

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND UPWARD SOCIAL MOBILITY: A STUDY ON THE DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN STUDENTS OF ELEMENTARY PUBLIC TEACHING

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**Abstract:** The present work is included in a research project which investigates concepts about English Language Teaching in the context of public teaching based on Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics. In this text, the attention will be turned to the grammatically marked aspects present in discourse about English language teaching by 9<sup>th</sup> year students of public elementary teaching in eight schools from different cities of the southwest region of Paraná. The argument is that, in the case analyzed, the grammatical aspects express the relation of detachment – existing between English language teaching, in its respective association with the upward social mobility, and students – which occurs in the social and ideational context of students.

**Key-words:** English language teaching; Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics.

**Resumo:** O presente trabalho está incorporado a uma pesquisa que investiga os sentidos construídos sobre o ensino de língua inglesa no contexto da rede pública de ensino à luz da Análise de Discurso Crítica e Linguística Sistemico-Funcional.

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Neste texto, a atenção será voltada aos aspectos marcados gramaticalmente no discurso sobre o ensino de língua inglesa de estudantes do 9º ano do ensino fundamental público de oito escolas de diferentes municípios da região sudoeste do Paraná. O argumento defendido é que, no caso analisado os aspectos gramaticais demonstram a relação de distanciamento – existente entre ensino de língua inglesa em sua respectiva associação com ascensão social e os estudantes – que se instaura no contexto social e ideacional dos estudantes.

**Palavras-chaves:** Ensino de língua inglesa; Análise de Discurso Crítica e Linguística Sistêmico-Funcional.

## I. Introduction

The present work refers to a partial result of a research work carried out in some towns of the Southwest of Paraná on the meanings built about the English language teaching by 9<sup>th</sup> year students of the elementary public school. The text observes how the relations between the representations in the investigated youngsters and their context are marked in the materiality of language; that is, the grammatical elements which mark linguistically certain effects of meaning, which rise from the contextualized representations in the students of public schools.

As theoretical support for this enterprise, we turned to the theoretical foundations about the operation of textual, discursive and social relations in the Critical Discourse Analysis, as well as the fundamental about the functional aspects of language in the Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Accordingly, the reason to take the meanings built about English language teaching under such perspective is supported by the intention of, as said by Silva (2009), “focusing the language as system and as behavior, probing it since the interiority (grammar) until its outer dimension (discourse)” (SILVA, 2009, p.721).

## 2. Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics

Even that it is not possible to delimitate a unique specific epistemological and historical point to the appearance of Critical Discourse Analysis (forth CDA), we can, in a general sense, locate its initial manifestations in the studies carried out in the 1970's by researchers of the East Anglia University in England, who were responsible for the elaboration of a subject called Critical Linguistics. According to Magalhães (2005), one decade later, other researchers, among them Norman Fairclough, from Lancaster University; entered in the Critical Linguistics' field. Later, the term Critical Discourse Analysis was adopted by Fairclough (MAGALHÃES, 2005).

However, Magalhães (2005) draws attention to an important aspect; according to the author, we must not consider the CDA just as a continuation of Critical Linguistics, though, there is a relation of contiguity between the two subjects. Whereas Critical Linguistics has its methodological proposals developed to the analysis of few samples of texts, CDA attempts to the "texts and events, in the several social practices, proposing a theory and a method to describe, interpret and explain the language in the socio-historical context" (MAGALHÃES, 2005, p.3).

In another work about the historical foundation of CDA, elaborated by Ramalho (2005), the author emphasizes the relevance of some basilar concepts like the notions of ideology, inseparable from the semiotic features; the notions of dialogism originally from the Bakhtin's writings; as well the principles exposed by Foucault about discursive formation analysis and its respective relations of power, which is set socio-historically (RAMALHO, 2005).

The relation between language and power is precious to the CDA (WODAK, 2001), nevertheless, according to Ramalho (2005), in the relation to power studied by Foucault – despite his essential contributions to the

CDA – lingers a determinist and unilateral character of discourse, being necessary, to Fairclough, as mentioned by Magalhães (2005) “to consider the power in its dialectic: as local of power and as affirmation of the power” (MAGALHÃES, 2005, p. 6).

Thereby, besides the notion of power, the concepts of ideology, subject and history should be studied, according to the view of CDA, describing the structures and social process; as those which implicate in certain textual production as those related to the production of meaning by the individuals or groups (WODAK, 2001).

Hence, these concepts are treated by the CDA in the scope of social relations, (GUIMARÃES, 2005), of the social subjects and of social groups, without necessarily considering a pure individual level (VAN DICK, 1993). It means that the subjects in CDA are social subjects, being their respective discourses understood as a three-dimensional model which involves textual dimension, discursive and social practices (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001, 1992).

Fairclough’s proposal about language as a three-dimensional model reveals an important factor of a theoretical and methodological approach which has “three analytical dimensions which had been studied separately” (RAMALHO, 2005, p.282).

Fairclough (2001; 1992) presents the indissolubility of these three dimensions. According to Fairclough (2001) things which refer to the social relations are, in part, semiotic. That is, language permeates the consciousness, identities and cultural values. Nevertheless, the author observes that this close relation does not implicate in the lack of distinctions among these instances or in the same treatment to them. As said by Fairclough(2001) “CDA is analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis (including language) and other elements of social practices” (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001, p.123). In other words, although the dimensions of the three-dimensional model are inseparable, they are not the same, for that reason we should analyze them in their dialogism.

These considerations bring some implications to the research, leading it to be socially oriented (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001). Such premise is also remembered by Halliday (2009), when the author explains that at the moment of investigation on the language phenomena, we often need to explore phenomena of other instances too. Therefore, “if we want to understand functional variation in language, for example, we will need to know something about the sociological foundations of human relationships and interaction” (HALLIDAY, 2009, p.59).

Taking it into account, initially, we should situate our work in the textual dimension, but also considering the order of the other dimensions involved in it. Thus, we need to observe the formal elements of language, which, according to Van Dick (2001) “are much less consciously controlled or controllable by the speakers” (VAN DICK, 2001, p. 106). Thereby, we are going to enter in the contributions, theorized in the Systemic Functional Linguistics, about the textual analytical procedures about relations which cross the discourse.

The Systemic Functional Linguistics (forth SFL) takes language in its social and contextualized functions. Thus, the SFL assumes language as an instance organized in three main metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual, in which, each one of these performs a role in the dynamics of meaning production. As said by Halliday (2009), language has been developed as a form to establish sense to our experience and also operating in a way to deal with each one of these experiences in the social life; this means, “language manages these as complementary modes of meaning (*ideational, interpersonal*) – along with a third functional component (*the textual*) which maps these on to each other and on to the context in which meanings are being exchanged” (HALLIDAY, 2009, p.62).

Thereby, as our work is interested in how the English language teaching is represented discursively by the students of elementary school, we should observe more emphatically the manner that the experiences are

codified in semiotic elements, providing to the speaker, images of mental and physical reality (GOUVEIA, 2009). That means: the focus will be turned to the ideational line of meaning.

In the ideational instance, the events experimented by us are organized in some figures related to these experiences. Then, the mechanisms which orient grammatically the organization of elements of empirical reality into figures constitute the transitivity system. By this system, figures comprehend processes of our inner and outer experience and participants which are involved in these processes. The relation between the process and its participants can also appear under some kind of circumstances (HALLIDAY, 2004).

According to Halliday (2004), processes obtained from the experience can be related to the world of abstract relations, the physical world or even to the world of consciousness which involve the relational process, verbal process, existential process, material process, mental process and behavioral process. It is important to notice that a process does not have to set necessarily in just one kind of mentioned perceptual world (HALLIDAY, 2004).

The process is the essential element of structure of transitivity system; as well participants are the closest instance linked to the process. However, the circumstances are optional in the constitution of representation in the clause; “their status in the configuration is more peripheral and unlike participants, they are not directly involved in the process” (HALLIDAY, 2004, p.176).

Taking the transitivity system we are going to identify how the perceptions of the relations which constitute the representations about English Language Teaching built by the students of elementary public teaching are organized grammatically in the relations among participants, process and circumstances.

### 3. Methodology

The data was collected through questionnaires, applied in 8 schools from 8 different towns of the southwest region of Paraná. All the questionnaires were applied to 9<sup>th</sup> year students of elementary public schools. Taking all the collected data, the sample is composed of 402 students who answered 2 open questions related to the perception of English language teaching and its finality, they being: 1) For you, what is English language Teaching? And 2) What is the aim of English language Teaching?

It is important to mention that we have decided to use “English language teaching” in the questions – as well as we are using in many parts of this text – as generic expression, referring to perceptions about: the teaching and learning relations, involving the English language<sup>2</sup>.

Before the students answered the questions, they had been previously clarified about the proposal of the research and about their spontaneous participation. These informational aspects were contained in a Term of Clarification, located at the top of the questionnaire. All the invited students accepted to participate and the filling of the questionnaires took about 15 minutes in each investigated classroom.

Since the collecting of the data had been finished, the information of the questionnaire answered by students was computed by a text editor, preserving its original content. Each questionnaire – as the original completed by students as the computed ones – was numbered; one

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2. Here, we cannot comprehend “English language teaching” only as an act of teaching, as it was only restricted to formal-didactic aspects. It was understood in the questions as social practice, considering, mainly, other teaching and learning relations, such as: identity features (*for whom* is the English language teaching?); and contextual characteristics (which is the most appropriate social context for the achievement of English teaching purposes?). As we are going to see along the analysis, we can identify some aspects of these relations in students’ answers and exploit them through their lexicogrammar expression.

number related to the total of questionnaires of the same school, and another which refers to the number of each school in relation to the total of schools investigated.

The organized data were analyzed according to some suggestions from Spink (1995), with some adaptation of the referred methodology for the objectives of our work. According to Spink, we need to observe: 1) the underlying themes of subjects' discourse and 2) the linguistic elements which organize the thematic structure (SPINK, 1995).

In regards to the first aspect of this methodology, Spink states that themes rise from free-association with an inductor term – in our case “English language teaching,” present in the open questions given. This means that the analyst should apprehend the thematic structure of representations through the analysis of the association of ideas which emerges from the answered questions (SPINK, 1995).

As far as it concerns the analysis of the linguistic elements (the second aspect), we explored how the contents of representation appear in the transitivity system.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

As already stated, the research involved 402 students in the 9<sup>th</sup> year of elementary public school, with participants of both sexes, 193 boys (28%) and 209 girls (52%). The average age is 14.15 years old and varies from 13 to 18 years old.

The scholastic context of the investigated students mirrors the general socio-economic situation of students attending public schools. According to some documents from investigated schools, the majority of students come from lower and lower-middle classes of society, either from the rural or from urban locations.



Analyzing the answers of the questionnaires, we could perceive that student discourse about English language teaching expressed five main themes: contact to abroad, language proficiency, job market, cultural learning and instrumental knowledge<sup>3</sup>. From these categories, we can notice the predominance of the first three themes, as it is possible to see in Table I, which shows the frequency of the themes mentioned by each participant:

**Table I:** frequency and percentage of themes associated to the English language teaching by students of elementary public school.

Theme	Frequency	%
Contact to abroad	204	50.74
Language proficiency	179	44.52
Job market	167	41.54
Cultural learning	48	11.94
Instrumental knowledge	25	6.21

**Source:** data collected and organized by researchers

Therefore, the themes of contact to abroad, language proficiency, and job market are the most present in the imaginary of the students in relation to English language teaching. In each of these categories lies an

3. As previously suggested in the methodology session, these themes rose from the free-association with “English Language teaching”; they were identified through the analysis of the students’ answers in the open questions. A study specifically on these themes is presented in Machado and Denardi (2012, in press).

implicit relation with upward social mobility. The proposal of this text shows how this relation between English language teaching and upward social mobility produces some discrepancy between English language teaching and the students of elementary public school, which can be perceived through the analysis of linguistic elements in the transitivity system.

However, before we start to analyze transitivity in the collected sample, we need to determine the reading that most concerns our research trajectory. That being said, the linguistic elements taken from the sample regard the relation between English language teaching, the respective associated theme, and a *Learner subject*. The element *Learner subject* does not necessarily refer to the investigated student; this element appears in the discourse of students and can be related to a person, a group, or even to an unidentified subject.

The discrepancy which posits a kind of self-exclusion in the imaginary of students in relation to English language teaching appears as a relation coined by the research team as a relation of impersonality.

#### 4.1 The Relation of Impersonality

In the statements included in this relation, we can perceive how a process of self-exclusion is established between students and the content associated to the English language teaching. In this relation, the *Learner subject* develops an essential role. For this reason, we verified the occurrence of the *Learner subject*, obtaining whom the *Learner subject* refers to in the student's discourse, through the quantitative search for the pronominal manifestation of *Learner subject*. The occurrence can be verified on table 2:

**Table 2:** pronominal occurrence of the Learner subject, frequency of students who mention it and respective percentage.

Type of occurrence	Frequency	%
1 <sup>st</sup> person of plural	226	56.21
Impersonal infinitive	164	40.79
3 <sup>rd</sup> person of singular	83	20.64
3 <sup>rd</sup> person of plural	46	11.44
Indefinite pronoun	40	9.95
1 <sup>st</sup> person of singular	33	8.2

**Source:** data collected and organized by researchers

It is possible to perceive that the most prominent occurrence among the students in relation to the indication of impersonality was in the first person plural, which appeared in the answers of 226 students; this represents 56.21% of the total sample.

The first person plural, “we” (*nós* or *a gente*), exercises on the investigated public a function of coherency of identity, which refers, in a general sense, to a collective *Learner subject*, more specifically to the students of public school. Thus, the subject, in this case, departs from the individual sense, and incorporates the possibilities, limitations, wishes and duties common to the group. Thus, the first person plural has the function of representing the homogeneity between the speaker (the student) and the situation of the group (the students of public teaching).

The frequency of impersonal infinitive tense, mentioned by 164 students, 40.79%, is also important in the configuration of sample. However, this tense does not present a formal subject, responsible for the action. The *Learner subject* is elliptic, despite being associated to the processes.

This tense was present in several manifestations of material and mental processes like: *having a good job, traveling abroad, learning the English language*. Nevertheless, the presence of impersonal infinitive marks the personal and temporal disengagement of students in relation to the content they are producing. This relation sets, irrelative of a lack of moral or cognitive engagement, a social condition in the context of these students, which prohibits a closer approximation between the students and the themes they associate in their English language teaching.

The manifestations of statements in third person of singular, third person plural and the indefinite pronouns have, essentially, the same function and thus were used by 83 subjects (20.64%); 46 subjects (11.44%) and 40 subjects (9.95%).

The essential feature of these kinds of statements is to mark the *Learner subject* as another person (or people) who is (are) not the student. It can be seen in the answers of subjects 43.1; 5.5 and 13.7:

Sujeito 43.1: É muito importante, mas é muito difícil de aprender, e é importante para *quem* viaja para outros países que falam outras línguas.

Subject 43.1: It is very important, but it is too much difficult to learn, and it is important for *someone who* travels to other countries that speak other languages.

Sujeito 5.5: Preparar *as pessoas* para o futuro por ser uma língua de influência, *pessoas* de grande importância necessitam do idioma.

Subject: 5.5: To prepare *people* for the future; being an influential language really important *people* need this language.

Sujeito 13.7: Para tudo, com a modernização a língua inglesa é falada por todo o mundo, se *você* quer ter um bom trabalho, ou essas coisas, esse é um ótimo ensino para a vida.

Subject 13.7: For everything, with modernization the English language is spoken throughout the world, if *you* want to have a good job, or these kinds of things, it is an excellent teaching for life.

It is possible to perceive in the examples above, the relation of validity of English language teaching marks the self-exclusion of the student/speaker in the statement. This is one of the main features which resonates in the practices of public English language teaching, in which, the lack of affinity towards involving students of public school due to their social condition, is then imbedded into the imaginary of the same students.

However, the self-exclusion is grammatically organized in different ways, noticeable by these three statements. Thus, it is necessary to dissect how the linguistic organization occurs in each one of these.

About the statement of subject 43.1 we can take the excerpt:

It (English language teaching)	is	very important	for someone who	travels	to other countries
Carrier	Relational process	Attribute	Beneficiary/ Actor	Material process	Goal

In this statement we have a common relation in the sample: two participants (*English language teaching* and *someone*) linked by a relational

process. The second participant is an indefinite pronoun, the actor involved in a material process of *travels*. Through this lens, the subjects, who are related to the English language teaching, are just those involved in the material processes which require some social and economic status.

About the statement of subject 5.5 we can highlight the follow excerpt:

really important people		need	this language
Attribute		Relational process	Value
Carrier			

The notion evoked in this statement can be approximated to the relation presented by Rajagolapan (2003), in which, according to Rajagolapan, the English language has become an object of social desire, a product for purchase and consumption.

The relation between the *Learner subject* (really important people/ carrier) and the English Language (value) is linked by a possessive relational process in the statement of subject 5.5. The English language as a respective value element is represented like a commodity, a product necessary to some people, more particularly to people with a specific kind of status, as demonstrated by the attribute: *really important people*.

About the statement of subject 13.7 we draw attention to the excerpt:

If	you	want to	have	a good job
Connector	Sensor	Mental process	Material process <sup>1</sup>	Goal
			Phenomenon /Projected clause	

Here, we need to perceive that after the analyzed excerpt we have “...*this is an excellent teaching for life.*” The validity of this statement appears under the condition of the previous statement. The conditional clause requires a *Learner subject* in the third person (you) who projects a goal (a good job) obtained through a material process (have) in his/her mental process (want to). According to this representation, the English language teaching will just make sense for the people who project it onto utilitarian purposes.

The configuration of these three examples is different. However, they have some features in common, which also summarize some aspects of the sample. In each one of these statements self-exclusion occurs, indicating that the English language is under some specific social position.

The effects of this representation appear clearly when we look to the number of subjects that used the first person singular to express the idea of *Learner subject*. From the 33 students (8.2%) who used the first person as participants linked to the English language teaching, 15 are involved by emotive mental process: *I like (or do not like) English* or *I would like to learn English*. Just 18 students represented in their own speech a linkage between the English language teaching and a relational or material process. This means that just a minority of group of students consider themselves included in the relations of English language teaching, when it is associated with utilitarian values.

Certainly, the *Learner subject* has the function of including or excluding individual (and/or groups) of relations with English language teaching, in regards to the discursive representations as linguistic elements employed by the students. Therefore, the *Learner subject* will vary according to the process or circumstance in the same speech. It becomes clear through the discourse produced by subject 29.7:

Sujeito 29.7: é muito bom para a *nossa vida* e bom para *quem* quer fazer um intercâmbio. Então da minha parte *eu gosto* da língua inglesa.

Subject 29.7: it is very good for *our life* and good for *someone who* wants to do an exchange. So, on *my part*, *I* like English language.

It (English language teaching)	is	very good	for our life
Carrier	Relational process	Attribute	Beneficiary

And	good	for someone who	wants to	do	an exchange
connector	attribute	Beneficiary/Senser	Mental process	Material process	Goal
				Projected clause	

So	On my part	I	Like	English language
Connector	Nominal group	Senser	Mental process	phenomenon
	Projecting	Projected clause		

When we divide the speech of subject 29.7 into three parts we can see that students exclude themselves from certain processes or circumstances. Further, in the first part, the relational process admits the beneficiary (*our life*) in the first person plural – which probably refers to the students of public school as previously mentioned – into the edges of the attribute, which demarcates this relation.



In the second part, there is an occurrence of a goal (related to a utilitarian value) and a material process in a projected clause. Due to these conditions, the exclusion of the speaker happens as it is possible to see in the use of indefinite pronoun.

In the third part, the *Learner subject* appears in the first person singular as a *senser*, linked to English language teaching (the phenomenon) by a mental process in an emotive verb, instead of a desiderative verb, as it appeared in the mental process of the second part. The projected clause: *I like English language* is under the projecting: *on my part*, which indicates the edges of relation between students and English language.

Here, we should not consider lightly the interpersonal instance. We can perceive that when there are some processes which, associated to the English language teaching, produce meanings in utilitarian senses, the students are more likely to exclude themselves. This has to do with the material conditions of the students that do not correspond to the status required by some figures associated with English language teaching. Therefore, the identity of the *Learner subject* in some processes is dissonant in relation to the students' identity, due to the divergence of material status required. This relation is not imaginative, as it comes from the typical social practices in a capitalist society, which distinguishes subjects and classes, and determines their identity and the role of each in the social relationships.

One misunderstanding that our work could suggest is that we are trying to show how the socio-economic context of students in public schools defines the detachment between them and the English language teaching. Certainly, this is not the aim of this work, as it is obvious that the social context influences the referred relation.

Although there is influence from the socio-economic context, it does not determine absolutely the distance between English language teaching and students. The relation of self-exclusion and subsequent detachment occurs mainly when the *Learner subject* is linked to the English language teaching by

utilitarian processes and goals. It means that the English language teaching appears far from students due to its associated themes, which express a strong relation with upward social mobility and, thus, with utilitarian values. The association with these themes causes a great discrepancy, since they do not correspond to the material conditions of students.

Therefore, it is necessary to consider that there is a difference between English language teaching as referent and as signification in the students' imaginary. As signification, it "comprises the role of discourse in constituting, reproducing; challenging and restructuring systems of knowledge and belief" (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992, p. 169). That being said, the dissonance in the studied case lies, primordially, in the signification of English language teaching rather than just in its material contextual reference.

However, the interpersonal (identity and relational) function will overlap and maintain the configuration of meanings (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992). Accordingly, English language teaching, keeping a close ideational relation with upward social mobility – a typical value structured in our society – mirrors interpersonal relations of the social structure of capitalism. As a result, English language teaching deals with the problems of the identities established by the *Learner subject* and with the negotiation of these identities. Such problems cause the detachment relation among students.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

From the analysis of various linguistic elements of speech about English language teaching in students of elementary public schooling in the southwest region of Paraná, we were able to perceive how the detachment between students and English language teaching is discursively represented.

This process of detachment is manifested in a relation of self-exclusion, which excludes the students from certain processes or circumstances. The students appear excluded, mainly, from the utilitarian processes and goals,

along with the implicit relation of upward social mobility. Therefore, English language teaching does not produce the detachment of the students of elementary public school directly; its associated themes, maintained by the interpersonal relations, become responsible.

One of the limitations of our work is that we explored the relation of detachment between English language teaching and students just in the sense of self-exclusion, focusing solely on the pronominal relations. The collected data can be explored further in regards to how the detachment unfolds through time of clauses.

Despite limitations, the results presented in this text can provide some contributions to English language teaching in public schools. Through this study, we were able to conclude that some associated representations of English language teaching are prominent influences in the relation of detachment. Therefore, it would be highly beneficial to explore ways of expanding the notions of English language teaching beyond the utilitarian values of upward social mobility.

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