

The Role of SESC RJ Regarding the Change of Perspective of English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The English language is a mandatory subject at Compulsory Education all around Brazil. Still, not only didactic material and additional resources, but also teaching methodologies face need for updating and improvement due to its lack of correlation among its content, students' interest and the environment they belong to. The lack of contextualization between the lessons and students reality, the excessive exposure to grammatical rules and methodologies that focus on repetitions do not prepare the students neither to their professional life nor to their social relationships, circumstances that lead them to demotivation. Therefore, SESC RJ (Social Service of Commerce of Rio de Janeiro) pedagogic team perceived the need for developing educational materials that could connect teaching practices, keep the students on the center of the learning process, motivate the spontaneous use of the foreign language while valuing aspects of our own culture as well as the foreign ones. In order to make the changes mentioned above possible, we were inspired by works and knowledge from authors like Paulo Freire, Acácia Kuenzer and Claire Kramsch. At the end of this study, we will point out how foreign language learning and culture appropriation are intertwined.

Keywords: SESC RJ, Foreign Language, Learning, Didactic Material, Culture

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Introduction

SESC was created in 1946, in a post war context, with the objective to contribute to the human and economic development in Brazil through high quality social educational actions. Set in all regions of the country, SESC represents a great social protection network, as it provides to Brazilian citizens services regarding education, health care, art, sports, culture and social tourism. In Rio de Janeiro, the institution holds 22 Units, 5 hotels Units and 2 restaurants that assist trade workers. Where there are no permanent facilities, SESC's services are offered in the 12 Mobile Units which provide access to reading material (BiblioSesc), dental care (OdontoSesc), women health care such as mammography and preventive exams with referral to the public health system (SESC Saúde Mulher).

In addition to the initiatives presented above, SESC RJ also carries out actions to fight hunger through Mesa Brasil, a food bank that, in partnership with other institutions, collects products suitable for consumption that would not be marketed and destines them to the population that is in a situation of food insecurity. Consequently, it avoids food waste in a country where, currently, more than 14 million people do not eat regularly.

Focusing on human development and social transformation, all actions carried out by SESC RJ follow an educational bias, in accordance with one of the best known teachings of Freire (1979, p.74) "Education does not transform the world, education transforms people and people transform the world." Based on this philosophy of work, the area of Education at SESC RJ proposes innovative and networked actions in the constant search to rethink its practices and stimulate the critical sense within a national and world reality of inequalities, indifference and conformism.

No one can be in the world, with one world and with others in a neutral way. I can't be in the world of gloves in my hands just checking it out. Accommodation in me is only the way to insertion, which implies decision, choice, intervention in reality. (FREIRE, 1996, p.77).

In sight of the facts exposed, we can guarantee that SESC RJ's commitment is not only to form, but look at the students' strengths, motivate them to understand and to follow a constantly evolving world; besides, to promote their insertion in society as a citizen who seeks freedom, equality conditions and opportunities for all, initiating this process through the communities where they reside.

Rio de Janeiro is a city with broad number of social issues. For this reason, SESC RJ's Education actions seek to find ways to face the most diverse realities through educational projects such as: Arte, Ciência & Tecnologia (actions aimed at promoting scientific education, cultural appropriation and reflections on the impacts of technology on education and society), Infâncias ((Early childhood education and activities on the schools extra-curricular shift through differentiated methodology and commitment to their rights and children leadership, and Pensamentos e Linguagens (recognition of our own culture, as well as, acknowledge of a diversity of cultures through the teaching of foreign languages and mother tongue).

Pensamento e Linguagens

This area of SESC RJ Education proposes several actions through courses, workshops and events in foreign language and mother tongue that has as main objective the fluency in foreign languages from relevant discussions on the social, cultural, political and economic scenario in which we are all inserted.

Pensamento e Linguagens area is in 13 units of SESC RJ, with 73 classes and a team of 24 instructors. Currently, almost 700 people are enrolled in free of charge foreign language activities, and, in July 2022, more than 640 vacancies were opened for language courses. SESC's foreign language classes are also in 3 public schools in the State of Rio de Janeiro involving a total of 11 classes. We can say that the partnership between SESC RJ and the Education Department of the State of Rio de Janeiro in offering language teaching represents the desire of both parties in changing the perspective in language teaching.

The actions ensure numerous opportunities to use foreign languages autonomously and in real contexts. We may use Aulas Passeio as an example; the students are invited to visit tourist regions of Rio de Janeiro and, while in the tour, which is carried out by a guide tourism speaking in a foreign language, we encourage the appreciation of cultural centers and the discussion of social issues identified during the trip.

Another highlight concerns the on-site and virtual exhibitions, in three languages that allow students of public schools and visitors to recognize their culture and the culture of the other through historical contexts of the language.

As a methodological tool, we also have Web series that portrait the life of two Brazilian characters who experience the challenges of learning the language through themes of our daily lives.

Meetings and festivals, bring together students enrolled at SESC RJ language courses, as well as, students and teachers from the state public school system of Rio de Janeiro that use SESC's materials and training activities, to experience cultural diversity, food and games from target-language countries.

Furthermore, continuous training activities for education professionals and seminars that are intended to emphasize the importance of dialogues and studies regarding education in Brazil. We understand that the actions of Pensamentos e Linguagens bring, not only the benefits of teaching a foreign language seeking the inclusion in the labor market, but sensitize the student so that they pass from a simple follower of cultural practices to a protagonist individual who thinks, reflects, unwinds to build new social practices.

Foreign Language Teaching at SESC RJ

The foreign language teaching in Brazil have been carried out through decontextualized lessons focused on grammar and translations. The main concern was on training students to meet the demands of the labor market, ignoring the positive impact that learning a foreign language can have on the personal growth of citizens, mainly those who, for living in social vulnerability condition cannot pay for specialized language schools.

Compulsory Education in Brazil takes an average of 15 years, which is very positive considering that in the United States of America, the average duration of Compulsory Education is 12 years. However, English language teaching is mandatory only in the last 9 years of schooling and the lessons are carried out through two weekly classes of fifty minutes each. If we consider the number of multinational companies in Brazilian territory, besides the fact that Brazil is a country of great touristic demands, we easily understand the reason why having fluency in languages is a great advantage over those who cannot communicate in a foreign language. Therefore, in search of better job opportunities, many students turn to language schools that charge them for tuition and didactic material. In addition, it is observed that the minor part of the population that can pay for a language courses, cannot, after completing the course, use the foreign language to talk about relevant and significant topics for their daily lives, which leads them to personal development.

Thus, faced the reality presented above, which is how the mission of SESC RJ is reinforced: “Promote socio-educational actions that contribute to the social well-being and quality of life of workers in the trade of goods, services and tourism, their families and the community, for a fair and democratic society.” (Departamento Nacional, 2010).

The initiative to offer foreign languages lessons - English and Spanish - free of charge to the public with a family income of up to 3 national minimum wages or practice values far below the market, was the first step taken by the institution, specifically, by the Education Management, to studies regarding the change of perspective in the teaching of foreign languages. The goal was no longer just to provide lessons to citizens who could not afford language schools and teaching materials, but to consolidate language teaching at SESC RJ as a differentiated offer of courses, workshops and significant activities that reflect the reality of students, most of whom living in the communities surrounding SESC units.

All in all and keeping sight of promoting experiences and prior knowledge, thus ensuring that important issues such as respect, politics, inequality, prejudice and culture can be discussed in classrooms.

The purpose is to enhance Brazilian culture while motivating them to get to know the most diverse cultural realities in countries where English and Spanish are native languages. According to Kramsch (1998, p. 17), “the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share.”

The great differential of teaching a foreign language at SESC RJ is due to two biases: didactic material and teaching practice. The didactic material consists of three books - basic, intermediate and advanced levels. They were designed by the institution's pedagogical team and are available to all students of SESC's language courses at no cost. As mentioned earlier, the decision to develop the teaching material came from the perception that the books used by that time did not reflect the reality of the students and, consequently, had a negative impact on the interaction, precisely because the groups did not feel represented by images and situations presented on those pages. The first and most important decision was to structure units based on Content-Based Learning.

“Content-Based Learning (CBI) is a teaching method that emphasizes learning about a topic rather than learning about the language itself.” (Davies, 2003). In other words, after identifying the main subjects of interest to the students enrolled in the foreign language

courses at SESC RJ, the pedagogical team structured the material so that the focus of the classes contemplates significant sets of themes. CBI is not a recently discovered methodology, but it is not very common in languages books and this method is applied, it assumes a very general aspect, which does not praise different generations and lower social levels. At SESC RJ, texts, podcasts, videos and other resources are tools to motivate and stimulate interaction based on the knowledge they already have, regardless of the mistakes and successes in the linguistic structure, after all, the first moment of the class concerns to exploring the themes. Then, in a subtle and planned way, the grammatical structures and vocabulary are introduced to the students - young, adults and elderly.

We believe that, developing the didactic material based on CBI goes against everything that has been offered to students up to then. When we move the focus away from elitist themes, grammatical structures and specific vocabulary to focus on the use of the language in a context in which these students could really see themselves, we reached our goal to make the learning process happen as a consequence of interaction, in addition to making it less complicated and more meaningful.

It is common to choose materials, usually books, produced in other countries, unrelated, therefore, to the reality of the Brazilian student, but focused on the reality of other countries. As a result, not only the target language, but also the culture of that language are shaped as elements without any connection with the objective and motivation of those who manipulate them. (KUENZER, 2000, p.114)

Another differential of what SESC RJ does is regarding the teaching practice. The only guideline that cannot be disregarded concerns the use of the communicative approach. Another differential of what SESC RJ does is regarding teaching practice. The only guideline that cannot be disregarded concerns the use of communicative approach.

After all, all efforts made by the institution to provide lessons that are different from what is made in schools and traditional language courses, focuses on helping students achieve the necessary fluency in the language so that they can search for new employment opportunities and personal development. Therefore, although all skills are worked on in class, oral practice is the main focus.

The other guidelines given to instructors must be interpreted in the light of their students and their needs. Hence, the importance of permanent training, since the professional needs to have a variety of strategies to fulfill the mission of SESC. For the same reason we do not have a Teacher's Guide, we have replaced it with dialogues and collective development of educational resource. Within this context of freedom to lead the lessons, instructors decide which perspectives to explore further and which extra resources to use to provide a complete learning experience for students.

Considering the results of this foreign language teaching - 85% retention of students annually and the expressive number of students who enroll in courses through other students recommendations - the institution's work expanded the boundaries of the units and reached the Schools of the State of Rio de Janeiro. The partnership between SESC RJ and the State Department of Education began in 2020 with English and Spanish language lessons using our didactic material that is available at no cost. Currently, three public schools in the State of Rio de Janeiro follow the methodology and partake trainings with the SESC RJ team.

The institution's expectation is that this partnership will be extended and that we will be able to expand to other schools all the learning experiences we offer to students of the courses at the units.

Conclusion

Based on the experiences obtained in these years of teaching foreign languages in the units of SESC RJ, we can say that this initiative was the starting point for reflections on discussions that have been raised regarding teaching in Brazil. Effective learning cannot be guaranteed only by exposure to the language, but by active participation of the student in the construction of his own learning process, as well as the understanding of language as an instrument of decolonization and deconstruction of established pre-concepts, opening spaces for new thoughts that lead to reflections and transformative actions about oneself and the community that surrounds it.

We have achieved the goal, through courses, workshops, and seminars, enabling the learning of foreign languages, expanding their world perspective and so as meeting student's demands and providing a dynamic, playful and contextualized learning.

We strengthen cultural identities by encouraging students to express themselves from their social practice when dealing with diverse topics related to everyday life. Thus, we foster empowerment by promoting access to information and other discourses, resulting in the social inclusion of subjects as ethical citizens, aware of their rights and duties.

The appreciation of the intellectual tradition of the community students are inserted and a teaching method that values their linguistic and cultural identity are the answer of the issues raised on the beginning of the article. As a conclusion, we point out how learning foreign languages and the appropriation of their own culture are fundamental keys to the production of knowledge.

Annex 1

Figure 1. Interaction among students from different generations



Annex 2

Figure 2. SESC RJ's students showing SESC'S material



Annex 3

Figure 3. Children enrolled in Infâncias Project visiting Pensamento e Linguagens Comic Strip exhibit



Annex 4

Figure 4. Picnic after Aula Passeio (a tour guided by a touristic guide)



Annex 5

Figure 5. Students presentation of their studies concerning Halloween and Dia de los Muertos



Annex 6

Figure 6. Story telling – actions with Primary School children at State Public Schools in Rio de Janeiro



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