

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE MULTILEVEL APPROACH

O ENSINO DE INGLÊS E A ABORDAGEM MULTINÍVEL

LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS Y EL ENFOQUE MULTINIVEL



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ABSTRACT

The multilevel approach provides greater exposure to target-language practice by reproducing real-life situations from students' daily experiences in the classroom and encouraging the use of the second language as a tool for effective communication. By exposing learners to real and authentic language as it is spoken in the everyday lives of native speakers, teaching materials structured under the multilevel approach more effectively fulfill their role as educational tools in the construction of high-quality knowledge. It is necessary to improve students' academic performance as well as teaching efficiency, since the improvement and adaptation of instructional materials contribute to achieving the goal of fluency acquisition, benefiting cultural enrichment and expansion, the optimization of academic or school performance, and the professional success of those involved.

Keywords: Education. English. Multilevel.

RESUMO

A abordagem multinível oportuniza maior exposição à prática da língua-alvo, reproduzindo situações da realidade do cotidiano dos estudantes em sala de aula e estimulando o uso da segunda língua como instrumento para a comunicação efetiva. Ao expor os alunos à linguagem real e autêntica que é falada no dia a dia dos nativos da língua estrangeira, o material didático, estruturado sob a abordagem multinível, cumprirá mais efetivamente seu papel de ferramenta educativa na construção de conhecimento de alta qualidade. Faz-se necessário melhorar o rendimento escolar dos estudantes, assim como a eficiência docente, sendo que a melhoria e adequação dos materiais didáticos contribui para que o objetivo da aquisição da fluência seja atingido, beneficiando a obtenção e a expansão de cultura, a otimização do desempenho escolar ou acadêmico e o sucesso profissional dos envolvidos.

Palavras-chave: Ensino. Inglês. Multinível.

RESUMEN

El enfoque multinivel ofrece una mayor exposición a la práctica de la lengua meta, reproduciendo situaciones de la vida cotidiana de los estudiantes en el aula y estimulando el uso de la segunda lengua como instrumento para una comunicación efectiva. Al exponer a

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los alumnos a un lenguaje real y auténtico, tal como se habla en la vida diaria de los hablantes nativos de la lengua extranjera, el material didáctico, estructurado bajo el enfoque multinivel, cumple de manera más efectiva su papel como herramienta educativa en la construcción de conocimiento de alta calidad. Es necesario mejorar el rendimiento escolar de los estudiantes, así como la eficiencia docente, ya que la mejora y adecuación de los materiales didácticos contribuyen al logro del objetivo de la adquisición de la fluidez, beneficiando la obtención y expansión cultural, la optimización del desempeño escolar o académico y el éxito profesional de los involucrados.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza. Inglés. Multinivel.

1 INTRODUCTION

The globalized world is marked by a process of political, economic and cultural expansion, in which technology reduces distances and brings nations closer together. In this scenario, the English language has become the main language used for communication between peoples, whether in business, travel, personal or professional life. Almeida Filho (2007, p. 09) states that "we live in a time in which contact between languages and cultures has never been so intense and generalized", showing that the need to learn another language is explicit and indisputable.

The objective of this article is to discuss the multilevel approach to the teaching and learning of English in this scenario in which the English language is so necessary, as it is the lingua franca of today. In addition, a reflection on the pedagogical advantages and challenges when applying the multilevel approach in the classroom to the public of young people and adults in language schools is proposed, especially with regard to the acquisition of the long-awaited fluency, which is sometimes quite difficult to achieve. The proposal of suggestions for teaching performance under the multilevel focus with the student seeks to enrich the pedagogical praxis among peers.

The main theorists who offer bibliographic support to this article are: Almeida Filho; David Crystal; Jill Bell; Nathalie Hess; Roxane Rojo; Susan Gass, Jennifer Behney and Luke Plonsky; in addition to a survey on the percentage of Brazilians fluent in English, carried out by the British Council in partnership with the Data Popular Research Institute.

The methodological focus of this article is based on the descriptive qualitative type, in which the selected categories and the indicators defined for the analysis are the multilevel approach and the teaching of English.

The result of the analysis shows us that this pedagogical approach has advantages and challenges. The advantages are highly rewarding in terms of acquiring fluency and mastery of the English language, so there is enough motivation to overcome the challenges. To this end, I share here my successful experiences with students with the use of the multilevel approach to English language teaching.

2 THE MULTILEVEL APPROACH

The English language has long been seen as an international language, but the phenomenon of globalization and the arrival of the digital age have established English as the lingua franca in the contemporary world. David Crystal (2018) points out that:

The [English] language has been undergoing a process of appropriation and change, driven by the use by more than 890 million non-native speakers around the world, who use it in international relations, education, entertainment, tourism and the media, most of the time without a native interlocutor.

From the moment that the importance and need for learning the English language today is a matter of course, the question that takes our attention the most is *how to* acquire mastery and fluency in the English language for quality communication.

Almeida Filho (2007, p. 09) addresses this issue by inviting us to reflect on "how to move between languages and their cultures with the least possible obstacles and with the maximum enjoyment of this endeavor is what wants us to occupy today in the professionalized profession of teaching languages or language".

It can be seen, therefore, that the pedagogical process of teaching and learning languages, and in this case I address more specifically the English language, becomes a prominent point of unique importance in order to make this task pleasurable and effective. When I mention effectiveness, I refer, in particular, to the acquisition of fluency in the English language and the contribution of methodological approaches to achieve this goal.

Susan Gass, Jennifer Behney & Luke Plonsky (2020) state that learning a language goes beyond memorizing grammar rules, as it involves learning to express communicative needs. Therefore, it is concluded that methodologies with an emphasis on communication are the best choices to achieve mastery of the target language.

The authors cited above explain that the acquisition of a second language can be compared to pieces that fit together, integrating aspects of language. Information about the target language can be presented implicitly or explicitly to the learner; In any case, he needs to extract the information from the content that was presented to him and use this information in the grammatical construction to produce the target language.

Figure 1*Fluency in English*

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The success of the acquisition of fluency in English is more easily obtained when the pedagogical approach of teachers is focused on an authentic communicative practice, exposing students to the target language in a real and legitimate way, promoting a meaningful and relevant learning of the English language, avoiding the predominant structuralist and formal pedagogical focus, that is, in the domain of form, which focuses mainly on grammar and lexicon.

The British Council (2014), in partnership with the Data Popular Research Institute, conducted a survey on the level of fluency in English of the Brazilian population and the result was that only 5% of Brazilians speak English, and only 1% declare themselves fluent in the language. There are no indications that the scenario presented in this study has changed since then. Consequently, from these data, the urgent need for changes and improvement in the use of teaching methodologies becomes perceptible; in pedagogical practice; in the initial, continuous and reflective training of the teaching staff; student motivation and commitment; as well as in the elaboration or adaptation of didactic resources so that the process of teaching and learning English culminates in the formation of fluent speakers of the English language at the end of the course.

For this purpose, there is a need not only for didactic material that explores the exercise of orality and maximizes the student's authentic contact with the target language, but also for a pedagogical approach that allows conversational practice to the extreme, offering the necessary linguistic support for the construction of discourse in the target language.

The multilevel approach provides communication between students in a collaborative environment, in which the teacher is the facilitator in the process of teaching and learning the target language. According to Jill Bell (2014, p. 90), the need to deal with plurality is one of the most important characteristics in a multilevel environment, as it drives the active role of learning. The author states that:

Mixed-level or heterogeneous groups are much more useful for fluency acquisition work. Lower-level students are exposed to the richer vocabulary and broader syntax of the stronger students and get useful practice in listening ability, without being subjected to the often overwhelming fluency of the native speaker. More advanced speakers have the opportunity to speak a little more than their peers would allow and, depending on the activity, they may also be challenged to express themselves in different ways to stimulate the listener's understanding and be called upon to explain their own understandings, which is an excellent form of revision.

Jill Bell (2014, p. 91) points out that the multilevel approach provides opportunities for the acquisition of fluency because it maximizes the moments of interaction between students, enabling the development of linguistic construction and fluency. The author agrees that "there are ways to make the mixed-level class a satisfying learning experience for all involved, but they demand a lot from the teacher."

In mixed-level classes, Nathalie Hess (2001) explains that students are different from each other in several aspects: learning styles, linguistic aptitude, language proficiency, attitudes, motivation, self-discipline, age, etc. The author concludes that, therefore, "we can probably say that most language classes are multilevel", even if taught under any other methodology. They are usually highly heterogeneous because students belong to different genders, ethnicities, cultural levels, socioeconomic classes, professions, interests, personality, degree of maturity and their own way of seeing and understanding life and the world.

One of the differentials of the multilevel approach is the criterion for grouping students. In mixed-level classes, students of the same age group are grouped together to study together in the same classroom, regardless of the degree of their language proficiency, and this heterogeneity is welcome and is used as a learning tool in the target language. The level of proficiency of the activities and exercises are gathered in such a way that the students develop tasks, sometimes with colleagues from their own linguistic level, sometimes in partnership with colleagues from other linguistic levels, always with the guidance of the teacher in a collaborative environment.

Nathalie Hess (2001, pp. 02 - 03) explains that "teaching in such classes can, in fact, be very similar to teaching in all other situations. It may be more challenging, but it's also

infinitely more interesting." The author also points out that "both people who share the same mother tongue and people whose native languages differ generally adapt to the contexts in which they are", that is, most communicative interactions, in English or not, are basically multicultural and multilevel, such as when talking to people from cultural and social backgrounds who have different levels of language proficiency, knowledge of the world and life experience.

Students learn best when they interact with different levels in the same classroom, share knowledge, and collaborate with each other. As mentioned by Nathalie Hess (2001, p. 03) "such cooperative and interdependent learning will help our students to foster positive mutual trust and helps them to perform better in a highly complex and interdependent society."

The current world we live in has characteristics of the multilevel type, and this is one of the reasons why the approach of classes with a mixed language level is effective, because it exposes and prepares students for this reality. The multilevel experience will require students to have strategic competence, which will help them succeed in communicative interactions. In addition, classes should combine learning strategies as facilitating tools in language learning: blended learning; discourse analysis; Realia (real data); task-based language learning. In this way, the learner is exposed to the target language with much more authenticity. By practicing and exercising the language as much as possible in a contextualized scenario, the student correctly internalizes the language, thus providing the gain of fluency.

3 ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

Naturally, there are benefits and challenges to classes in the mixed level format. According to Nathalie Hess (2001, pp. 02-04), the benefits consist in the fact that there will always be a sufficient number of students to interact; there will be a rich diversity of human content; there will be no boredom; Teacher professional development occurs naturally, as the teacher will need to be organized, creative and self-evaluative to ensure the effectiveness of the classes. In addition, another advantage is that the teacher is not the holder of knowledge, but the facilitator of the construction of knowledge with the student in a contextualized teaching and learning process, which takes into account the profile of the students, their needs and interests, in which linguistic development occurs naturally through real and authentic exposure to the target language, provided by Blended Learning, Discourse Analysis, TBL-Task-Based Learning, Realia and ICTs-Information and Communication

Technologies in language teaching, resulting in the acquisition of fluency in English more quickly and consistently.

The use of conventional material for language teaching, which does not mix activities of different levels of language proficiency in the same textbook, can stifle and make multilevel classes unfeasible. It is very rare to find textbooks, prepared under the multilevel approach, available for purchase in bookstores or the like. This type of material is usually developed by authors linked to school franchise networks for language teaching and is marketed within schools.

In this way, the language teacher, who teaches classes according to the mixed level approach, will need to produce the didactic material from a multilevel perspective for use in his classes. Due to the diversity of students in the classroom, the most recommended didactic material for multilevel classes is the SD – Didactic Sequence, which allows greater pedagogical adaptation of content to appropriately meet the different learning profiles of the students, as stated by Roxane Rojo (2013, p. 182) "the solution would be for the teacher to be, therefore, the author of his own DS – Didactic Sequences for his own students". According to the author, the DSs are more flexible, examining few teaching topics in a brief chapter, which is adapted by the teacher to his pedagogical needs and to the students' learning possibilities. In addition, they can be easily combined with other materials and content because they are modular (Rojo, 2013, p. 174). Technological and digital resources, combined with didactic sequences, bring authenticity of language and customization to the class.

Table 1

Advantages and Challenges of Using the Multilevel Approach

Use of the Multilevel Approach in English Language Teaching	
Advantages	Challenges
Communication	Creation of the didactic material
Wealth of human content	Lesson Management
Unbored	Maintaining student focus
Professional Development	Promote active participation of all and valid interactions
Teacher facilitator	Catering to different types of learning
Fluency Acquisition	Teacher appreciation

Source: The author, based on Nathalie Hess (2001) and Jill Bell (2014).

In addition to the need for teachers to create their own educational material, Nathalie Hess (2001, pp. 04-06) points out other obstacles to be overcome when using the multilevel

approach, which are: the need to manage the class in such a way that the focus is maintained and that all students interact and benefit from these interactions; ensure meaningful learning, respecting different learning styles; motivate quieter students to participate in conversational and interactive tasks in a satisfactory way.

Another aspect that deserves attention is the demerit of the teaching profession, which does not guarantee a satisfactory remuneration in relation to the time dedicated by the teacher to prepare classes and prepare/adapt didactic material, tasks that are generally developed outside the school. This sad and worrying reality is highlighted by Roxane Rojo (2013, p. 182) when she observes that the overload of the working day and the lack of time for planning and preparing classes are due to the devaluation of teachers.

Based on my own successful experiences throughout my professional career in English language teaching, my suggestions for overcoming the obstacles and overcoming the challenges presented by the use of the multilevel approach in the teaching and learning of English are explained below.

For the best management of the class with mixed levels, I suggest that all students already know in advance what the dynamics of the classes are from a multilevel perspective. I recommend that the methodology be exposed and clarified before enrollment in the course and that an explanatory class be taught as an initial class, before starting with the language content classes. Thus, the student will know what to expect from the teacher and classmates, as well as what others expect from him. Establishing the rules of operation of the class will help everyone to benefit from the smooth running of the class.

To encourage the participation of shy and quiet students, I suggest establishing a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, in which the student feels comfortable and safe to participate more actively in the activities. Knowing the profile of the students facilitates the elaboration of tasks and exercises on subjects of their interest, motivating them. The variety of activities, sometimes aimed at individualization, sometimes focused on interaction, provides opportunities and favors different learning styles. The mix of activities allows students to work at their own pace, as well as express their opinions and ideas, feeling part of the group. Encouraging respect is an essential factor for everyone to express themselves harmoniously. Valuing the participation and positive contribution of students throughout the classes is also motivating: constructive guidance and well-deserved praise are always welcome.

The secret of success lies in the investment in the training of teachers and in the careful preparation or adaptation of the didactic material. A well-trained teaching team in both initial and continuing education will be able to overcome these challenges. It is up to the

pedagogical coordinator to instruct, monitor, guide and resolve the doubts of the team of teachers so that the pedagogical praxis is effective. Pedagogical meetings for the exchange of experiences, exchange of ideas, sharing of successes and challenges in the use of the multilevel approach, observation of classes and respective feedback are important for teacher (self) evaluation, for support and professional enrichment and for pedagogical success.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The choice of the methodological approach, teacher training and the production or adequacy of the didactic material are basic factors to provide the student with the opportunity to master the foreign language.

The sociolinguistic aspect and discourse analysis are fundamental elements in the learning of a language and complement the acquisition of the four linguistic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in the target language, because the one who knows a language well, knows how to use it in order to communicate appropriately in different scenarios and contexts to achieve the purpose of communication.

One of the keys to acquiring fluency in English is the search for learning the language in a more natural and practical way. Some factors that hinder the acquisition of fluency are: little time for language practice during class, insufficient real and authentic exposure to the target language, lack of knowledge of the sociocultural and cognitive profile of students, inadequate choice and/or use of methodological approaches and didactic resources.

The multilevel approach, if well applied by trained teachers, greatly favors the acquisition of fluency in the target language.

The valorization of the teaching profession, the priority in the quality of teaching and the school investment in the initial and continuing training of the teaching team allow for a more reflected, solidified, motivated and constantly updated teaching action, ensuring the procedural effectiveness of teaching and learning.

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