students are encouraged to reinforce fixed values. Thus, this concept of education does not concern the development of a critical approach which questions the *modus operandi* and, consequently, the essentialist view of the world. Hence it seems natural that teachers face difficulties in managing an education which sees knowledge as relational, negotiated, and fluid (MOITA LOPES, 2003).

4.2 How do English teachers negotiate with the issue of difference in their educational setting?⁶

ELT educators are normally not trained to teach using a diversity- and critique-oriented approach; they tend to incorporate a content-focused discourse, thus helping to maintain the *status quo*. However, this does not mean teachers cannot bring this issue to the classroom, as can be seen in the following excerpts (emphasis added):

1. Nowadays, the institution where I work doesn't address those issues either. In meetings and teacher training sessions, these topics are never in the agenda of discussions. But teachers do face diversity in their classrooms and my impression is that they try to deal with **it as well as they can, and, in general, they succeed in it**. But not because they've been instructed in their formation neither do they receive any specific support or training

6 In Brazilian public schools, English lessons usually take place once or twice a week in 45-minute periods. Many teachers complain about the limited amount of time they have to develop learning as a social practice.



from the institution where they work. I would say they **do it instinctively and out of their passion for what they do and their love and respect for their students** (Teacher Eloisa).

2. What I see in these institutions, especially in the public ones, is that they have **problems to deal with differences because they find it hard to do a lot of things they consider important in the learning process**, like evaluate and assess students learning, if differences are taken into consideration. What I see is that they try to make everything the most homogeneous as possible, in order to try and be 'more fair' and accurate in evaluating the whole process. And when it comes to dealing with differences in the themes they address in class, **teachers usually avoid it because they think that grammar and functions are more important than discussing social issues** – what, in their opinion, may be a waste of the class time, since students usually have a few hours of English classes per week in these institutions (Teacher Marcia).
3. I have clear in my mind that these situations are becoming more common every day. But actually **it has not been my focus since I do not feel prepared to deal with diversities**, so I **have to try harder to prepare my lessons focusing on differences** (Teacher Elis).
4. I do believe diversities are a rich resource for our classes. We can learn a lot from them in terms of language, behavior, ideology and world. I am fond of the Multiliteracies paradigm, and according to that we **HAVE to bring those issues to the classroom**, otherwise we are not dealing with Multiliteracies. Once the idea is to form people ready to critically interfere (or not) in their world, I believe it's only possible **by bringing diversities into the classroom**. During my last English class, for example, **I showed them some short videos with love stories. Two of them had a gay couple**. I also showed some comic strips portraying the difference between a woman asking a man to light her cigarette and another with a man asking a man to light his cigarette. We had a great discussion about that. So, answering how I deal with diversities, I **always bring them into my classroom**. I listen to different points of view, **give them the opportunity to talk and always have a reading suggestion if I don't know how to answer something** (Teacher Cristina).

Eloisa describes her school setting as a place where diversity is not the focus of her teaching. However, more and more classrooms include students with different backgrounds, and teachers are forced to face this challenge. Without academic support, teachers have to learn intuitively how they should work with their students. According to Eloisa, teachers may succeed because of their commitment to teaching. Eloisa seems to believe that committed teachers are concerned with their students' learning, so one may deduce from her comment that such teachers may overcome the problem. Nevertheless, non-critical engagement may encourage a view of stability in social relationships. Rhetorically, teachers may acknowledge differences exist but, due to the lack of clarity about this issue, they may simply ignore them. Thus, we may have a model of hegemonic education which communicates teachers' profession as a mission. In this sense, teachers' actions are justified in the name of developing relationships with their students. In



other words, teachers need to be passionate educators rather than critical thinkers. Consequently, they may advocate a 'soft' attitude towards the 'difference' issue, ignoring political and social implications.

Marcia considers teachers' inability to deal with diversity at school and why this issue is directly related to them being unable to talk about it. She also observes that ELT teachers usually focus only on the target language. She suggests that teachers do not seem to strive to contribute to equity in students' learning experiences. This inability to consider diversity leads some educators to ignore the fact that the school setting is populated by individuals who may differ from conventional norms (JESUS, 2012). Pedagogical practices that might reflect upon these differences and their social and cultural effects are not permitted. Thus, the school system tends to encourage hegemonic standards to spread the homogenization of teaching. However, this situation is constantly being questioned and shows that social boundaries may not be entirely controlled. Naturally, teachers do not know how to embrace the issue of 'difference'. They are accustomed to promoting a discourse that may neglect diversity with the goal of avoiding any action which may change well-established rules (JESUS, 2012).

Elis assumes that she does not have enough confidence to deal with diversity ('I do not feel prepared to deal with diversities.'). However, she looks for ways to address students' differences ('so I have to try harder to prepare my lessons focusing on differences.'). On the other hand, without reflections on diversity, teachers may intuit that they need to address the issue. This intuition is probably linked to the implementation of National Curriculum Parameters (BRASIL, 1998), official guidelines which have drawn much attention to the question of diversity. Seminars, conferences, and meetings have spread over Brazil to discuss this issue. Despite all the fruitful discussions, there are still only a few practical implementations of activities which embrace the issue of diversity in Brazilian English language classrooms. Consequently, intuition-guided teachers might promote a discourse that can reinforce stereotyped images about minorities. This may lead students to be silenced and to take on an assimilation attitude so that they can be more conventionally accepted (JESUS, 2012). In some cases, teachers may reinforce symbolic violence (BOURDIEU, 1989/2012) in the classroom as a way to legitimize hegemonic discourse. For example, in a recent research, Jesus (2012) draws attention to the clear difficulties that minority boys face when they do not behave appropriately. Teachers' strategy usually involves making gender dichotomy visible to reinforce hegemonic positions and legitimize the norms of conventional, gender-related cultural ideas.

In excerpt 4, Cristina implies that diversity enriches our understanding of the world, defending that she is affiliated with multiliterate epistemology: 'I am fond of the Multiliteracies paradigm, and according to that we HAVE to bring those issues to the classroom.' For this reason, she tries to create opportunities through which she can implement topics that problematize this issue. In this perspective, students are encouraged to see language as a social practice. Teaching a language, in turn, is not seen



as a series of functional grammar modules, but as an activity that takes into consideration a multicultural competence according to which language is not transparent and carries ideological components which collaborate to construct reality. It is understandable that through language we choose the way we name the world around us, we highlight 'differences', and we create symbols of unity and collective identification that represent voices we want to express (MONTE MOR, 2008).

Despite some of the teachers' complaints about their lack of academic preparation to cope with diversity, there has been progress in recent years in relation to preparing teachers to meet difference in some contexts. Consequently, some university educators now have greater awareness of the need for student teachers to be responsive to the issue of 'difference'. However, this awareness seems to be more related to individual practices of some teacher trainers, as can be seen in the following excerpts (emphasis added):

1. I tried to bring questions to class that allowed the students to see **the intercultural issue is not easy to deal with**. I guess I was very lucky to have an engaging group of students who were willing to talk about diversity. They prepared their seminars based on complex and productive discussions **on ethnic and gender differences that I was not even expecting to see**. They really surprised me! What I keep thinking about this experience and asking myself is what about if this group of students didn't want to talk about the hidden complexities in the discussions of diversity? **Or to what extent am I responsible to raise these issues in class?** (Teacher Marcela).
2. As much as possible, I try to include cultural, ethnic and gender differences in my language classes. As I teach Phonetics and English, most semesters, I believe it's important to use different authentic **materials portraying people from different backgrounds, in order to understand that we are different from one another, and that we shouldn't consider somebody better than another**. I also believe it's necessary to **analyze what textbooks and other resources show regarding these differences** (Teacher Carolina).
3. I try to do it as much as possible, and to be careful not to take a militant stance on it. I **focus more on cultural and ethnic differences because they seem to be more relevant in my context**. And perhaps because gender differences don't come up so frequently in discussions and texts. In that case, I might try to make up for this deficiency by introducing the topic myself, but I usually allow my students to choose their own topics for the classes and sometimes gender difference comes to the fore. In any case, **I try not to be patronizing and allow them to see difference as something to be seriously addressed and not just respected or, worse still, ignored** (Teacher Joana).

In excerpt 1, Marcela reveals her worries about intercultural issues ('the intercultural issue is not easy to deal with'). It seems she focuses on cultural and linguistic differences. Nevertheless, her students bring to the classroom questions related to gender and ethnicity in order to promote discussion. She was surprised



and satisfied when these questions emerged ('on ethnic and gender differences that I was not even expecting to see. They really surprised me!'). Although she appears to doubt that her duty is to raise this type of debate in her classroom, as an educator she can provide her students with strategies to deal with diversity. This point also reveals that our educational system maintains teachers in a position of fragility when it comes to 'difference'. They are given little or no support or supervision regarding this question, considering that they are normally trained with a focus on transmitting theoretical content (MONTE MÓR, 2011).

Carolina, in turn, strives to include 'cultural, ethnic and gender differences' in her lessons. She searches through textbooks or didactic materials which demonstrate that we are all different: 'materials portraying people from different backgrounds, in order to understand that we are different from one another.' However, it is necessary but not sufficient to show that we are different; we need to rethink what it means to be different in terms of power relations. Carolina may reinforce a multicultural sensitivity model of acceptance of other cultures without actually questioning cultural hegemony. This view may enhance binary poles (masculine/feminine, black/white, canonical/non-canonical culture) which maintain the logic of domination and exclusion. Therefore, educators may ignore the fact that even the hegemonic discourse of homogenization is not factual, but only constructed from a social and historical basis (MENEZES DE SOUSA, 2011). To understand this issue, we need to bear in mind that identities are discursively characterized. From this point of view, it is clear that human relationships are mediated by constant power struggles that are not always transparent or obvious to those involved (MONTE MOR, 2008). It is also clear that the legitimacy of discourse does not occur randomly, but is the result of a game with hegemonic rules, ideologically constructed to show how we should behave and move in our social theatre.

In the last excerpt, Joana affirms that she worries about cultural and ethnic issues, but stresses that she takes care not to act as a militant. She does not address gender differences because this topic is not visible in her classroom. However, other studies (MOITA LOPES, 2003; JESUS, 2013) have shown that teachers do not clearly realize there are a plurality of genders in the school setting. This can also be understood as a consequence of little debate inside graduate courses, suggesting that more attention needs to be given to teachers constructing educational practices which are culturally sensitive (ERICKSON, 1996) to gender issues, for example. Maybe this is a reason why Joana thinks this question never arises in her classroom. In this situation, we always need to take into account that teacher training is based on an educational model which is remarkably fragmented and unresponsive to diversity. On the other hand, in a critical literacy that strives for difference, teachers are invited to deconstruct norms regarding gender, ethnicity, culture, and language.



Final remarks

In this paper we have discussed ELT teachers' perceptions about diversity and curriculum in their undergraduate courses and how they have been dealing with this issue in their daily educational routine. The data was generated by a questionnaire sent to teachers via Facebook. To support my idea, I used a critical literacy framework. These theoretical perspectives are particularly interesting for questioning normalization and contradictions in ELT teachers' discourse.

The questionnaire attempted to capture teachers' perceptions about diversity and teaching. There was a general belief that teacher education courses still focus on content rather than on production of meaning. Teachers reported they are worried about their preparation to deal with diversity (ethnic, gender and cultural). In spite of this, they meet these challenges intuitively. Some teachers who are aware of diversity have attempted to design lessons with topics which embrace questions about 'difference'.

Given that this interpretative research used only one instrument to analyze data, it may be problematic to provide generalizable conclusions. This particular group of participants may not reflect other professional contexts. However, this research does provide insights into current ELT programmes. Firstly, a single subject on diversity, such as Sign Language or Ethics, may not enable teachers to fully appreciate the issue at hand. This may be one of the reasons why many teachers fail or feel insecure about addressing this topic. Secondly, teachers carry beliefs about what diversity means. At university, their training is strictly content-focused, devoid of reflection on the question of diversity in the ELT context. They would not even have had much chance to perceive the world as marked for cultural and social 'differences'. There is a significant focus on linguistic competence rather than on political awareness in the educational setting. This view of teaching seems to be so rooted in our culture that it is very difficult to undergo change. It would be desirable if all curriculum components were consistently reformulated to a genuine appreciation of diversity and if such knowledge were applied in the classroom. Without constant and appropriate discussions in ELT programmes, it will be difficult for future teachers to successfully deal with changes required for embracing diversity in our world.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE TEACHER CURRICULUM

Instructions: Please answer the following questions which address your experiences about language teacher curriculum. Remember this questionnaire will be kept confidential, and will be not linked you in anyway. Thank your for your collaboration.

1. How do you describe your undergraduate curriculum in terms of its teaching approach? Do you think it is focused on a critical or a traditional paradigm?
2. How can you analyse your undergraduate course in terms of diversity? Do you think it prepared you to deal with any cultural, ethnic and gender differences?
3. How does your school deal with differences?
4. How do your teachers used to deal with cultural, ethnic and gender differences in their classrooms?
5. How do you deal with diversities? Do you prepare lessons with focus on cultural, ethnic and gender differences?