



**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO CEARÁ**

**CENTRO DE HUMANIDADES**

**DEPARTAMENTO DE ESTUDOS DA LÍNGUA INGLESA, SUAS LITERATURAS  
E TRADUÇÃO**

**CURSO DE LETRAS INGLÊS**

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**REFLECTIONS OF A SYSTEMIC BILINGUAL TEACHER ABOUT LANGUAGE  
ACQUISITION IN A SUMMER IMMERSION EXPERIENCE**

**FORTALEZA**

**2019**

FRANCISCO RODRIGO SOARES OLIVEIRA

REFLECTIONS OF A SYSTEMIC BILINGUAL TEACHER ABOUT LANGUAGE  
ACQUISITION IN A SUMMER IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado ao  
Curso de Letras Inglês do Departamento de  
Estudos da Língua Inglesa, suas Literaturas e  
Tradução da Universidade Federal do Ceará,  
como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de  
Licenciado em Letras Inglês.

Orientador: Prof<sup>ª</sup>. Dra. Lidia Amelia de Barros  
Cardoso.

FORTALEZA

2019

Dados Internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação  
Universidade Federal do Ceará  
Biblioteca Universitária  
Gerada automaticamente pelo módulo Catalog, mediante os dados fornecidos pelo(a) autor(a)

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- O47r Oliveira, Francisco Rodrigo Soares.  
Reflections of a Systemic Bilingual Teacher about Language Acquisition in a Summer Immersion Experience / Francisco Rodrigo Soares Oliveira. – 2019.  
20 f. : il. color.
- Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (graduação) – Universidade Federal do Ceará, Centro de Humanidades, Curso de Letras (Inglês), Fortaleza, 2019.  
Orientação: Profa. Dra. Lidia Amelia de Barros Cardoso.
1. Aquisição de Segunda Língua. I. Título.

CDD 420

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Aprovado em \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_.

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## **AGRADECIMENTOS**

À Prof.<sup>a</sup> Dra. Lidia Amelia de Barros Cardoso, pelo auxílio e excelente orientação.

Aos professores pareceristas Pâmela Freitas Pereira Toassi e Ronaldo Manguiera Lima Junior pelo tempo disponibilizado, sugestões e colaborações durante meu percurso acadêmico.

Aos colegas da turma, pelo apoio, ideias e disponibilidade de tempo para leitura do trabalho.

Aos meus pais e toda minha família, pela paciência e apoio durante esses 4 anos na universidade.

## **ABSTRACT**

Bilingualism has been discussed a lot in Brazil as the number of bilingual projects in schools have increased in the last years. Currently, many schools offer bilingual classes assuming a different perspective of the English learning process. During a summer immersion experience 2 American kids aged 4 and 9 were taught Portuguese lessons based on Systemic Bilingual method. It is expected that the data collection and analysis of the present study will shed light to some important characteristics of the method that helped students acquire the second language. In addition, the strategies used to accomplish the learning goals are identified.

**Keywords:** Bilingual Classes; Systemic Bilingual; Second Language Acquisition.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the last years, bilingual schools have become very popular. The popularity calls the attention of teachers and parents who have decided to invest in this alternative of education to their children. In this study, I aim to analyze the acquisition of Portuguese as a second language by two American children through activities and strategies from Systemic Bilingual classes based on my experience as a Systemic Bilingual English teacher.

Systemic Bilingual is a method created by Vanessa and Fátima Tenório based on CBI (Content-Based Instruction) which means that children study the target language using contents they are already adapted to in mainstream classes. It is important to mention that the focus of the classes is language acquisition not the content itself. To adequate the approach to the Brazilian educational context, the proponents created the Content-Based Teaching of English as a Foreign Language or CBTEFL.

Different from teenagers or adults, children are usually not shy, they are risk-takers and do not usually get embarrassed. These characteristics are important while learning a new language and tend to make the second language acquisition process easier and more efficient. In addition to this, children also like moving, repeating and role-playing. There are common activities in Systemic classes that help providing real context situations while the acquisition process becomes more real, fun and engaging.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the acquisition of Portuguese in an immersive experience by two American children. This study is built by presenting some teaching strategies used in Systemic Bilingual method and showing how they influenced their language production. The following questions are going to be discussed to help us understand better the goals and results expected: What characteristics of the method are important to help students acquire the second language? What strategies helped students improve their level of proficiency?



### **3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **3.1 Systemic Bilingual**

Speaking a second language has become an important characteristic worldwide. Bilinguals tend to occupy higher positions at work and develop more areas in their brains and cognitive capacities. In this context, the number of bilingual schools has increased a lot in Brazil. As an example, a good number of private schools in Fortaleza has started to offer bilingual classes for children and teenagers. Parents seem to approve and invest more in this kind of program to give their children an opportunity of studying English through a completely different perspective.

One of these bilingual projects is called Systemic Bilingual. The program was created in 2002 by the Brazilian sisters Vanessa and Fátima Tenório. The method uses CBI or Content-Based Instruction and in order to adequate it to the Brazilian context the proponents called CBTEFL or Content-Based Teaching of English as a Foreign Language. The main purpose of the program is to promote the study of the English language through contents established in the traditional curriculum.

#### **3.2 Content-Based Instruction**

Content-Based instruction is believed to provide many benefits since it exposes students to an extensive input in a class and promotes contact with different topics with other content areas, such as mathematics, science, geography and arts. This way, children feel motivated and tend to learn more. Furthermore, everything that is discussed in a CBI environment is objective and contextualized. This implies that students are going to have contact with natural, comprehensible and meaningful activities within a specific context.

Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) suggest in Snow (1997) that,

In a content-based approach, the activities of the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught, and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language. Such an approach tends itself quite naturally to the integrated teaching of the four traditional language skills.

After the overview and the presentation of some benefits of content-based instruction that is base for the Systemic Bilingual method, the next section will focus on the immersive environment and the importance of immersion to a second language student.

### **3.3 Immersive Environments**

The Systemic Bilingual has been adopted throughout Brazil and in 2017 one of the private schools in Fortaleza started to use this method in the English classes. The curriculum designed in this particular program consists of children from 2 to 12 years old having 5 English classes per week of 50 minutes each. This framework has showed some important results in oral and written production. In spite of not having familiarity, children who have never studied English before can already communicate using simple but relevant and well-structured sentences. Those results may be observed as the students are in an immersion program.

Research has clearly demonstrated that immersion students, regardless of program type, develop much higher levels of second language proficiency than do non-immersion students studying the second language as a regular subject (i.e., for one period per school day). (...) In comparison to non-immersion students, immersion students develop (a) almost nativelike comprehensive skills as measured by tests of listening and reading comprehension; and (b) high levels of fluency and confidence in using the second language, with production skills considered non-nativelike in terms of grammatical accuracy, lexical variety, and sociolinguistic appropriateness (HARLEY et al, 1990).

Children are exposed to input through songs, stories, games and a variety of other content areas in the target language in a slow and gradual perspective, but always going beyond the current level of competence of the student. These principles are described in the Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (2000),

This hypothesis states simply that we acquire (not learn) language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of (acquired) competence. (...) The input hypothesis states that in order for acquires to progress to the next stages in the acquisition of the target language, they need to understand input language that includes a structure that is part of the next stage.

All classes in Systemic Bilingual method are integrated and tend to connect themselves providing the students that level of acquired language that goes beyond their current level of competence.

Language learning cannot occur without some input, (Ellis, 1997). It means that teachers focus the discussions on everything that is within children's domain at the moment. That's why classes are related to the mainstream Brazilian curriculum and an important aspect of this is to have students comprehend content presented through the second language. Lyster (2007, p. 60),

Teachers are known to modify their speech by speaking more slowly in the beginning grades, emphasizing key words or phrases and using cognates, restricted vocabulary, and shorter phrases. (...) To further facilitate comprehension, teachers rely on extensive body language, including gestures and facial expressions, and a range of paralinguistic elements.

As a pre-service English teacher, I have been achieving good results in production of the English language by my Brazilian students through Systemic bilingual method. Most of them can already communicate using well-structured and meaningful sentences to express what they need, ask questions, say what they like and describe what is happening around them. Students in this framework understand the use of verb *to be* in the first person, differentiate the demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that* in a real conversation, use the modal *can* asking for permission and apply there to be correctly while referring to existence. The most important fact is they do not need to have explicit grammar classes to know how to use those structures, they just acquired through content classes.

### **3.4 Vocabulary and Language Acquisition**

Vocabulary takes an important place regarding second language acquisition. If the words learned are contextualized and make part of the routine of the learner, vocabulary acquisition process might reach high levels. This situation seems to happen to bilingual projects, like Systemic Bilingual in which children acquire the English Language through a Content-Based Teaching approach. It is important to mention that this study focuses on how a teacher perceives aspects of second language acquisition by young children but

could serve as an opportunity to understand the way older children receive the input and produce in the target language reacting to the same approach.

All these characteristics of the Systemic Bilingual method contribute to facilitate the second language acquisition. To maximize vocabulary input, teachers also work with flashcards, games, *realia* and songs. This is confirmed when LLACH and GÓMEZ (2007) suggest that,

They like playing, running, just moving. There are many activities related to this natural characteristic which the teacher can take advantage of. For instance, action songs give the opportunity of moving their bodies while singing. Moreover, songs are associated with relaxation and fun. It is good device to stimulate the students and to improve the atmosphere of the class. On the other hand, they have to concentrate for a while as many songs involve repetition, listening to the rhythm and a good memory in order to sing them. In addition to using physical activity, the teacher can also use young children's love of bright colours. Colouring and drawing activities can, therefore, be used in order to learn, for example, some vocabulary related to the colours or the objects they are drawing.

As children seem to enjoy these kinds of activities - they are very energetic, they like to run, sing and move, the teacher has to be prepared and create an environment of fun in a classroom.

### **3.5 Systemic Strategies and Students Outcomes**

As an immersive environment, a Systemic classroom should have a teacher who keeps the use of the target language to interact with the students all the time. In order to make this possible, teachers establish routines and, of course, use some strategies like prompting, recasting and repetition. They are fundamental during a Systemic class because they help students communicate and give them some opportunities for feedback as they allow the teacher to correct some possible mistakes in pronunciation or incorrect use of verb tenses, for example.

Recasting and Repetition are very commonly used with very young learners. As they are initiating the studies in a second language, they need assistance to understand sentences and create their own.

Recasts as the most frequent type of feedback used by immersion teachers (...) serve to maintain the flow of communication, to keep students' attention focused on content, and to provide scaffolds that enable learners to participate in interaction about subject matter that requires linguistic abilities exceeding their current developmental level. (LYSTER, 2007, p. 95 - 96)

It is very common to have young students creating sentences like: "Teacher, *me* like apple". Using a recast, the teacher substitutes the object pronoun by the Subject one and asks the learner to repeat: "I like apple". This happens all the time and naturally the students tend to acquire the correct use of the pronouns as they listen and repeat the teacher.

Prompting, on the other hand, is used frequently by teachers who deal with students in elementary school. It does not mean that little ones are not able to understand and respond a prompt. Elicitation, a kind of prompting, happens every class to check students' prior knowledge and it provides a huge interaction among them.

the teacher directly elicits correct forms from students by asking questions such as "How do we say that in French?" or by pausing to allow students to complete the teacher's utterance (e.g., *C'est un...?*), or by asking students to reformulate their utterance (e.g., "Try again"). (LYSTER, p. 110)

When a student does not know and does not remember how to say a word or sentence in English, the teacher feels free to prompt the classmates to help the student find the word or sentence he/she needs. The following example show this situation.

Student: "Teacher, How do I say *Eu quero comprar uma bola nova*, in English?"

Teacher: "Ok, let's help your classmate... Can someone teel him How you say "*Eu quero comprar uma bola nova*, in English?"

This way, other learners participate and also help to take the teacher out of the center all time.

Another important strategy used by teachers and students in a Systemic class is the clarification question "How do I say \_\_\_ in English?" This tool helps the student to communicate without using the mother tongue. One more time, the immersive context is maintained. If a student needs a pencil to do an activity in class, but he does not remember how to say it in English, he can ask the teacher: "How do I say *lápiz* in English?" After this,

teachers can give the answer right after or prompt other students to help. Then, the learner is asked to repeat the whole sentence.

For the next section will be presented the methodology for this case study in which two young learners of Portuguese as a second language had classes based on Systemic Bilingual method.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Context

For the data collection, some examples of activities used in the bilingual classes I teach were used to help two American children acquire the Portuguese language in immersion private meetings. The two kids, a 9-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy took 13 classes. The topics and the objectives of the classes are described on table 1:

Table 1 – Classes’ topics and objectives

WEEK	CONTENT	ACTIVITIES
1	Personal Description (physical and personality adjectives) / Feelings / Life stages	Describe yourself / say preferences / describe characters from movies and TV / watch episodes from “ <i>Turma da Mônica</i> ” / Play “ <i>Cara a Cara</i> ” / Present your family / Discuss the role of babies, children and adults in a family.
2	Clothes / Colors / Places in a city	Describe the clothes of <i>Monica, Magali, Cebolinha</i> and <i>Cascão</i> / Differentiate clothes for summer and winter / Describe clothes you usually wear to go to school, to the mall, to the beach and to stay home / Watch episodes from “ <i>Sítio do Pica Pau Amarelo</i> ”.
3	Parts of the body / Clothes / Jobs / Places in a city	Draw some parts of the body / Say where you put on shoes, hats, t-shirts and other kinds of clothes / Say what adults do and where they work / Play memory game with jobs / Recognize some places in a city and who works there / Watch episodes from “ <i>Castelo Rá Tim Bum</i> ”.

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4	Sequencing / Grouping / Addition / Shapes / Sizes	Count the elements in a group / Do addition with pieces of clothing / Play sequencing games and “ <i>Genius</i> ” / Recognize shapes and find them around the house / Play “ <i>Twister</i> ” and <i>Hopscotch</i> .
5	Meals / Fruits and Vegetables	Talk about preferences / Describe your breakfast, lunch and dinner / Prepare a typical American and Brazilian breakfast / Associate fruits and colors / Play “bingo” / Talk about healthy and unhealthy food / Prepare and healthy sandwich and pizza.
6	Parts of the house / The farm	Differentiate houses and apartments / Describe your house and your favorite room / Say what you can do in each part of the house / Describe a farm / Say what animals can live in a farm / Watch episodes from “ <i>Cocoricó</i> ”.

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Source: data from the research.

## 4.2 Participants

All the data necessary for the analysis was collected from a group of 2 students that made part of 13 private classes of Portuguese as a Second Language. The girl had more contact with Portuguese from a younger age, her parents used to talk to her in Portuguese more often and she used to be exposed to some Brazilian TV programs and cartoons. The 4 year-old boy did not receive the same amount of input from his parents and was less mature in terms of cognition aspects.

## 4.3 Procedures

The students’ production was audio recorded and transcribed three times during the period of 13 classes. These recordings were important as they provided an overview of how much they improved after that period of exposure to a second language through classes based on Systemic Bilingual techniques. The first section of recordings happened in class 1, the second in class 7 and the third in class 13. For the recording, students had to follow the steps described below:

Step 1: Answer questions related to their daily life and preferences.

Step 2: Talk about what they see in the pictures. I showed them some pictures related to the contents we were going to discuss during the classes.

Step 3: Say as many Portuguese words you know in 1 minute. In this step my focus was to observe the increase of vocabulary upon students' production.

## 5. FINDINGS

In order to exemplify the theoretical aspects used in the elaboration of the research, some relevant results obtained after the tests mentioned in the methodology will be discussed and analyzed below.

In step 1, both participants developed well responding basic questions about themselves. As an example, when the girl was asked “*Qual o seu animal favorito?*” she just answered “*Não sabe falar em português*” for the first interview, but after the period of exposure to Portuguese, for the third recording, she was able to say long sentences using many adjectives to describe her favorite animal, as in “*eu gosto de cachorro. Um cachorro pequeno, é branco e peludinho, muito muito. Parece de um pom pom*” The boy performed better in step two, but he also demonstrated progress in answering questions. When I asked “*Quantas pessoas moram com você em sua casa?*” for the first time, he answered in English, but in the third recording, he said “*4, meu irmã, eu e meus pais*”.

In step number 2, the participants described what they could see in some pictures. The same pictures were used 3 times, the focus was to understand if they were able to give more information as they were progressing through the classes. As an example, I showed a picture with the 4 main characters from “*Turma da Mônica*” and the progress of the girl is described on the table below:

Table 2 - Girl's progress

Step 2 – Talking about what they see in the picture	Picture 1 – “Turma da Mônica” characters	Participant: 9 year-old girl
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Recording 1	“são feliz, essa <i>from</i> Mônica”
Recording 2	“essa é Mônica, ela é zangada. Quando Cebolinha tenta pegar o coelho da ela e Cebolinha é muito esperto, Magali gosta de melancia e Cascão não gosta de água, ele toma água mas ele não toca.”
Recording 3	“essa é... Tem Mônica, Cascão, Cebolinha e Magali. Magali gosta muito de comida mas todas as comidas gosta mais melancia. Ela está usando um vestido amarelo. Esse é Cebolinha só tem 5 pedaços de cabelo e ele é muito esperto, ele quer pegar o coelho azul de Mônica, mas ela fica zangada, bate na ele quando ele pega e Mônica está usando um vestido vermelho e essa é ela brinca, brinquedo de um coelho azul e ela gosta... ela fica zangado quando o Cebolinha tenta pegar o vestido dela e o Cebolinha está usando camiseta verde e short preto e sapato marrom, e Cascão está usando short vermelha com um coisa, não sei... e um botão de branca e um camiseta embaixo disso amarelo e ele não gosta de água, ele toma água mas ele não vai tocar, nada de água! Não toma banho, não lava as mãos, não nada.”

Source: data from the research.

The increase of vocabulary and accurate grammar output is explicit throughout the time. In the first recording, only one adjective to describe the characters is identified. But the third recording shows she was able to attribute not only physical and personality adjectives from all characters, but add their behavior, relate clothing items and colors and use demonstrative pronouns like “*esse*”. Because of this, I could observe that she absorbed a lot of information from the classes and took advantage of that during the task.

The boy had a quite different result when compared to the girl. Even though he was not able to say long sentences as she did, he also progressed using more adjectives, for example. In the table below we can see how he developed in step 2. In the first recording, he just said the number of characters he saw in the picture, but in the last one, he not only said their names, but presented some characteristics of them.

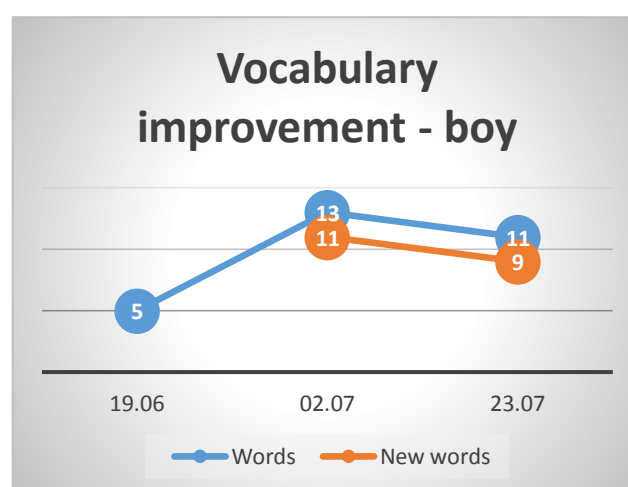
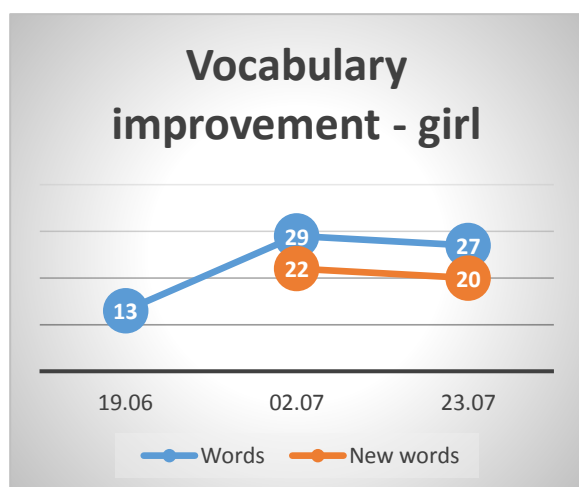
Table 3 - Boy's progress

Step 2 – Talking about what they see in the picture	Picture 1 – “Turma da Mônica” characters	Participant: 4 year-old boy
Recording 1	“quatro.”	

Recording 2	“Casção, Mônica, Cebolinha e coelho e Cebolinha.”
Recording 3	“Casção, Mônica, Cebolinha e Magali. Bom, não bebe. Zangado, triste, porque ele não pode pegar Mônica coelho. Com fome, melancia.”

Source: data from the research.

As vocabulary is so important regarding speaking in another language, the participants performed a third task in which they had to say as many words they remembered in one minute. With this data, it will be possible to see if the amount of input during the classes would help students to improve their vocabulary level. The results of this step are summarized in the graphics below:



Both participants showed an increase in quantity of words from the first to the second recordings. Even though this number decreased in the third recording, the amount of new words kept high and it may be explained by the considerable input they received and the different topics they studied throughout the classes. The majority of those words were nouns followed by adjectives and pronouns.

All of these recordings and tests were used to make me understand how the techniques of a method could help young learners to acquire a language. I believe that all

moments of prompting, recasting and repetition we had in classes, made them feel more comfortable to produce and perceive how much they progressed.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The growing number of schools that adopt bilingual projects in Brazil enables us to perceive and have contact with different methods and strategies of teaching English. Those Systemic Bilingual techniques used and demonstrated in this article assisted me in the generation of an interesting analysis on the second language acquisition process.

It is understood that the use of strategies such as prompting, recasting and repetition seems to provide the learner more confidence, clarity and objectivity in producing in a second language through a gradual and natural way. Because of these positive results, I decided to use all these characteristics to observe how Portuguese learners would respond to the use of these techniques and obtain results as good as those I have in the classroom regularly.

## 7. FINAL REMARKS

The acquisition of a second language and the strategies that contribute to it were the focus of this research. Those techniques, from the Systemic Bilingual Method were analyzed and used with two participants that seemed to show a good progress in the target language.

The three steps that involved the interview with the participants were important to demonstrate how they developed in the acquisition of Portuguese. The ability to say longer sentences answering basic questions, use of lots of adjectives to describe pictures and the gradual increase of new words may summarize what was expected to happen in the end of the research. It can be said that the techniques of prompting, recasting and repetition as well as the content-based instruction and the immersion environment seem to facilitate the acquisition process, make the learner internalize the language in a natural way and achieve high levels of proficiency.

Having only two participants with different ages may limit the analysis and it would be better to have more participants in a study of language acquisition to have more data to compare and describe.

This study would only be the first step to develop new questions about the use of teaching strategies in bilingual programs around the country. It would be interesting to see how these strategies would work with older learners or with the study of other languages, for example.

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