Building an EFL Curriculum for Young Learners: A Brazilian experience

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Abstract
EFL curriculum construction is a process usually carried out by educational authorities. In this paper, attempt has been done to describe the experience of building a local curriculum for early English language learning in public schools in Brazil, with the participation of school teachers, university professors and educational authorities. Both, the resulting curriculum guide and the process that led to its final format are discussed, along with consideration on its implementation in a context that lacks clear educational policies toward the teaching of a foreign language to young learners. A sociocultural approach to learning was adopted as the theoretical framework, translated into several principles that guided the suggested syllabus: playful and meaningful learning, interdisciplinary knowledge construction, interactive tasks, intercultural awareness, spiral syllabus, whole person and whole language perspectives. The document, jointly constructed, was validated by the community of practitioners, thus presenting ideas that resonate with their practical experience. This “grassroots” approach to curriculum design addresses the emerging need to introduce English at early stages of schooling, due to the global pressure for access to the world that functions through that language.

Key Words: Brazilian Experience, EFL Curriculum, Young Learners, Local curriculum
Sociocultural Approach

Suggested Citation:

1 The Project “Construindo o currículo de língua inglesa para escolas públicas de Londrina” (Building the ELT curriculum for schools in Londrina) that is reported here had the collaboration of 14 participants, who, for two years and a half, reflected on the issues addressed in this paper.
1. Introduction

There has been a worldwide trend to introduce English in the early stages of education as a result of the economic pressure for higher levels of proficiency in that language (Graddol 2006). In a globalized world, where technology facilitates oral and written interaction and the job market requires a competent command of this language, local communities feel pressured to develop this competence by starting teaching it in the early school years (Enever 2011; Garton, Copland, Burns 2011).

In Brazil, where compulsory education in a foreign language starts in grade 5 (i.e. when children are around 10 years old), this demand was quickly answered by the private sector through the inclusion of English in the curricula as a way of attracting anxious parents who want their children to be competitive in the future job market. However, this inclusion took place much earlier than it is required by law, when children are enrolled at “educação infantil” (4-5 years of age).

The public sector, however, has been slower in reacting to this kind of pressure, although, more recently, the local governments have developed several activities to meet this demand. This is the case of Londrina, a city in Southern Brazil, where, in 2008, some county schools started to offer one 50-minute class per week to children enrolled in grade 4, via a project called “Londrina Global”. Since, legally, the teaching of English is not compulsory at this level and different jurisdictional guidelines apply to city and state education, this situation created the need for better interaction between these two educational management bodies. In the absence of such formal spaces, a community-based project was designed to bring together the main stakeholders in order to build a coherent curriculum that could promote better integration with the subsequent years of schooling.

It is important to note that although there are state guidelines for the teaching of foreign languages from grade 5 onwards (which is not the case of earlier stages), teachers are not required to follow them strictly, and there is some autonomy in syllabus definition and implementation.

In order to open the dialogue between these two educational management levels, the researchers proposed a community-based project. This curriculum project, which began in 2011, brought together university professors, foreign language pedagogical coordinators at the local and state levels, university students in the beginning of their teacher education process and teachers of English to young learners, totaling 10 participants. During regular meetings, the group drafted a guide that was validated in 2013 by school teachers in a meeting with 80 participants.

In this paper, the emergence of the government project that created the need for a joint syllabus for English in elementary schools has been first contextualized, and, secondly, the experience of building the curriculum within a community of practitioners has been presented.

2. ‘Londrina Global’ Project

The project ‘Londrina Global’, initiated by the local government in response to the pressure for competition in a global market (Gimenez, Tanaca, Peres, and Oliveira forthcoming) was proposed with the overall goal of introducing the English language in
the curriculum of municipal public schools. At that time, scholars were requested to cooperate with the Secretariat of Education team in developing specific objectives for learning as well as to provide guidance for school teachers who would be in charge of the pedagogical activities. It is important to note that the initiative was not supported by a careful action plan and a few similar experiences. Most of the initial steps were possible due to the enthusiasm and commitment of the team of educators who asked for external help from the university and commissioned teaching materials to be locally produced (Ramos, Tonelli 2008) according to the following objectives:

- To help children develop a taste for the English language;
- To provide an innovative communication experience;
- To minimize students’ difficulties in learning English in the transitional period between the 4th and the 5th grades.

Due to budgetary restrictions and the lack of qualified teachers to work at this level, the offer of English was implemented in the great majority of schools (85 per cent of the total, reaching about 5,500 children). Teacher education became an important strategy to guarantee that the children would be exposed to the language and develop according to the goals mentioned above.

One of the concerns during the partial implementation phase was related to the consequence generated by this unequal situation, in which some children would be in contact with the foreign language and others would not. In such situation, question was obvious—what would exacerbate the heterogeneity in 5th grade classrooms. Additionally, project managers had to deal with the lack of curriculum guidelines. Considering that, in Brazil, official documents that regulate/guide the teaching and the development of English teachers to young learners are non-existent (Tonelli, Cristovão 2010). The documents that could eventually provide guidelines for these educational practices for the first years of schooling in Brazil are the national curriculum parameters for children education, literacy teaching guidelines for 6-year-old children and the guidelines for the 9-year curriculum. Since none of them makes any reference to a foreign language, it was necessary to design a syllabus and Curriculum Guide from scratch, which was done through a collaborative project of a community of practitioners, formed in 2011.

3. Collaborative Curriculum Design

3.1 Members and strategies

The community of practitioners (Wenger 1998) gathered around the objective of writing up the curriculum guide included members with different degrees of expertise in the field. Some were university researchers with theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching English to young learners (TEYL), others were educational authorities in charge of organizing this level of teaching but without experience in TEYL, and others were directly involved in schools, teaching children as young as 5. Discussions involved learning and sharing of experiences. Tasks were divided among the members, and different parts of the guide were drafted by those who felt more comfortable with the topic under construction. Their suggestions were then brought to the meeting and the text was validated by the participants. During each meeting, the contributions were shared with the team, which
helped to improve and clarify the remaining doubts and make the text more readable. This
dynamics provided, besides the active participation of those involved in the Guide writing
process, moments of reflection from different standpoints, bringing to the group
representative developments on the concepts inherent to the process of TEYIL, and on the
importance of drawing a document that could guide this pedagogical activity.
A calendar of meetings was established, and, during the meetings, both theoretical and
practical issues were discussed, especially the contents that should be included in each
phase of the early education years and how they could be organized.
One of the group’s decisions was related to the nature of the document which had to
provide some guidance while leaving some room for flexible adaptations, depending on
the different educational contexts. We opted for a reader-friendly document, written in
Portuguese, with 45 pages. A version of the guide is available at www.uel.br/eventos/epic.
The group’s understanding of the curriculum was that an organizing document could be
helpful in indicating the syllabus sequence for each year of study, avoiding un-justified
repetition, and thus preventing students who had already studied English in the initial
years of schooling from being bored. However, the project participants were also aware
that the suggested syllabus would have to be re-contextualized in specific schools, since
there was great diversity in the curricula across the school system. More importantly, it
would have to make sense to the school teachers.

3.2 The Curriculum Guide
The Curriculum Guide is organized into 7 sections. The introduction gives an overview of
the reasons for creating the document and the process involved in its development.
The second section, entitled “The learning of a foreign language by children”, makes
reference to the main official documents for the teaching of foreign languages in Brazil,
from grade 5 onwards, with the objective of contextualizing the proposal within the
existing guidelines for teaching children at the referred school levels.
The document was written taking into consideration that English language teaching must
be based on theoretical-methodological guidelines which define objectives, pedagogic
procedures and the desired learning outcomes. Vygotsky’s (1987) sociocultural approach
was adopted as the guiding theoretical framework, following the understanding that
human development occurs through an interaction between the individual and the
environment, the physical and social world in addition to cultural and interpersonal
dimensions. Therefore, it was recommended that TEYIL should involve the learner in a
countext rich in experiences in the foreign language, in which the teacher tries to create lots
of opportunities for the use of language in the school’s everyday activities, respecting the
learners’ individual differences and offering a fun environment. This vision is connected
to sociocultural theories of human development and anticipates that learning mediation
must make use of several cultural products that “carry” the target language, including
maps, games, songs, rhymes, drawings, electronic games, among others, making possible
the continuous appropriation of the language contained in these tools. Such activities
involve the interrelation between transmission, negotiation and transformation, during
which the teacher acts as mediator and students start increasing their responsibility and
autonomy gradually. From this perspective, learning can be evidenced by the participation of learners in the activities and not necessarily in their capacity to reproduce contents immediately.

In the third and fourth sections, the main goals for the teaching of English to children, especially in the kindergarten and in the early years of schooling are presented. It was decided to make explicit the principles that guided our selection of contents and approach, detailing each of them with examples.

**Principle 1: Playful learning**

Fun activities such as playing with other children, playing games, singing songs, listening to stories, drawing, for instance, are common in the children’s universe and they foster children’s participation in the English teaching and learning process and their development as foreign language speakers.

**Principle 2: Meaningful learning**

Significant learning refers to the way new information integrates with what the learner already knows and makes sense to their reality. For example, the contents to be explored in the English classes could be adapted taking into account the student’s previous knowledge. In this way, the child would learn by doing. The child can, for instance, produce a birthday card and give it to a friend or prepare a shopping list with items he or she will use to prepare a meal.

As it is understood that every single moment is a unique opportunity to make the learning process closer to the child’s reality. In that sense, the teacher can use daily situations to teach the language: if the pupil comes and asks the teacher to tie his/her shoes using the mother tongue, the teacher can, while tying the child’s shoes, repeat the sentence in English. The same example applies to when the child asks for water or to go to the toilet.

**Principle 3: Spiral syllabi**

A spiral curriculum organization allows the retaking and expansion of contents in different learning stages. The content explored in one class can become a pathway to deeper knowledge. The teacher can use the classroom routine to teach new contents and expand them in a progressive manner. A good example of such principle would be exploring the weather with the pupils: in every single class, this theme can be selected and new elements can be introduced. The teacher can, in one class, show the children how to say the weather is sunny, the next class the teacher asks the same question “What is the weather like today?” but show them a picture of a cloudy day. By giving them different examples of weather the children master different ways of describing the it what can help them to review and apply the content in a non-linear way.

**Principle 4: Whole language experience**

To develop as a foreign language user, the student must interact with the language in its totality and not only with isolated words and grammar structures. This principle promotes the usage of chunks of language without being explicitly taught. The objective is to place the children in situations in which they can be in contact with the language within real contexts and, as a consequence, they will become familiar not only with isolated words but with expressions and sentences.
**Principle 5: Intercultural awareness**

Foreign language learning contributes to the development of the awareness that language is a cultural practice and promotes a contrast between the learner’s culture with other cultures associated to the language being learned. One possible way to explore such principle would be using stories or fables to have the children reflect upon their own culture: a plot which brings concepts of good and evil can be used in order to show them how such ideas differ depending on each culture. It is also important to show the foreign language learners that different national celebrations are related to a certain culture so the children can have a way to compare and contrast.

**Principle 6: Whole person learning**

The learning of a foreign language is part of the children’s integral development and includes their affective, cognitive and social development. Instead of seeing the child as just a language learner, the idea is to create opportunities for children to live good experiences with the foreign language, thus promoting a positive attitude. The tasks should involve emotions, reasoning and social skills.

**Principle 7: Interaction**

The child develops as an individual by having opportunities to interact in a foreign/additional language. Language learning is a social experience and the children have to be requested to engage with other classmates (pair work, group work, whole class activities). Tasks like “treasure hunt” and playground games can foster this kind of interaction.

**Principle 8: Interdisciplinarity**

Normally, the English language teacher works separately from the class teacher. It is important to promote the integration of the language learning with other school subjects and the contents can be planned according to themes or projects. The children can, for instance, learn the numbers and make calculations in conjunction with the math tasks assigned by the class teacher. Or learn the vocabulary related to the environment, such as ‘river’, ‘forest’, ‘woods’, ‘park’ in tandem with the notions of geography. It is important to highlight the fact that teaching a foreign language in an interdisciplinary perspective means thinking about the students' reality, meeting their needs considering their life contexts and experiences. It also demands a constant questioning by the teacher concerning what contents should be taught and why. It is also desirable to consider what are the relationships and the contributions of the contents being taught in different disciplines that can to be addressed in an integrated way. By using since a story-based class the teacher can bring the personal context of the students to a more ease, interesting and meaningful learning.

Section 5 of the Guide presents some methodological procedures and the sixth section deals with the importance of the learning process evaluation. It is suggested that feedback to the families can be given by using a portfolio. In the last section of the curriculum guide, a syllabus according to the following expected learning outcomes has been suggested:
Table 1: Expected learning outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT’S EXPECTED OUTCOMES FOR EACH LEARNING PHASE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 – 5 years of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7 years of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-9 years of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10 years of age</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. The Guide and its validation

One of the essential characteristics of the Guide construction process was the collaborative effort in which participants could contribute with their area of expertise and professional experience. According to Mainardes (2011), when left out of the discussion process, teachers and professionals involved in Teaching Practice may consider documents such as curriculum guides irrelevant, especially if they disagree with the theoretical principles underlying the curriculum proposals or do not feel confident in implementing them. For this reason, it was decided to submit a preliminary version of the Guide during the 1st Meeting of Teachers of English to Young Learners, with the participation of teachers and professionals from Londrina and other regions of the states of Paraná and Mato Grosso. The main objective of the meeting was to promote a discussion about the Guide. To do so, each participant received, in advance, a version of the document via email. During the meeting, participants were allocated in groups with a moderator and a rapporteur who brought the comments to a plenary. Based on a questionnaire also prepared by the community of practitioners who proposed the Guide, the participants’ opinions about that document were collected. The guiding questions were:

1. Does the guide provide support to the teacher in reorganizing his/her work?
2. Does the guide help with the implementation of English teaching in his/her reality?
3. Does the guide lead teachers to reflect on their classroom work?
4. Does the guide allow for the establishment of relationships with practice?
5. Is there coherence between the theoretical and methodological principles?
6. Would the contents table help with the organization of the teacher’s work?
7. Is the organization by year in accordance with the children’s age level?
8. In your opinion, are contents significant and adequate to the indicated age level?
9. In your opinion, does the document fail to address anything important?
10. Would you exclude anything from any section of the document?
11. Is the language in the document clear?
12. Do you think you would need special training to be able to work with the line proposed by the document?

Overall, professors and other participants of the meeting reported that the Guide would contribute a lot to TEYL. The main point raised by them was that the Guide would be helpful especially to teachers with little or no experience. In addition, they emphasized that the Guide would improve and strengthen the work of teachers in the context of implementing English teaching to children and that such a document could provide support to their pedagogical practice.

As for the proposed syllabus, participants said that it could lead to a more harmonious work among teachers, guaranteeing that all students would go through the same teaching process. On the other hand, they also pointed out that it would be important to allow flexibility in its implementation, giving the diversity of the English language offer in the region. In relation to the need to prepare teachers to work with the proposed document, participants highlighted the importance of offering in-service training to help them develop a deeper understanding of the theoretical assumptions presented in the Guide. They also suggested the desirability of having a network of teachers working in this field in order to share experience, methodologies and teaching materials.

Another area the teachers felt lacking in their expertise was the improvement of language skills. Therefore, they suggested the Guide included information about the ideal professional profile needed, i.e., which linguistic skills, theoretical, methodological and cultural knowledge would be required in order to have successful TEYL.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between local and global in TEFL can be exemplified by the experience reported in this paper about the collective construction of a curriculum guide for TEYL. Following the international trend towards increasing inclusion of English at early stages of schooling, the researchers’ experience in Brazil has shown that this kind of pressure has been forcing teachers to make decisions about the curriculum. The project reported in this paper exemplifies the attempt to create a bottom-up process, by allowing school teachers to have a say in the writing up of a document together with the educational authorities.

The final curriculum guide incorporates practitioners’ voices and subscribes to a sociocultural view of learning. The purpose of TEYL in the researchers’ context is to provide learners with meaningful language practices, thus allowing them to develop as whole human beings. Rather than just conforming to the job market requirements for language proficiency, the aim of this study is to instil positive attitudes towards English and help make the transition from primary to secondary school levels.
About the Authors:

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