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JANYELLE LIMA ALVES

**THE CHALLENGES TO LEARN ENGLISH IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL CONTEXT
BY THE EYES OF THE STUDENTS – A CASE STUDY**

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JANYELLE LIMA ALVES

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Lídia Cardoso

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“Learning is a treasure that will follow
its owner everywhere.” (Chinese
Proverb)

ABSTRACT

The discussion about foreign language learning in public schools has been frequent in several studies. Researchers have already pointed that, frequently, students, teachers and even the school staff believe that learners are not able to learn a foreign language at public school. This study aims to find out the challenges 6th grade students face in learning English in public schools. In order to collect the data for the research, a sample of five students with poor performance in English were interviewed. Their answers were audio recorded and transcribed. Their lessons were observed and field notes were taken. The data was decoded and themes emerged. These themes were categorized between challenges and positive aspects. The results presented that different students manifested different layers to similar challenges to learn English. Bullying and lack of interaction, boredom, varied factors hindering language comprehension, and the embarrassment at speaking in public were the challenges that rose in their speeches. The participants, however, understand they need to engage more in the lesson in order to enhance their learning.

Keywords: *Foreign language learning; public school; young learners*

RESUMO

A discussão sobre aprendizagem de língua estrangeira em escolas públicas em sido frequente em diversos estudos. Pesquisadores já apontaram que, frequentemente, alunos, professores e corpo pedagógico da escola acreditam que não é possível se aprender língua estrangeira em escola pública. Este estudo tem como foco descobrir os desafios que alunos de sexto ano enfrentam para aprender inglês em escolas públicas. A fim de coletar os dados para a pesquisa, uma amostra de cinco estudantes com baixo desempenho em inglês foi entrevistada. As respostas foram gravadas em áudio e transcritas. Suas aulas foram observadas e anotações foram feitas sobre estas. Os dados foram decodificados e os temas emergiram. Estes temas foram categorizados entre desafios e aspectos positivos. Os resultados apresentaram que alunos diferentes manifestaram diferentes camadas de dificuldades similares para aprender inglês. *Bullying* e falta de interação, tédio, fatores variados dificultando a compreensão da língua, e a vergonha de falar em público foram

os desafios que emergiram de suas falas. No entanto, os participantes entendem que precisam se engajar mais nas aulas com o fim de melhorar seu aprendizado.

Palavras-chave: *Ensino de língua estrangeira; escola pública; jovens aprendizes.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

The practicum is a valuable period in a graduation course as it is such a moment that undergraduate students go to the work field to promote integration between theory and practice. According to law 11788 (BRASIL, 2008), the aim of the practicum is to learn skills inherent to professional activity and curricular contextualization, focusing on the learner's development for citizenship and for work. Also, the Curricular Supervised *Practicum* means to approximate students to the reality of the classroom, as well as to make them reflect critically not only about the pedagogical practice but also about the challenges that the profession brings and the theoretical knowledge improvement of students through the teaching practice.

It was during practicum, as well as in the observational internship, when the ideas for this investigation emerged. The school where I student taught then was an example regarding participative students. I could see and feel students enjoying class, and their eagerness to learn more; however, the grades of some of them were unsatisfactory. This study, then, surged from this interest in finding more about students' struggles on learning English. With the objective of investigating the processes that either stimulate or frustrate students while they are learning English in a public school, and, more specifically, of relating their teacher's practices in classroom to students' thoughts and behavior in order to understand what challenges they face to learn English, this paper was developed.

Two different hypotheses were raised in order to explain this phenomenon: the first one brings up that students might feel inhibited and frustrated at having to confront an exercise in English; the second one says students may not feel the need to learn the foreign language because they think they will not need it in the future as means for applying for a good job or integrating a foreign community. As this phenomenon intrigued me, I set out to investigate what challenges public school students face to learn English.

This academic paper comprises a literature overview including studies carried out with students, their families and teachers, as well as a brief presentation of the main official documents used in Brazil concerning education. The methodology encompasses the background and physical context in which

the research took place, the participants and the criteria used for their selection, the instruments, and the data analysis criteria utilized. Subsequently, the findings are presented and divided into two categories: the challenges and the positive aspects. Since the challenges are the focus of this study, they are detailed. The positive aspects are mostly intertwined with the other themes; however one of them is elaborated in order to bring a reflection toward students' struggles. Then, the final remarks bring an overview of the findings, objectives and hypotheses, in addition to mentioning the relevance of this study for the teaching community.

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the past years in Brazil there have been several changes concerning educational legislation. The recent formulation of the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC) and its updating recent adaptations (BRASIL, 2017) are under implementation to guide the curriculum of schools so that any student enrolled in a specific grade will be studying the same content, independently of the part of the country he or she lives. Although the changes are supposed to improve the quality of learning in the country, there is a feature that must be observed when we talk about learning foreign languages in public schools that distinguish them from the private ones.

Recently the *Leis de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* (LDB) established that English classes are to be offered in schools for classes from the sixth grade onwards (BRASIL, 2017). It is known that most private schools offer English as foreign language (EFL) lessons since first grade. Nowadays, there is the rising of the schools wherein bilingual approaches are applied; many of these schools have classes and activities in the foreign language since kindergarten. In addition, BNCC proposes the content knowledge and skills only for each grade after the sixth.

This approach to language learning in Brazil seems to have some impact on learners' views: students frequently believe that the school is not the place where the foreign language is learned. The narrative research carried out by Barcelos (2006) presented data in this instance. Her investigation encompassed the beliefs of *Letras* and *Secretariado Executivo* undergraduate

students in the places where foreign languages are learned in Brazil. The students who did not have access to private courses informed the learning in the public school (which refers, in Barcelo's paper, the traditional school, public or private, excluding only the language courses) as "weak and demotivating" for reasons such as teachers' unpreparedness and indifference, lack of material resources, non-use of target language and poor curriculum. Yet, these students believe their experience in public school made them more committed to overcome adversities at language classes in college, even though it was painful.

These beliefs are present in the pedagogical field, too. Lima and Basso's study (2014) reported on the beliefs of an English teacher in her first year working in a school. The teacher believes the few hours of class per week hinder the learning, and also that her students do not believe they can learn language in public school and that they do not reflect upon the English teaching quality; otherwise they would demand better conditions for the learning.

In Dias and Assis-Peterson's study (2006), conducted with professionals, parents and students from a public school, it was revealed that the school professionals assume students and family are not interested in learning English since they do not have access to computers and have their setting oriented to the local community (p. 114,115). On the other hand, the family and the students think of EFL learning as a route to achieve success in the students' professional or personal lives, yet they consider the accomplishment of this learning as something very hard to happen. The family, moreover, supposes the school does not put effort into providing good language teaching by reason of believing the learners would not learn, and that private courses are the proper spaces for learning to take place (p.119 - 122)

Ribas (2009a, p.339, 340) correlated the motivation to learn English to teaching cultural aspects. The results suggested that discussing cultural subjects with students can be used as a way to captivate students' interest for the target language. Besides, varying the lessons and exercises formats may increase the learners' intrinsic pleasure to participate in class. Results also reveal that the reading activity was considered complex by students. The lack of

resources also discourages students while the low range of choices for the teachers to work with demotivates the teachers (p. 341 - 343)

Additionally, affective factors could interfere in the learning, perhaps even more than the curriculum or lesson design. The motivational levels of a group of secondary school students and their variations were investigated before and after their English classes. Both external factors and situations happening inside classroom could influence responsiveness to classroom experiences and motivation to learn English (BAMBIRRA, 2017, p. 234). Also, self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy and extroversion influence directly on how students interact with the foreign language class and in the (not) development of the interlanguage (BROWN, 2000)

In face of what was then presented, it is relevant to know the elements that interfere in the students' firsts steps in journey of learning English in public school.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Background

This qualitative research was conducted in Brazil in the second semester of 2018. This study aims to find the challenges students face to learn English in public schools. The data were collected in the months of September and October with a group of sixth-grade students in three phases of recorded interviews. In addition, the English lessons of the group were observed on the days the interviews were recorded and in other two occasions. Field notes were taken for all of the lessons observed.

3.2 Context

The study was conducted in a public middle school of the metropolitan area of Fortaleza, in a neighborhood with high degree of social vulnerability. It is a spacious school, with 12 classrooms being currently used, multimedia lab, Google Lab, science lab, courtyard, vegetable garden, auditorium, teacher's lounge, soccer field, physical education room, bathrooms, kitchen and cafeteria, and library. Also, there is a gym under construction.

All the classrooms are equipped with white board, fans and chairs. In the case of the P.E. room, the space is adorned with tatami and mirrors hanging on the walls. The school also provides 4 digital boards, 2 projectors and Wi-Fi connection for the teachers' use. The teaching staff uses Google for Education as the online platform, and post activities to be done at home or whenever students are allowed to use the computers in multimedia lab or Google lab.

Students go to school five days a week, from approximately 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., and have their morning and afternoon meals in the school cafeteria. Many of them do all the assignments at school and have elective lessons after the mainstream curriculum. When the school year starts, they receive the uniform, notebook and textbooks they are going to use. In addition, each student also receives a key to a bookcase which is going to be for personal use during the rest of school year.

The school year and the curriculum are divided into 4 terms, although the school principal explained that teachers make adaptations to the official curriculum, suggested by the PCNs¹, to accommodate their expectations on students' learning in order to achieve better results than following the guideline strictly.

The English classes take place in two moments and two different rooms. Each lesson lasts 50 minutes, although all subjects are block-scheduled classes. The rooms provided to the lessons are the English room - classroom 7, and the Google Lab.

The layout of the classroom is spacious, with a broad white board, the teacher's table, students' desks and chairs, and the teacher's lockers. The room is clean, although the lighting is a bit dim for reading and writing activities. The desks are disposed so that students sit in pairs, and, according to the teacher, one student with good performance is paired up to one with low performance in order to enhance the learning process of both. This corroborates to Vygotsky's (2007 *apud* SERRANO and PONS, 2014) concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development*, as an example of cooperative learning setting. The pairs, then, form three lines in the classroom.

¹ *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*. It is a document used as a guideline to elementary and middle schools curriculum.

3.3 Participants

For this research, five students out of a classroom with thirty-seven (13,51% of the group) were recruited as participants. They had to fit in the following criteria in order to be part of the group:

- 1) They must be sixth-grade students
- 2) Their performance in English classes must be checked as below the average (the school's average grade is 6 out of 10)
- 3) The English input for them must happen only in school

With the assistance of the English teacher, the students were selected. Consent letters were delivered to their parents (APPENDIX A) in order to have permission to observe and interview their children, which was properly signed and returned. One consent letter was also delivered to the English teacher, who signed confirming her authorization to have her lessons observed and to be inquired.

Moreover, for the safety of the participants' privacy, fictional names were assigned for each of them; Joana, Luana, Marcelo, Pedro and Ruan. The English teacher is going to be called as "teacher" or, if a student mentions her name in his or her speech, she is going to be identified as "Wanda".

3.4 Instruments

The research consisted of three phases divided by the questions in the interviews. The 1st phase encompassed questions regarding the participants' background in school, such as routine, perceptions towards peers and teachers, and study habits (APPENDIX B). Each student was interviewed once for this phase.

The 2nd phase encompassed recorded interviews concerning the English class, what they liked or did not like and whether they learned or not (APPENDIX C). The interviews happened right after each lesson was over in order to have more accurate answers from the participants. Each student was interviewed after two classes for this phase.

The 3rd phase comprised one more recorded interview for each student. The questions in this phase involved what they had learned so far and general reflection on the classes (APPENDIX D).

The questions were elaborated by the researcher, inspired in instructions used in a narrative research to investigate beliefs and experiences of learning English (BARCELOS, 2006).

During the three phases, five English classes were observed and field notes were taken for the purpose of comparing the classroom practices to the participants' discourses. A total of 5 classes were observed in this period.

After the three phases and observations were finished, in the course of the data analysis, the need for one more interview emerged in order to comprehend the answers of one of the participants more broadly. Hence, another interview was prepared, its questions being of evaluative nature, using content students had previously studied in class in all the school terms, to verify the learning range of the participant and compare the results with his previous interviews (phase 2 and phase 3).

Before each interview started, the participants received previous orientation regarding the subject matter the questions approached in order to obtain more fitting response for the data collection.

For a more global understanding of the phases and the structure of each lesson, the following table was designed:

Table 1 – Observations content

| Observation Day | Subject | Teacher's Method | Interview | Students interviewed or observed |
|-----------------|---|--|------------------------------|--|
| 1 25/09 | Prepositions of place + review there is / there are | Expositive (digital board) + group work + groups contest | #1 (Phase 1) #2 (Phase 2) | Joana Luana Marcelo Pedro Ruan |
| 2 02/10 | (History exam) + Homework verification | Lesson was interrupted | No interview | Luana Marcelo Pedro Ruan |
| 3 04/10 | Homework verification | Individual call at teacher's table | No interview | Luana Marcelo Pedro Ruan |
| 4 09/10 | Animals (vocabulary) | Mimic game (groups contest) + expositive (textbook + whiteboard) | #3 (Phase 2) | Joana Luana Marcelo Pedro Ruan |

Table 1 – Observations content (Continuation)

| Observation Day | Subject | Teacher's Method | Interview | Students interviewed or observed |
|-----------------|----------------------|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| 5 11/10 | Animals (vocabulary) | Individual listening activity (chromebook) | #4 (Phase 3) | Luana Marcelo Pedro Ruan |
| 6 23/10 | Animals (production) | Poster creation (dictionary, textbook + material brought from home) | #4 (Phase 3) #5 (Content acquisition) | Joana (#4, #5) Pedro (#5) |

3.5 Data analysis procedures

Creswell's (2007) work was used as support to the qualitative research design. The Students' interviews were transcribed and decoded in order to identify themes in the discourses. The frequency of distinct subjects in students' speech was taken into consideration; therefore themes emerged from this point and were categorized between challenges and positive aspects in their discourses.

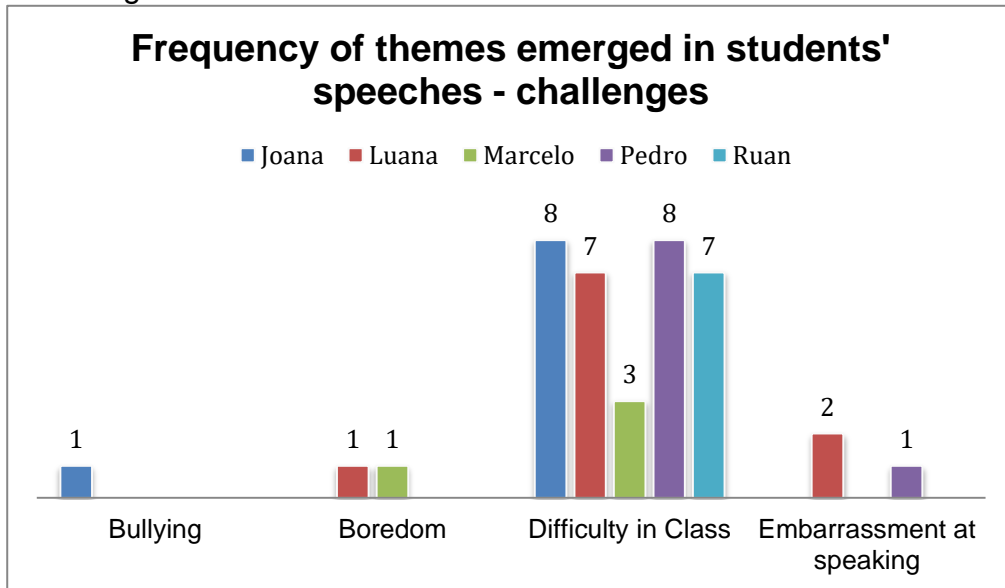
These themes, then, were cross-referenced with students' behavior in classroom. These procedures assisted by literature (SCOLLON and SCOLLON, 2001; CRESSWELL, 2007) were pursued in order to have further comprehension on the aspects of EFL classroom that are a challenge to each participant, as well as what seems to catch their interest and have them involved in classroom environment and, therefore, elaborate a generalization of the themes emerged from this study.

Now that the procedures for the study take place were explained, it is time to debate the results.

4 FINDINGS

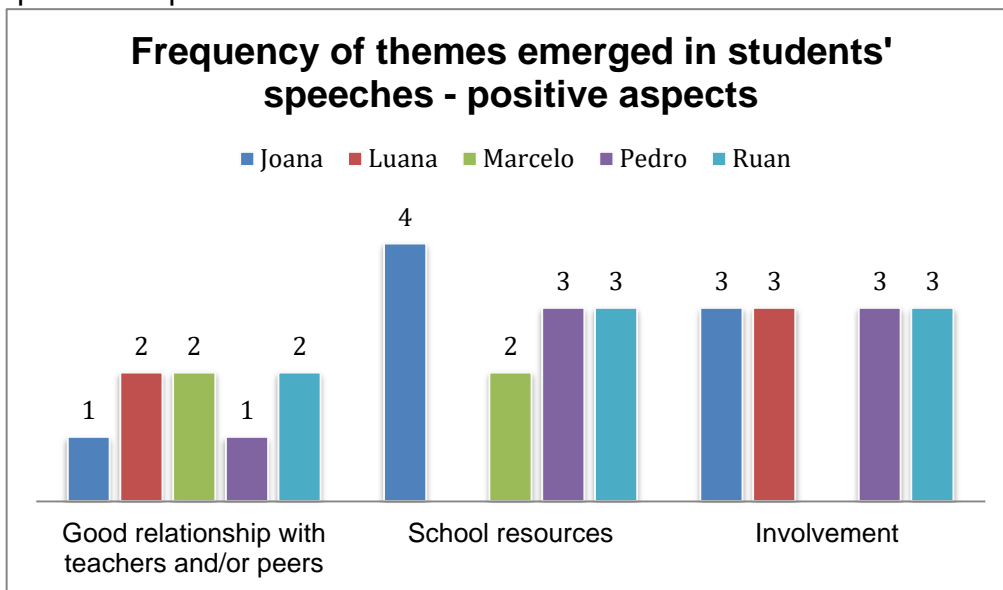
The emerged themes could be divided into two categories: the challenges and the positive aspects. The following graphics express the rate each theme emerged in participants' speeches:

Graphic 1 – frequency of themes emerged in students' speeches – Challenges



Source: Research data

Graphic 2 – Frequency of themes emerged in students' speeches – positive aspects



Source: Research data

The challenges are going to be presented according to the frequency they emerged in students' speeches. The positive aspects are mostly entwined inside the challenges; however, one of them, the involvement, was highlighted to call our attention to the perceptions they have of their own learning.

4.1 Challenge #1: difficulties in class

As mentioned previously, the goal of this study is to identify what types of challenges students of public schools face when learning English. The literature has provided that students' beliefs for their flawed learning frequently lie on the school's lack of material resources or the few hours of the language lesson per week (BARCELOS, 2006; RIBAS 2009a; RIBAS, 2009b).

The school observed, however, comprises a different environment. The model of school in which students spend the day in the institution has been implemented gradually in Fortaleza since 2014 (FORTALEZA, 2018), and it was observed that the teacher deploys different approaches or resources whilst teaching. In the 1st observation, she used the digital board to explain the content, and students had to work together in their respective lines to develop sentences using prepositions of place and the objects they could see in the room which was displayed by the digital board. The 2nd and 3rd lessons were directed to different activities (application of history exam and homework verification, although this assessment did not happen as the teacher was called out of classroom and I had to 'take control' of the class). In the 4th observation, the teacher opened the lesson with a game, dividing the class once again among its lines of students and had one student of each line mimicking for another as means to score and win the competition.

In the 5th lesson, the teacher had them doing a listening activity in the Lab to introduce new vocabulary. BNCC (2017) does not specify the teaching of listening strategies through listening activities, yet it is proposed the teaching of listening strategies, such as cognate words and discourse context clues (BRASIL, 2017, p. 204, 205). The *PCN Estrangeira*² (1998) instructs that the main goal of the EFL teaching should be to enhance the learners' reading abilities; however, depending on the conditions it is implemented, the teaching of the other skills is accepted (BRASIL, 1998, p. 20, 21).

The 6th observation took place in a day devoted to the creation of posters. The teacher had told students to set in groups of four and to bring the material needed beforehand. She brought dictionaries and distributed two for

² *PCN Estrangeira* is a guidelines document on how to teach foreign languages in schools

each group. This let them exercise their creativity in the task of designing and producing with their own abilities.

The observed lessons were not merely expositive and I was able identify in the participants' speeches that they like when the teacher manages to bring different materials and uses visual aids:

I: Qual foi a parte mais legal da aula de hoje?

M: Que... Ela fez a coisa, a célula³, aí cada um tinha que responder o que ela coisava, perguntava qual o animal. (Interview carried out in 09 October 2018)

I: O que você mais gostou da aula de hoje? O que foi mais legal?

J: Eu gostei na aula de hoje que a tia passou tudo na lousa [digital]. Eu gostei que ela falando aonde que tá o vaso, outras coisas assim[...] (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

We can see from Marcelo and Joana's speeches that they enjoy activities in which they interact with the language through games or technology the most in class. Ribas (2009b, p. 480) suggests that students' motivation rises when the activities performed meet their expectations.

However, the employment of different approaches and activities does not ease the path they need to follow to learn the foreign language. In the interview #1, when the students were asked what they thought about the English lessons, four of them said they have difficulties at learning English.

I: O que você acha das aulas de inglês?

P: É difícil porque eu não entendo direito inglês. Pra mim fica difícil. (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

M: São um pouquinho *difícil*, mas às vezes eu consigo... (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

R: Não, às vezes, de vez em quando... De vez em quando eu fico... Fico meio assim, meio com sono. Às vezes eu fico com algumas coisas que eu não entendo, e tem algumas *coisa* que eu entendo que eu entendo. (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

L: Tem algumas partes que eu não consigo compreender, mas dá certo, tia. Eu gosto de inglês. Sei que eu não sei muito de inglês, eu sou tipo, eu não sou tipo aquela pessoa *inteligentona*, mas eu sei de inglês. Eu não sei muito, entendeu? (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

Due to the difficulty to assimilate the lessons' contents, the participants face the task of learning the foreign language as a challenge. Based on the observations, I will include a brief description of how the

³ The classroom layout is that students work in "cells", usually in pairs or groups of three, which frequently are the lines they sit on.

participants act during English classes: Joana is frequently quiet and does not talk to her peers. Luana naps, talks to classmates or writes on her notebook. Marcelo is absent-minded or talks to the classmates seating behind him. Pedro naps, walks around the classroom or talk to his peers, and Ruan copies what teacher tells the class to do and participates in the activities.

During the interviews, the five students expressed some variation of their difficulty to learn the content. During interview #2, Ruan admitted he did not understand the lesson well, and, when I asked what was the most difficult part, he said “*Foi essa [parte] que tinha uma... caixa e a bola e [a gente] tinha... que explicar [a posição da bola]*” (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018). The explanation or the presentation of the content, in this instance, seems to be the issue interfering with his comprehension. There is the possibility that the approach the teacher applied in this specific context was not effective since it was observed that the majority of the students had some trouble with the preposition “on”, even after her explanation. The difficulty to comprehend the grammar is a factor which may discourage the student, his motivation may decrease when he has an activity he enjoys, yet cannot take part by answering correctly. (RIBAS 2009a, p. 341)

During interview #3, the participants answered they have learned in that day's lesson (4th observation): the teacher had started a new content, ‘animals’, and introduced some vocabulary. At a point in class, she requested students to open their books to the page she indicated and said “*tem essa expressão, help us. O que ela quer dizer?*” Many students manifested excitedly shouting answers such as “*ajuda*”, “*socorro*”. Then, the teacher explains the animals are asking for help not only to fight against extinction, but also for protection as pets are mistreated every day. After that, she reported some situations of violence against domestic and abandoned animals, one of these had happened in the school's neighborhood and some students were involved, which brings the need for discussion. Some students also talked about it, thus the teacher questioned them if it was correct to injure animals. Most of them answer that it's not.

When I asked the participants what they had learned in the lesson, Marcelo, Pedro and Ruan answered:

I: O que você conseguiu aprender na aula de hoje?

R: Que não é pra maltratar os animais, e... sempre dar a vacina em dias.

P: Eu aprendi que não é bom chutar os animais, maltratar os animais.

M: É o que ela tava conversando, mas eu não sei explicar... Dos... Dos animais. Em extinção. Que quando as pessoas pegam um animal, chutam ele. Aí ele... A mulher viu, aí ela foi lá na polícia. Aí disse pra polícia. Aprendi que não deve chutar os animais. Tem que cuidar deles. (Interviews carried out in 09 October 2018)

The two girls answered the question by saying that what they had learned was, according to Joana, “*falar inglês de animais*”, and “*como escrever os nomes dos animais em inglês, sabe? Porque a maioria, também, eu não sabia, entendeu?*” in the words of Luana (Interviews carried out in 09 October 2018).

The context of this lesson proposed by the teacher seems to be of help for students to engage in the lesson, yet it did not guarantee all of them acquiring the vocabulary matter. The majority of the lesson was in Portuguese, including the vocabulary the teacher was using during her contextualization to refer to the animals. The parts of the lesson which encompassed the use of the target language were the activity in the beginning of the class - the mimic game in which the teacher gave the name of the animals in English to the participants; and the activity after the contextualization, which consisted of a list of names of animals in English the students should translate.

The lack of use of the target language in class is one of the complaints made by the participants of Barcelos’ research (2006, p. 157,158). In her paper, she presents the point of view of students who had learned English in public school contrasting with private courses and their beliefs towards the learning in these two environments. Cardoso (1999, p. 56) asserts in her paper that the classroom is the only place students have in which learning occurs. The lack of contact with the target language makes it impossible for the production to happen, since there is not any acquisition. Even though students feel integrated to the lesson due to subject familiarity, if the lesson is carried out only in their mother language, they do not pay attention to the lesson’s linguistic features.

The lack of comprehension, in general, seems to be the greatest issue in the classes. Except for one of them, the students often said they could

not understand the class very well. Pedro was one of the participants who let this stressed in his speeches. He frequently said he did not understand the lesson nor was able to say what happened in class.

Yet, as previously mentioned, Pedro does not pay attention to the lessons. In several different instances, the student was caught napping (1st, 2nd and 6th observations), talking (1st, 4th, 5th and 6th observations) or walking around the classroom or laboratory, when the observation took place there (1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th observations). On the 6th observation, the lesson in which students should prepare a poster about animals, there were students who did not take part in any group. Pedro was one of those students. The teacher informed me that it usually happened because he did not help his peers in the group. She chose a group for him and, then, I observed that he barely interacted with his peers while they were working in the poster. He repeated his behavior of the previous observations: napping most of the time, and, more at the end of the class, standing up and walking around the classroom to talk to other classmates.

However, on occasional moments, Pedro participated. One of these instances was the listening activity that was held on the 5th observation. He listened to the audio track with his partner, and, although he tried to copy the words from his peer, as instructed by the teacher, he was actively engaged in answering aloud, sometimes before his classmates could answer. The Mimic game on the 4th observation also had him participating, guessing the animal which was being mimed together with his group to win scores in the game.

The interest in participating on activities in which Pedro competes with others is apparent. On the other hand, he spends more time than the rest of the class to start doing written activities. He usually writes the diary after the others, when the teacher starts whichever activity she planned for the lesson. On the 2nd observation, the day the lesson was designated to the application of a history exam in the computer lab, he finished his test in less than ten minutes while most of his classmates spent at least twenty to finish it. On the 3rd observation, a lesson in which the teacher only verified the homework of the term, he said he could not find any of his school material and left the classroom to search for it. When he spent too long to come back, another student was sent

to find him, and he came back empty-handed. The teacher then went with him to the principal's office. When she came back, alone, she told me that it was a regular situation whenever she asked to check his notebook. The students in classroom agreed with her.

Another situation observed was Pedro's answers to the interviews. There were frequent occasions in which he misunderstood the meaning of my questions:

I: Como é suas amizades? Você tem amizades com seus outros colegas da sala, com os da outra sala? E como é sua amizade com os professores?

P: Pra começar assim a amizade com a pessoa que eu não conheço eu começo pelo nome, perguntando como é o seu nome. Aí quando ela pergunta eu falo como é meu nome. (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

I: O que você mais gosta das aulas de inglês?

P: De educação física.

I: Não. De inglês.

Ah. Nenhuma.

I: Nada que aconteça na aula que você goste?

P: Só hoje, que foi o dia que eu gostei mais do que os outros *dia*.

I: E o que aconteceu que você gostou?

P: Porque a gente usou o computador e viu vídeo. (Interview carried out in 11 October 2018)

He also frequently goes to the front of the class and says he cannot see from the place he sits, in the back of the room. It may be due to a sight problem, but the teacher infers he might be having difficulties at reading and be illiterate. It was assessed that he has reading and writing skills, considering he read some sentences aloud in classroom, and there were a few phrases written in his notebook. Thus, his issue does not seem to be illiteracy, but low levels of literacy, which means the absence of skills to engage in a reading or writing practice and likely low comprehension of different text genres used and assessed in school environment (SOARES, 2009).

This possibility of deficient literacy called my attention to Pedro's answers about his learning in phase 2 and 3. In interview #2, he answered he did not learn and could not say what he learned in class that day. In interview #4, already in phase 3, which took place the same day as the class in laboratory in which he was partaking more actively, he was asked what he already could say in English and answered "*nada*", nothing. Intrigued with his answers, I decided that another round of questions was necessary.

Thus, new content was prepared to evaluate if some learning was accomplished during the school year. The interview followed the following content:

- 1) Numbers
- 2) Animals (using flashcards)
- 3) Introduction
- 4) Countries
- 5) Greetings

I assisted him during the process, giving hints whenever he seemed in doubt on how to answer. His answers showed he did not store the content entirely, yet he may have some notion of the content. The following excerpt addresses one of the subjects they have studied in the beginning of the year and that is frequently revisited due to the teacher's way to make the attendance call in class.

I: Tu *sabe* contar em inglês? Quais são os números?

P: ...

I: One, two...

P: Eu só sei o meu número.

I: Qual é o teu número?

P: Twelve

I: Twelve? Qual é o twelve?

P: É o doze.

I: Doze, né? Mas tu não *sabe* tipo o one, two, three... Não? Qual é o zero?

P: É... *Zero* [In English Pronunciation].

I: Olha aí, tu *sabe*, rapaz. Que história é essa? [risos]. Qual é o dez?

P: ... Não sei, não.

I: Vamos juntos. Vamos contando comigo. One.

P: One.

I: Two.

P: Two.

I: Three.

P: Three.

I: Four.

P: Four.

I: Five.

P: Five, six.

I: Six.

P: Seven [Number seven was said at the same time as the I spoke].

I: Eight, nine, e o... Ten. (Interview carried out in 23 October 2018)

4.2 Challenge #2: embarrassment at speaking

Luana and Ruan mentioned they do not like to speak when teacher demands them to. While Luana says she feels embarrassed at speaking, Ruan explains he does not like to answer them aloud.

I: O que você achou mais difícil na aula de hoje?

L: Ah, foi na parte que ela foi falando os *verbo*, entendeu? Que ela foi pedindo, tipo “número um!” aí, não... Tipo, “grupo um, grupo dois”, entendeu?

I: A competição.

L: É, a Competição. Aí porque, tipo... Por isso que eu não quis falar, porque eu não sou muito apegada a essas coisas que eu, tipo, tenho vergonha, entendeu? (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

I: E o que você não gosta nas aulas?

R: Hã?

I: O que é mais chato nas aulas, o que você não gosta.

R: É... Quando... Porque eu não gosto de responder perguntas, as perguntas, aí eu não quero falar. Aí, às vezes, ela fica pedindo, aí eu não gosto. Aí eu fico com raiva, às vezes. Acho chato. (Interview carried out in 11 October 2018)

Although Ruan does not want to participate in teacher's requests, he seems to feel comfortable in integrating in activities which need a person to be the focus of the group. On the 4th observation, the teacher opens the class with a mimic activity, and Ruan is one of the students who volunteered and was chosen to mimic in front of the class. He mimed the animal teacher instructed him to do. Even though he complained about answering aloud, it did not affect his engagement in the activity, as I noted in the class which happened the same day of his interview: the teacher wanted him to participate, but he refused to answer aloud. Yet, he said one of the answers low voice while another student answered louder to the teacher.

This resistance to speak aloud corroborates with Lightbown and Spada (2006) about inhibition interfering in learning and language acquisition. He seems interested in the interaction, yet he is apprehensive about taking risks and answering in front of his classmates, too self-conscious of his pronunciation.

It has been suggested that inhibition discourages risk taking, which is necessary for progress in language learning. This is often considered to be a particular problem for adolescents, who are more self-conscious than young learners. (LIGHTBOWN; SPADA, 2006, p. 61)

The same could be applied to Luana, yet, her participation was not evidenced in most activities. She was frequently caught napping or talking with her classmates. The only instance she was observed participating was on the 6th observation, a class in which they had to prepare a poster with the group. In that class, she prepared the layout of the poster and wrote the title and some information on it. In the interviews she had mentioned that her favorite part of the lesson was when she could write something. It may be an indicator that her interests are different from the others, and that her motivation could be written activities she needed to copy.

4.3 Challenge #3: boredom

The participants also said that they do not like to feel they are not completing a task. In the interview #1, when I asked what Marcelo did not like about the school, he answered that he did not like “*de ficar parado na escola, de ficar sem estudar*” (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018). Luana answered similarly:

“Ficar sem fazer nada, tia [...] É, tem... uma hora que , tipo, eu faço as tarefas e não tem nada pra eu fazer, entendeu? Aí dá vontade de conversar, só que não pode”. (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

The lack of activities is one of the conditions which may affect students' motivation. Whilst they already see the foreign language as a struggle, they spend long periods of time waiting for instructions in class. From the observation, it was possible to see that the teacher usually provides students some time to finish their activities. The amount of time seems to be too much for some students who finish copying or answering the activity quickly, yet others do not finish on time for one reason or another. Idle students tend to talk to their peers and decrease their effort to complete tasks (RIBAS, 2009a, p. 341, 342)

4.4 Challenge #4: bullying

In the interview #1, when Joana was asked whether she had a good relationship with her classmates and students from other classrooms, she answered naming the friends she had made in school instead of saying she is

acquainted with many people, as the other participants did. Also, she mentioned her classmates bully her because of her physical features.

Tipo assim, eu tenho uma colega do sexto ano A, que é Fabíola [nome fictício], que a gente não briga. A gente nunca brigou. Nós somos *colada* assim como a outra amiga dela que é do sexto ano C, que é da minha sala. [...] Tem um, os meninos da minha sala ficam me chamando, me faz bullying, me chamam de “Bigbig dos olhão”. [...] Eu só tenho intimidade com o Eduardo [nome fictício] porque ele não fala nada comigo, só brinca comigo. (JOANA, interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

In classroom, Joana is mostly quiet and seems to be paying attention to classes. The only lesson in which she participated more actively was on the observation #6, when the teacher had students prepare a poster with a campaign concerning animals. During this activity, she interacted with the other components of her group. Apart from this day, she did not interact with other people in English classroom often. As Pessoa (2014) highlights, the participation in class may be affected by “the smallest words and actions, such as a classroom utterance, an activity, a picture, the arrangement of seats, or the configuration of groups” (2014, p. 366). This lack of interaction in a classroom in which students work in cooperative learning, in other words, work interacting with their peers to enhance learning, may be harmful to her learning development.

4.5 Positive aspect: involvement

Most participants have good relationship with their classmates and like the approaches and resources used by the teacher, as mentioned during the challenges. However, these positive aspects have not been facilitating their path to learn English. It is possible to say the same concerning their involvement in classes.

When I questioned the participants what they could do to improve their learning, the majority of them replied similarly, saying they should study more or pay more attention to classes. Some of them had some ideas of what could be developed.

I: O que você poderia ter feito hoje, na aula, para ter te ajudado a aprender mais?

J: Falar sobre... Aprender as coisas em inglês, aprender as coisas em inglês. Pronto, apareceu aquela casa com o carro, e a tia perguntou onde que *tava*. Eu respondi que o carro *tava* perto da casa, a tia falou que acertou. Também onde que *tava* o abajur, onde que *tava* outras partes aí. (Interview carried out in 25 September 2018)

P: Que eu tenho que estudar mais o vocabu... vocabulário, pra aprender a falar mais inglês. Que eu não sei muito.(Interview carried out in 09 October 2018)

I: O que você acha que poderia fazer pra melhorar, pra aprender mais inglês na aula?

L: Bom, eu acho que eu melhoraria se eu me esforçasse mais, e eu parasse de dormir nas aulas. (Interview carried out in 11 October 2018)

The acknowledgement of the need to focus more in the lessons is a positive feature on their speech. Joana explained that when she answered correctly, she received a positive feedback from the teacher - it seemed to be eye-opening to her and made her perceive she needs to work more on learning vocabulary and grammar. Pedro, who is not frequently aware of the developments in the lesson, answered his vocabulary needed improvement, too. Luana, differently, added she needed to stop her habit of sleeping in class. Her awareness of this attitude as damaging to her learning also shows that she can do something to prevent this condition to continue to happen.

However, the students were not seen putting effort on enhancing what they say they needed to improve. Hence this good aspect might be seen as another challenge. Considering this perspective, a question arises: what could be done in order to make these students become more engaged in classroom and face their challenges?

A possibility is for the teachers to look for subjects comprising different cultures and bring them to classroom, have students compare their culture to the other countries' (RIBAS, 2009a), as well as to show students that the classroom, the learning and their social context are naturally intertwined, and that the foreign language is indeed useful for them (DEWEY, 1975; DEWEY, 2005).

Also, having the English teachers sharing pedagogical issues to find solutions together (PESSOA, 2006) could be a manner for the language teacher to have their concerns seen from different perspectives and receive different opinions on how to approach the issue they have in their classrooms.

5 FINAL REMARKS

The objectives of this study were to investigate the processes that stimulate or frustrate students while they are learning English in public school, as well as to relate their teacher's practices in classroom to students' thoughts and behavior in order to understand what challenges they face to learn English. Different students manifested different layers to similar challenges to learn English. They expressed difficulty in class for diverse reasons: bullying and lack of interaction with peers in a cooperative learning classroom, boredom, embarrassment at speaking in front of the class, and, the challenge which appeared the most in their speeches, difficulty to assimilate the class. The students expressed their struggles with understanding the grammar content by the approach the teacher used, their unawareness of the content when the context is too familiar along with the absence of the vocabulary in target language, and the possibility of literacy deficiency.

However, they also reported their opinions in regards to what they could do to improve learning. They are aware they need to engage more in classroom and some of them have expressed in which aspect they need to be more involved, although they do not provide the change in behavior during classes. The implications that come with students having such awareness of their behavior yet do not change. So, they must be taken into consideration and further studied. The same applies to the interference of the low levels of literacy on the foreign language learning in classroom.

The most important aspect of this research was to have students voice their challenges. Reaching for students and hearing their concerns is important. Understanding the steps that make them go through the struggles and being prepared to work to solve these struggles with them is pivotal to their success in language learning.

Despite the relevant findings in this research, there were some circumstances limiting the range of the study. The school had some English lessons dispensed in order to have games between classes, a factor which delayed the development of the study and let me with less time to be in class observing the participants. Another hindering aspect faced was that one of the participants might have low levels of literacy or some degree of slow learning,

and it was not possible to assess if it was a real issue and whether it would be a restraining factor with regards to leaning English properly due to lack of time and resources. In addition, the 2nd lesson observed was interrupted and the teacher asked me to ‘take control’ of the class while she attended to people who demanded her attention outside classroom.

Even though there were some limitations to the study, the hypothesis which proposed that students might feel insecure and frustrated at having to confront an exercise in the foreign language was proved as true by the participants’ speech. However, there were no evidences to validate the hypothesis proposing that the participants may not feel the need to engage in learning the language due to the thought they would not need to use this language in the future as means to find a job or integrate in a different community.

Further studies are necessary to observe variations and depth of students’ struggles during their whole school life; the participants of this study are starting their journey to learn EFL, there are 6 years ahead of them to learn English in school. Also, the themes emerged in this research are related to a small group, and should not be generalized. The necessity to deepen and increase the coverage of the study, to understand the challenges of other groups of students and different social contexts is apparent.

To be aware of the students’ learning circumstances and their struggles with a new language, especially the ones who are starting their journey in the foreign language learning in public school, is of prime importance. With this knowledge, strategies can be developed to facilitate their steps and make their learning more effective. When we reach our students, we are helping them face their challenges.

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APPENDIX A – MODEL OF CONSENT LETTER SENT TO PARTICIPANTS’ PARENTS

Caro (a) responsável,

Estamos realizando uma pesquisa sobre os desafios que alunos de sexto ano enfrentam para aprender inglês. Este estudo tem como objetivo entender quais são as dificuldades de aprendizado dos estudantes de língua inglesa em escola pública, para, assim, procurar soluções para melhorar o aprendizado.

Para isso, gostaríamos da participação de seu (sua) filho (a) em nossa pesquisa. Pretendemos entrevistá-lo para saber sobre suas opiniões sobre a escola e como é sua relação com as pessoas no ambiente escolar. Três aulas de inglês serão observadas e, após estas, faremos entrevistas. As perguntas da entrevista não possuem caráter avaliativo.

Todas as entrevistas serão gravadas em áudio, com o fim de serem usadas para análise. Será mantido sigilo sobre a identidade dele (a) e nenhuma informação pessoal será utilizada nas ocasiões em que o trabalho for apresentado.

A participação do (a) seu (sua) filho (a) é voluntária, podendo ser interrompida pelo responsável a qualquer momento.

Este trabalho está sendo desenvolvido por uma aluna concludente do curso de Letras Inglês da Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), sob a orientação da Professora Lídia Cardoso. Para qualquer informação adicional, estamos ao seu dispor através do número (85) 98818-5308.

Muito obrigada.

A investigadora principal
Janyelle L. Alves

CONSENTIMENTO INFORMADO

Estamos solicitando a participação de seu (sua) filho (a) na pesquisa “Os desafios de aprender inglês em escola pública pelo olhar dos estudantes”, e gostaríamos de pedir permissão para que seu (sua) filho (a) faça parte da pesquisa respondendo algumas perguntas. As entrevistas serão gravadas por meio de áudio.

A participação dele (a) é muito importante para sabermos quais as dificuldades de aprender a língua inglesa, e para procurarmos soluções que melhorem o aprendizado.

Todas as informações pessoais serão mantidas em sigilo. Os resultados, quando apresentados, usarão nomes fictícios, protegendo a identidade do (a) seu (sua) filho (a).

A participação do (a) seu (sua) filho (a) é voluntária, podendo ser interrompida pelo responsável a qualquer momento.

Este trabalho está sendo desenvolvido por uma aluna concludente do curso de Letras Inglês da Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), sob a orientação da Professora Lídia Cardoso. Para qualquer informação adicional, estamos ao seu dispor através do numero (85) 98818-5308.

Muito obrigada.

Data: ___/___/_____

Assinatura do investigador

Data: ___/___/_____

Assinatura do responsável

APPENDIX B – MODEL OF INTERVIEW FOR PHASE 1

1. Como é sua rotina na escola?
2. Como é seu relacionamento com seus colegas e professores?
3. Há alguma coisa na escola que te agrada muito?
4. Há algo na escola que você não gosta?
5. O que você pensa das aulas de inglês?

APPENDIX C – MODEL OF INTERVIEW FOR PHASE 2

1. Você sente que conseguiu aprender com essa aula?
2. Qual foi a parte mais legal da aula?
3. O que você achou mais difícil na aula?
4. O que você poderia ter feito na aula de hoje para ter aprendido mais?
5. O que você aprendeu hoje?

APPENDIX D – MODEL OF INTERVIEW FOR PHASE 3

1. O que você já sabe dizer/escrever em inglês?
2. O que você mais gosta nas aulas?
3. O que você não gosta nas aulas?
4. O que você poderia fazer para ter um rendimento maior?
5. Você sente que tem conseguido aprender bem o conteúdo estudado em sala?