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Learning English as a foreign language: learners' beliefs in different contexts

Inglês como língua estrangeira: a visão de alunos de diferentes contextos

Inglés como lengua extranjera: la visión de estudiantes de diferentes contextos

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Abstract: This paper is the result of a research conducted by Languages students from the Universidade da Região de Joinville (Univille), whose main objectives were to understand, identify and re-signify the beliefs held by high school students concerning the process of

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learning the English language. For this purpose, questionnaires about the issue were applied as a way to understand what the convictions were and how the context of education influences over the said convictions. The participants of this research were students of public and private schools from the city of Joinville. The results were analyzed according to some basic authors, such as Brown (2015), McKay (2002) and Tanaka (2003), in addition to authors that investigate the field of applied linguistics. This research has reached very meaningful results and reflections, bringing to light the fact that, though not so different on both scenarios, the context had a strong influence in the way that students perceive the foreign language learning, and how they see themselves in this process.

Keywords: English learning contexts; learner beliefs; English as a foreign language.

Resumo: O presente artigo é resultado de uma pesquisa realizada por acadêmicos do curso de Letras da Universidade da Região de Joinville (Univille) que teve como objetivos entender, identificar e ressignificar as crenças trazidas por estudantes de ensino médio acerca do processo de aprendizagem da língua inglesa. Para isso, foram aplicados questionários que permeassem essa temática, a fim de entender as convicções presentes e de que forma o contexto de ensino exerce influência sobre elas. Os participantes da pesquisa foram alunos de escolas públicas e particulares da cidade de Joinville. As análises dos resultados deram-se com base em alguns teóricos fundantes como Brown (2015), McKay (2002) e Tanaka (2003), além de outros autores que investigam a área da linguística aplicada. A pesquisa apontou resultados e reflexões muito pertinentes, evidenciando que, apesar de não ter sido tão diferente nos dois cenários, o contexto tem forte interferência no modo como os alunos percebem a aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira e se veem nesse processo.

Palavras-chave: contextos de aprendizagem de inglês; crenças dos alunos; inglês como língua estrangeira.

Resumen: Este artículo es el resultado de una investigación realizada por académicos del curso de Letras de la Universidad da Região de Joinville (Univille) que tuvo como objetivos comprender, identificar y replantear las creencias que traen los estudiantes de la escuela secundaria sobre el proceso de aprendizaje del idioma inglés. Para eso, se aplicaron cuestionarios a respecto de ese tema, a fin de comprender las convicciones actuales y de qué manera el contexto de enseñanza interfiere en ellas. Los participantes de la investigación fueron estudiantes de escuelas públicas y privadas de la ciudad de Joinville. El análisis de los resultados ocurrió con base en algunos teóricos fundamentales como Brown (2015), McKay (2002) y Tanaka (2003), además de otros autores que investigan el área de lingüística aplicada. La investigación arrojó resultados y reflexiones muy pertinentes, mostrando que, aun no tan diferente en los dos escenarios, el contexto tiene fuerte interferencia en como los estudiantes perciben el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera y ven a sí mismos en ese proceso.

Palabras clave: contextos de aprendizaje de inglés; creencias de los estudiantes; inglés como lengua extranjera.

INTRODUCTION

In Brazil, English is a mandatory subject in all schools starting from the 6th grade, according to the Common Core Curriculum (Base Nacional Comum Curricular – BNCC). The BNCC states that the study of the English language allows the students to have more

access to global matters and know about them, contributing, thus, to the students' critical agency and to an active citizenship, opening new possibilities of interaction. The document also prioritizes the political and social functions of English and its status as a *lingua franca*, emphasizing the importance of learning it as a second language (BRASIL, 2018). The content subject, however, is not the only important factor in the learning process, especially when it comes to second language learning.

Also, in accordance with Kalaja and Barcelos (2013), learners' beliefs can influence not only on their learning methods and strategies, but also on how they view the language and the conflicts that may arise during the learning process. However, the hardest problem about learners' beliefs is, according to Wenden (2001 *apud* BERNAT; GVOZDENKO, 2005), that they are often overlooked. The author also mentions studies conducted by many scholars whose findings lead to the conclusion that the context in which the learners is determines what beliefs they have towards language learning. As stated by Wenden (1987 *apud* FAZILATFAR *et al.*, 2015), it is possible that learners' beliefs about language learning influence the strategies they apply when undergoing the process of learning a new language.

Understanding these beliefs, it is important to establish the method and approach that should be used to reach these students, and to clarify all misconceptions they might have. Moreover, it is also important to learn where these beliefs come from: if they differ from one social context to another, and how it may reflect on society. Therefore, this research aims to identify the students' beliefs, the context in which they appear, and to compare learners' beliefs about English learning in public and private high schools. The research also has the goal of resignifying previous established conceptions about English learning in both contexts by reflecting upon how EFL learners see themselves in language learning and how they perceive the teacher's role in this process. To achieve the results, this research used quantitative and qualitative methods, applying questionnaires to high school students concerning their beliefs about English learning. Then, the answers were analyzed according to some theories

Firstly, this article presents the basic authors for this investigation, such as Brown (2000; 2015), McKay (2002) and Tanaka and Ellis (2003), to provide a wider contact with the field of English learning beliefs. Then, the results collected through the questionnaire, along with the analysis and the main hypothesis raised with it, are exhibited. Last of all, we discuss the main conclusions about the learner's beliefs in both contexts. The reflections and results achieved with this research may contribute to a better understanding about the learning conceptions carried by students, providing numbers and analyses to improve the approaches and maximize opportunities to get in touch with the language in regular English classes. It also provides a basis to understand why students have such conceptions, and what in their context may contribute to their beliefs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning a new language as a foreign or second language is a process that depends on three main spheres: the teacher, the context, and the learner. Teachers have the challenges of making their students get interested in the classes, in the contents, and of promoting their curiosity to learn the target language. Their work is more successful when they consider the students' culture and experiences, making them feel part of the learning, of that language, and of its culture. In this way, the learners' context needs to take place in the classroom, with discussions and comparisons, making them see purposes, individual ones or not, to study it.

The context also has significant influences on language learning. In English's case, there are two mentioned by Brown (2015): the context where English is learned as a

second language (ESL) and the context where it is learned as a foreign language (EFL). In the first case, the students go out of their classrooms and have ready-made contexts for communication, for daily life uses, whereas in the second situation the learners do not have the language readily available and, therefore, they need to make some effort to find opportunities to use it. In Brazil, English is, to many students, a foreign language. So, it corresponds to the second case. Because of that, Almeida (2012) defends that, due to the students not being required to speak outside the schools, reading should be the most relevant skill. The author proposes that rethinking the goals of EFL in regular schools – both private and public ones – is what one needs to do to avoid the perpetuation of meaningless pedagogical practices.

Considering that the learners' effective learning is the main objective, the ones who must be at the center of the discussions are the learners. Additionally, most of them have some beliefs involved in this process, as McKay (2002, p. 90-91) points out: "Particularly, older learners, have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be delivered. These beliefs are based on previous learning experiences." There are learners, for example, who prefer to focus on grammar, thinking it is more relevant, while others believe that they need to "speak like a native," and use this belief as a model.

Some of the factors aforementioned can interfere on how fast the student will learn the language, but they are not obstacles that might impede the learning. However, the school and the language teacher need to work together, showing their students their potential, giving feedback about their mistakes and successes, motivating them to know more about the language and the culture and to speak about themselves, creating opportunities for the language use. Brown (2015) brings some guidelines for teachers and learners for maximizing the second language (L2) use in foreign language contexts:

- Use class time for optimal authentic language input and interaction;
- Don't waste class time on work that can be done as homework;
- Help students to see genuine uses for the L2 in their own lives;
- Provide extra-class opportunities such as suggesting an L2-speaking-movie or TV show, using the L2 on social media such as Facebook or Twitter, getting an L2-speaking conversation partner if available, doing outside reading (news, magazines, books) or writing a journal or diary [...];
- Form a language club and a schedule of regular activities (BROWN, 2015, p. 162).

When these contexts include public schools, more specifically in countries that learn EFL, like Brazil, following the guidelines can be more difficult, but not impossible. The teacher and the learner need to be motivated to discover the language and its uses, breaking previous established thoughts and beliefs, both about teaching/learning English in public schools and about learning difficulties. Only after overtaking these beliefs, carried by teachers and by students, the possibilities for learning can increase, more methods and approaches can be tested, and more experiences and practices can be lived.

Moreover, learner beliefs can be shaped during the learning process, and the teacher must know how to deal with all the different thoughts of their students. Because of that, it is possible to say that "the relationship between beliefs, behaviors, and learning outcomes is an interactive and dynamic one" (TANAKA; ELLIS, 2003, p. 64), since it depends on how the class will be prepared and given. Tanaka and Ellis (2003) also affirm that learner's beliefs are situation-specific, which means that those beliefs vary according to factors such as age, environment, family, cultural background and context, as stated before. The authors have brought a list of statements learners shared with them for their research, as seen in Figure 1:

Figure 1 – Learners' belief statements*Belief Statements:*

1. I can learn well by speaking with others in English
2. If I am permitted to make mistakes in English, it will be difficult for me to speak correctly later on.
3. I can learn well if I try to study English outside class on my own.
4. I can learn English well by writing down everything in my notebook.
5. In order to speak English well, it is important for me to learn grammar.
6. It doesn't matter if I make mistakes when speaking with others in English.
7. In order to learn well, it is important for me to review what I have been taught in the English class.
8. I should be able to understand everything I read in English.
9. In order to learn well, it is important for me to try to think about my progress in English.
10. I can learn well by listening to radio or watching TV in English.

Source: Tanaka and Ellis (2003, p. 85)

It is clear that all the statements are different, and they show personal learning strategies in English, as listening to music, reading and learning grammar. Besides that, it is possible to notice personality traits, such as the duality between making or not mistakes in English and the need to know the student's progress. Tanaka (1999) has identified the following: "Two broad dimensions of learner beliefs: (a) beliefs about self as a language learner (*e.g.*, self-efficacy, confidence, aptitude, motivation) and (b) beliefs about approaches to language learning" (*apud* TANAKA; ELLIS, 2003, p. 65).

Knowing that, it is a fact that the majority of investigations made in this area was once only about "what beliefs learners hold and how learners' backgrounds (*e.g.*, nationality and previous language learning experiences) affect their beliefs" (TANAKA; ELLIS, 2003, p. 64). However, in recent times, the focus is also on the changes of learner's beliefs during the period of acquiring proficiency, since it is important to follow it and to mediate an efficient teaching-learning environment.

METHODOLOGY

The present research uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. In this way, the quantitative research provides numbers and statistics from the collected data, while the qualitative one uses the data for further analysis and interpretation in a non-numerical way. This kind of research can also be called quanti-quali, precisely because it combines the two modalities to allow a full analysis. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3-4):

Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. [...] Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide-range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand.

Thus, in this research the participants were 53 high-school students in the same age range, 18 from a public high school and 35 from a private one, in the city of Joinville, who have regular English classes. They answered an individual questionnaire (the data collection instrument), having 11 closed and semi-open questions, concerning their beliefs on a L2 learning. Then, the researchers tabulated the results and described, interpreted and analyzed the collected data, comparing the results from the private schools to the ones from the public schools, having as references the basic authors.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first question investigated the students' opinion about the importance of the English language, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – First question: Do you believe English is important?

	Public school	Private school
Yes	100% (18)	91.4% (32)
So so	0	8.6% (3)
No	0	0

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

Considering the percentages, it is noticeable that the importance of the language is almost a general agreement in both contexts, what is probably related to the lingua franca status which English has nowadays, showing it is a language that provides a wider communication across the borders of the native countries, as McKay (2002) defends. However, in the private school context, it is interesting to perceive that 8.5% of the students see the language with average importance, even if their school gives a lot of focus to that. It can be related to the applicability they see in the language, proving that using English only at school is not enough to understand its role and importance.

The second question was a semi-open one, which had as a goal to understand the contexts where the students use English in their daily life (Table 2).

Table 2 – Second question: In which contexts do you use English daily?

	Public school	Private school
Only at school	22.2% (4)	8.5% (3)
In trips	27.7% (5)	68.5% (24)
For entertainment	66.6% (12)	77.1% (27)
For work	33.3% (6)	17.1% (6)
Others. Which?	0	8.5% (3) With friends from other countries; chats with foreigners on the internet; English courses

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

The results bring some similarity in both contexts, mainly in the entertainment option, which shows that the contact with the language is more provided and even more meaningful in these situations in which the students have no obligation to learn, as McKay

(2002) points out when affirming that entertainment is one of the reasons why English is spread. It is also possible to perceive that there are more students in the public school who only use the language in the school context, showing the access to English is not equal for everyone.

What makes a greater difference between the answers are the opportunities for traveling abroad to practice the language, which the private school brings more frequently. However, as said before, this does not have a relevant influence on language learning, because “the ownership of English is no longer limited to English native speakers and their countries” (BROWN, 2015, p. 163), allowing people who are in EFL contexts to become as fluent as those who go abroad. To prove that, the students from the private school brought other contexts in which they use English that can be provided in Brazil: with friends from other countries, chats with foreigners on the internet and English courses.

The third question investigated a very widespread belief carried by English students, which concerns the possibilities of becoming fluent in English (Table 3). This question also converses with what was discussed in the previous one.

Table 3 – Third question: It is just possible to become fluent in English by traveling or living abroad. Do you agree with this statement?

	Public school	Private school
Yes	50% (9)	37.1% (13)
No	50% (9)	62.9% (22)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

As shown in Table 3, in the public school, half of the students still believe that going abroad is the best way to become fluent in English, which is not necessarily true. McKay (2002, p. 41) says that “the goal of English language learning to achieve a native-like competence must be put aside”, justifying that learning English should not be associated to a comparison with native speakers, because there are no better speakers. In the meanwhile, in the private school this conception is clearer, with more than 60% of the students believing that it is possible to become fluent just by studying in Brazil, probably because this is a most frequent reality in their contexts.

In both schools there are meaningful percentages of students who still believe in this fallacy, since most of them try to compare themselves to those who have already traveled or lived abroad, or to native speakers, as if they were models. These results also present a need both schools still have, which concerns to the deconstruction of the beliefs spread by the students, making them feel more secure and not inferior in comparison to those who have more resources, by giving examples of English speakers who are like them and who passed by the same process they are in, for instance.

The fourth question was about the students' opinion regarding learning English with a teacher who is a native speaker, *i.e.*, whether they thought it was the most efficient way (Table 4).

Table 4 – Fourth question: Do you agree that learning English with a native teacher is the most efficient way?

	Public school	Private school
Yes	77.8% (14)	57.1% (20)
No	22.2% (4)	42.9% (15)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

Table 4 shows that, in both contexts, the majority of the students agree that a native speaker would be indeed the best teacher. As Kalaja and Barcelos (2013, p. 2) state, there are many students who believe that their non-native teachers are not well prepared to teach them, and being in contact with a native speaker would be the most effective way to learn the English language. However, the results obtained from students from the private school were not as close to unanimity as the ones from the public-school students, which is a possible indicator that the former are more satisfied with their classes. This might be due to the fact that, in Brazil, private schools tend to be stricter when it comes to choose teachers who have a higher proficiency degree in the language.

The fifth question had the purpose to analyze the students' beliefs towards the importance of grammar when learning English (Table 5).

Table 5 – Fifth question: Mastering grammar rules is the most important part of mastering the English language. Do you agree with this statement?

	Public school	Private school
Yes	50% (9)	14.3% (5)
No	50% (9)	85.7% (30)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

There is a divergence between the public and private-school students. The beliefs of the public-school students are split exactly in half, and the private-school ones heavily lean towards the rejection of grammar as the most important aspect when learning the English language. This shows what McKay (2002, p. 90-91) explained when she wrote about learners having their beliefs set towards how they would like the instruction to happen. Tanaka and Ellis (2013) point out the students' backgrounds and previous learning experiences as part of a defining factor to which beliefs learners hold.

Regarding the students interviewed for this research, it is possible to say they have different backgrounds and that their learning experiences are different because of the schools in which they study. Brazilian public schools tend to have less qualified English teachers, and it is not a rare phenomenon for them to go on strikes, compromising students' learning and having to try to recover the lost topics in a short period of time, causing teachers to focus only on grammatical aspects. On the other hand, private schools often work with grammar within a context. In addition, they have the tendencies to choose teachers who are more familiarized with the English language and to invest in their continuing education, which keeps them updated on the most recent research on EFL acquisition. Such practices may reflect on students' beliefs, as they are part of their learning experiences.

The sixth question focused on whether students perceived making mistakes as acceptable while communicating in English (Table 6).

Table 6 – Sixth question: What matters most in the English language is being able to communicate without worrying about making mistakes. Do you agree with this statement?

	Public school	Private school
Yes	55.6% (10)	74.3% (26)
No	44.4% (8)	25.7% (9)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

The results obtained through this question go in accordance with the ones from the previous question, as grammar and mistakes are often inversely correlated. At the same time, it is possible to notice that communication is the priority in both contexts. Yet, there are many students who still believe standard English is the one that should always be spoken, especially in public schools, since they frequently see the language decontextualized. Perhaps this comes from comparisons students make between native speakers they have contact with, in entertainment or on the internet, and themselves, focusing exclusively on how effortlessly they can convey their ideas, and not noticing that people who have English as their first language also make mistakes both in speaking and writing.

The seventh question was about whether the students agreed that being proficient in English meant making no mistakes (Table 7).

Table 7 – Seventh question: Having proficiency in English means not making mistakes. Do you agree with this?

	Public school	Private school
Yes	5.6% (1)	8.6% (3)
No	94.4% (17)	91.4% (32)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

It is a very common belief that, in order to be considered fluent in a certain language, one cannot make any mistakes, which is largely due to the conception of the native speaker as the perfect model. In this case, the majority of students do not agree with this statement, and in both contexts most students believe that their mistakes do not necessarily mean they are not proficient in a language. Still, there are some students who have an idealized view of a perfect proficiency, meaning they do not make any mistakes after achieving it.

This is very interesting especially in comparison to the previous question, in which nearly the majority of public-school students and a significant quantity of private-school students do not agree with communication, regardless of mistakes, being the priority. As a consequence, it is possible to see a divergence in the answers: while a significant number of students believe that one should not make mistakes when communicating, possibly visualizing the idea of the native as the perfect model, the large majority of them do not believe that making mistakes means you are not proficient.

The eighth question investigated how students see the teacher's role in the classroom (Table 8).

Table 8 – Eighth question: The teacher is the focus of the class because s/he is the source of knowledge. Do you agree with this statement?

	Public school	Private school
Yes	33.3% (6)	42.9% (15)
No	66.7% (12)	57.1% (20)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

The difference in how the students perceive the teacher is quite significant, even though it is not that large. In the context of public schools, it is possible to see that most of the students do not agree that the teacher is the source of knowledge. This could either mean that they do not see the classroom as their main source of English knowledge, preferring to learn on their own, or that they see the teacher such as a mediator. The teacher, in

this case, is seen as giving the tools to the students to learn on their own, but while also providing support rather than purely being a knowledge transmitter.

In private schools, however, the results are a bit different. While the majority of students do not see the teacher as the source of knowledge either, there is still a significant number of them who see him/her like that. This may be due to textbooks and workbooks, which the teacher uses as a guide for their classes, being heavily used in private schools.

The ninth question was about the ways the students preferred to learn English, and they had the possibility to choose more than one option (Table 9).

Table 9 – Ninth question: You learn English better when...

	Public school	Private school
The teacher explains the content	27.7% (5)	60% (21)
You search the content on your own	50% (9)	20% (7)
You solve exercises	38.8% (7)	42.8% (15)
You practice dialogues	61.1% (11)	85.7% (30)
You do things not related to school	88.8% (16)	91.4% (32)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

This question brought meaningful differences in both contexts. A large number of private-school students prefers when the teacher explains the topics, while a very small number of public-school students have the same opinion. This correlates well with the previous question, in which many students from the private school saw the teacher as the source of knowledge. In both cases, however, the vast majority of students prefer to learn English with no school-related activities, meaning that they do not see the classroom as their main source of knowledge, but rather as a more complementary one. In public schools, this is even more evident, with a large number of students preferring to look for English contents on their own rather than relying on the contents provided by their teachers.

It is also interesting to notice that a lot of students in both contexts (though mostly in the private-school context) prefer to learn through dialogues, indicating a preference for the communicative approach. This also ties in with the answers for the sixth question, in which most students agreed that what matters in the English language is being able to communicate. Consequently, it is observable that the majority of students see the importance of learning real-life communication in English, rather than focusing only on grammar.

The tenth question covered how the students perceive the quality of their classes. They analyzed if the English classes they have help them acquire the language (Table 10).

Table 10 – Tenth question: Which alternative is applied to your school English classes?

	Public school	Private school
They are great, because they provide the opportunity to fully learn the language.	0	31.4% (11)
They are enough, because they provide a good basis to learn the language.	27.8% (5)	45.7% (16)
They are not enough, as I have to research on my own or attend an English course at the same time.	50% (9)	20% (7)
They contribute nothing to my language learning.	22.2% (4)	2.9% (1)

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

The results show the difference between the quality of the public-school classes and the private-school ones, as observable in their answers. Private-school students' answers tend to emphasize how much more exposure they have to the language compared to public-school students. However, there are still some students in both contexts who do not deem the classes as good enough for their learning. This might be due to the teacher's approach towards the classes not meeting the students' needs, reducing the students' motivation to study the language, as Brown (2015) states. Furthermore, this question comprises the two broad dimensions of learners' beliefs presented by Tanaka (2003): beliefs about self as a language learner – motivation –, and beliefs about approaches to language learning.

The eleventh question comprehended the students' beliefs towards who plays a more important role in language learning, themselves or the teacher (Table 11).

Table 11 – Eleventh question: As a student, what is your role in English language learning?

	Public school	Private school
I hope the teacher teaches all the contents in class, because s/he is the one responsible for learning to happen.	11.1% (2)	2.9% (1)
I participate in classes and I study on my own, because the teacher and I have the same level of importance for learning to happen.	22.2% (4)	65.7% (23)
Learning depends exclusively on my motivation and effort.	66.7% (12)	31.4% (11)
Learning English does not make sense to me.	0	0

Source: elaborated by the authors (2019)

Considering the answers, few students categorize themselves as passive in the language acquisition process. The private-school students see their participation as an important factor for learning to happen. This can be associated to the heavier study routine they have, which maintains a higher level of pressure on them and also on the teachers. The public-school students acknowledge their role as the main one inside the classroom, which might be a reflection of a common statement made by teachers, that their job is done after having taught a class and that learning depends on the students. Notwithstanding, it is known that learning depends not only on the student, but also on the teacher, both working together, as Brown (2015) affirms.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the research question, some important points could be noticed in regard to learners' beliefs. For example, students in both contexts prefer to learn the language when it is not an obligation; they have an idealized view of native speakers, mainly in the public school; and a different opinion about the English classes, since the majority of the private-school students see the classes as enough, while students from the public one say they need English courses at the same time.

Another relevant point was the controversy when it comes to their beliefs concerning mistakes and proficiency. While the majority of students agree that the importance of English is communicating without worrying about mistakes, a significant quantity of them do not agree with it. Meanwhile, 90% of students agree that proficiency does not mean perfection; they still think they should strive for it, alluding to the native proficiency as a model.

Also, it was possible to perceive how context can influence language learning, and it is remarkable that in the public school there is still a meaningful percentage of students who only use English at school, which shows the possibilities to access the language are not the same. Another factor was about the economic resources, which can facilitate the contact with the language. In regard to this factor, the private-school students brought higher numbers concerning possibilities to go abroad and attending English courses, while the public-school ones use English more frequently at work, for example – two quite different realities.

One more reflection about how the contexts in which students are inserted influence on their learning arises from how important they perceive grammar to be when mastering the English language. In the private-school context, classes are generally more contextualized, which leads to students preferring to focus on their communication skills over mastering grammar. On the other hand, public schools tend to focus on grammar rules, oftentimes decontextualized from real-life tasks, leading the students to believe that mastering grammar is the key to achieve fluency. The way teaching happens in each context also varies – public schools following textbooks and private schools following their own materials –, which converses with how learners' experiences may influence their beliefs towards the best kind of instruction.

Another goal was to reflect upon how EFL learners see themselves in language learning. Students from public school think the learning process depends only on their motivation and effort, probably because of the numerous problems pointed out, while the private-school students understand that they and the teacher must work together, since both of them have a role in the process.

Considering the purpose of identifying how the students perceive the teacher's role in EFL learning, it was possible to see a great divergence. While most students from the private school see their teachers as being their main source of knowledge, public-school students think the teacher plays a more secondary role, and they seek to learn English by themselves. This can also mean that students from the private school live in contexts in which English is easier to access, while public-school students may live in contexts in which English is more uncommon, and they need to search for their own opportunities to use it.

Bearing all that in mind, this research tried to resignify the previous established conceptions about English learning in both contexts. It also brings reflections about the need public and private schools have to deconstruct some fallacies spread by the students referring to their language learning and to reaffirm their view that knowing English is very important. The contributions this research makes are mainly to express the beliefs pointed out are results of the contexts and the educational system the students are inserted in, also providing some guidelines for schools and teachers to rethink their practices and to encourage students to study English beyond the classroom. It is suggested that future research in this area shall continue, conveying the results to schools for them to analyze and reflect upon, thinking about changes that may be implemented to overcome the negative results.

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