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EXPERIENCE REPORT ON STUDENT'S PARTICIPATION IN A UN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SIMULATED COMMITTEE AT THE IFMUNDO 2019

Relato de experiência sobre a participação de estudantes no Comitê simulado da ONU em língua inglesa no IFMundo 2019

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Abstract

The communicative practice in English language rests on the pillars of speaking, reading, writing and listening. However, in general, the regular high school Brazilian student does not often find the necessary subsidies to develop these skills in school. The IFMundo project from the Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas Gerais (IFNMG) – campus Almenara was born aiming to providing multidisciplinary, plural and democratic learning. Within the scope of a simulation of the UN committee, the IFNMG English-language committee is also born with the aim to provide the student a possibility to experience a communicative practice through the representation of a nation, seeking to debate and point out suggestions for improving problems of great global relevance. This paper brings an experience report that point out gains and difficulties faced by students acting as ambassadors responsible for defending their country positions with the committee, using a second language. In the preparatory stage, there was a voluntary selection and the chosen group of participants for the project studied, prepared, simulated and problematized various situations linked to what the project proposed. The participation in all project stages allowed the intensive use of the English language in the debate committee, increased the student's vocabulary and self-confidence in speaking the language, and served as a springboard for participants and others involved in emphasizing the importance of learning English for the academic, social and labor market purposes.

Keywords: English language. Oral practice. Simulation. Debate.

Resumo

A prática comunicativa em língua inglesa se apoia nos pilares da fala, leitura, escrita e audição. Entretanto, de forma geral, o aluno regular do ensino médio não encontra subsídios necessários para desenvolver essas habilidades no âmbito escolar. O projeto IFMundo do Instituto Federal do Norte de Minas nasceu com o objetivo de proporcionar um aprendizado multidisciplinar, plural e democrático. No âmbito, de simulação do comitê da ONU, nasce também o comitê em língua inglesa, que visa oportunizar ao aluno a possibilidade de vivenciar uma prática comunicativa através da representação de uma nação por parte do aluno, buscando debater e apontar sugestões de melhoria para problemas atuais de grande relevância. Esse trabalho traz um relato de experiência que aponta ganhos e dificuldades enfrentados por alunos ao atuar como embaixadores responsáveis por defender seu país junto ao comitê utilizando uma segunda língua. Na etapa preparatória, foi feita uma seleção voluntária onde o grupo de participantes escolhidos para o projeto estudou, preparou, simulou e problematizou diversas situações atreladas ao que o projeto se propõe. A participação nas etapas do projeto permitiu o uso intenso da língua inglesa no comitê de debates, ampliou o vocabulário e autoconfiança do aluno em se manifestar nessa língua e serviu como um trampolim para os participantes e demais envolvidos no sentido de ressaltar a importância de se aprender Inglês para o mundo acadêmico, social e para o mercado de trabalho.

Palavras-chave: Língua inglesa. Prática oral. Simulação. Debate.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of the IFMundo English Committee was born when I was able observe the IFMundo debate dynamics where students take on the role of ambassadors from a particular country and meet with other ambassadors (called delegates) where they discuss current global issues of relevance and worldwide interest. I realized that the student needs to take a position on a particular subject not in accordance with his or her own convictions, but in accordance with the official diplomatic position of the country that he represents. Thus, there may be an internal conflict of interests for the young person who needs to vehemently defend a position that does not necessarily represent his or her point of view.

The English committee's theme was "Review of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the 21st Century". Within the theme, agendas such as the revision of the definition of human rights that contemplates current phenomena such as the emergence of the internet, homo affective relationships, etc. were proposed. In addition, there were discussions regarding the right to intellectual property, the right to privacy and the inclusion of indigenous peoples in society. The themes were widely debated at the event, where each participant (called a delegate) represented a country, defending its position and interests.

The debate between delegates of each country takes place according to the United Nations Committee's debate model. There was a board that mediated and controlled the debates, ensuring that each participant has the same structural conditions for participating in it. Delegates

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argue each other on a specific topic and they need to find a balance between their position and another country´s position.

At the end of the event, the delegates are asked to produce a document where the results of the negotiations between nations were presented, as well as its highlights and conclusions on that theme. Among the solutions presented, the importance of respecting the human being as a being of rights and duties, regardless of their sexual, social or political choice in all nations, stands out. For the country that does not have an inclusion policy, it was proposed that the country adopt measures that go in that direction. Within this theme, the signatory countries proposed that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights be applied more rigorously in all nations and that socio-educational measures be taken to guarantee its compliance.

1 PREPARATION PROCESS

When I arrived in IFNMG campus Almenara in May 2018, preparation for IFMundo 2018 was underway (COSTA; MATINS; PALHARES, 2019). I could see the mobilization of teachers to prepare students for the event with periodic meetings to discuss possible topics that would be discussed. The students, in turn, were reading the study guides prepared by the teachers, which worked on aspects related to topics to be discussed in each committee, and technics on public speaking and debate. There was a Spanish teacher who set up a Spanish language discussion committee as well. This teacher had been preparing her students for a few months for the discussions that took place as planned.

Thus, the idea of setting up an English-language discussion committee came to fill an existing gap in which students reported not having the opportunity to express themselves in English in a more formal setting. According to them, what came closest to a communicative context was when they approached their Second English Language teachers in the hallways or even in the classroom to talk in English, but these conversations were short and with simple dialogues.

As a result of that observation, I proposed to set up the debate committee in English, which means that the participants would be in charge of conducting the whole debate using the English Language. As a methodology, I chose to set up a discussion group with students who have a sufficient level of English to understand and be understood, regardless of their limitations. Once established, the group would hold weekly meetings with varied activities that included: English language practice, vocabulary acquisition dynamics, listening practice, pronunciation correction, among others (Figure 1).

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Figure 1 – Group meeting.



Source: autor.

In addition, a WhatsApp group was created with the purpose of minimizing the response time in which the participant needed to wait to resolve a certain question. This group was of great importance for the training progress, as it allowed the participants to feel more comfortable to interact with the other colleagues in the face-to-face meetings, since they had already exchanged messages through this channel.

For the debate, the methodology used refers to autonomous learning practices, since "autonomy resides in the ability of the subject to take their own training for themselves" (Gottardi, 2015 p.113). Thus, I understand that the student achieves a more meaningful learning when he or she "appropriates" the object to be learned, in this case the selected country, and seeks an information framework for the debate.

When I presented the idea of an English committee on the IFMundo project, there was initially some resistance from the students as they said they were unable to conduct a high level debate in a language they were not sure of using. One of the biggest challenges was to convince them that they would be able to participate in a high-level debate committee, even in a language that they do not completely master and do not feel confident about using it, either because of their limited vocabulary, low self-confidence or other factors inherent in language use in practice.

Regarding the background of the participating students, most of them had a reasonable level of English but had no communicative practice. Most students reported learning English on their

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own either using computer games or English language games, listening to music and watching TV shows.

The student selection was done on a voluntary basis. The existence of the project was disclosed to all classrooms and the interested students should express their interest through a simple registration with personal information and questions about their English language learning. Subsequently, the participants were summoned to a meeting, where the project dynamics, duration, objectives and goals were explained. From then on, the student who had no interest in participating could choose to give up before starting effectively. The enrolled totaled 28 students, of which four of them chose not to continue the project. After the first meeting, some students again manifested desire to give up under the argument that their English was not good enough to take part in such debates. They were encouraged to continue persisting and learning more and more. Even so, we had two students drop out, equivalent to 8% of the inicial group.

Once the participant group was defined, weekly meetings were held where I brought topics for debating as well as simulated interactions between delegates and delegates with the board of directors, and practiced specific vocabulary focused on the proposed debates. These meetings lasted one hour and only English was used between the participants and me.

A predominantly positive factor was the vocabulary improvement of the participating students. In the first meetings of the preparatory period, the student's English speaking was timid due to the factors already mentioned. This has made me create mechanisms to stimulate student output such as the presentation of word lists used in the context of a committee. I also used video testimonials from students from other institutions who participated in similar events, and finally, the participation of a teenager who had several experiences in UN committee simulations in Brazil and abroad, who exposed her considerations regarding the project and talked about the impact that such experiences had on her life. This participation was crucial in encouraging students and showing that the scope of the project is much larger than the simple debate between delegates from various nations.

3 THE DEBATE

The culmination of the IFMundo project is the debate between delegates. There is a preparation logistics where a group of students are the main protagonists of the organization, preparation and execution of the necessary conditions for the debate. This happens in the same model of the official debates of the United Nations and our English committee followed the same format of the other committees that used the Portuguese language in its scope. Students dress in character, each representing their respective country. The discussions were initiated as directed by the board of directors, with each delegate representing his or her country identified by a nameplate and dressed for formal occasions. The debate took place for two days and was divided into sessions of 2 hours each.

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Figure 2 – The debate.



Source: autor.

As in the preparatory meetings, some students performed better than others did due to their improved English level, as well as issues related to personality type, public speaking ability, nervousness, etc. A considerable improvement was observed in all the participants of the group, especially those who were not very comfortable with the use of language in their oral usage. As the meetings took place, the participants ventured more in their linguistic placements and this made them perform better within the group, thus creating a progressive circle of learning improvement.

4 RESULTS DISCUSSION

The communication process encompasses several factors that go beyond mastery of grammatical structures or decontextualized words. To put what is known in theory into practice, is necessary to adopt an active learner posture using communication strategies as

> Communication strategies are revealed as mediating instruments that act as bridges between the learner's desire to communicate significantly in L2 (second language) and his available linguistic repertoire to achieve his communicative target. This fact also raises the question of L2 learner's attempts to link their linguistic knowledge to their interlocutor's linguistic knowledge in real communication situations (FIGUEIREDO, 2001 p. 181).

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Thus, speaking English means putting together a skill set that involves both physical and emotional aspects. It is for a person to stand in front of the speaker, understand what he or she says, and give an instant response when receiving information. This process occurs quickly and does not allow time to think and formulate what he or she means, as occurs in a passive communication process. The latter, in turn, is valid but should not be the only form of learning, as the individual can study English for a while, but when it comes to use the language in a real and out-of-school situation, the individual "freezes" and cannot express himself in the desired way.

This is directly linked to emotional and psychological aspects and varies from person to person. An individual who is well-versed in public speaking, who has no problem with shyness and is not ashamed to make mistakes can have positive characteristics when communicating in the English language. On the other hand, the shy and/or introvert person ends up having an extra challenge to communicate in a second language. Some students that showed this profile reported that they would have performed much better if they were not shy. Nevertheless, they rated their participation as positive. "I'm ashamed to present work even in Portuguese, imagine speaking in front of an audience in a language that I don't speak well," said one of the students. "Even so, I managed to overcome my fear and participate in the debate even with few speeches. That was a big leap for me", one concludes.

The IFmundo project improves, among other skills, the participant's argumentative capacity and critical thinking. In the English committee, this was an even bigger challenge because in addition to the participant trying to do their best in a debate, they needed to do it in a language other than their mother tongue, which makes the whole process even more complex. One must really understand what the other delegates meant, his explicit and implicit considerations, and produce an appropriate response or counterargument to succeed in the debate. In this sense, the participant needs to be aware of what he hears and what he will answer in order not to have his position attacked and to have to surrender to the counter arguments. This process aroused in the participant an ability that, according to reports, they did not even know they could do.

Finally, the project gave the students the opportunity to realize a dream, or a task that seemed distant to many because, as much as they had some knowledge of the English language, they could not find an opportunity to put what they had in theory into practice. According to them, it would only be possible to practice English at such a high level if they attended a lecture or an international academic event, which seems far from their reality. In this way, linguistically speaking, the IFmundo project allowed them an international experience without leaving home, where they practiced and improved their vocabulary, their argumentative skills, debate, teamwork, problem solving, among other tasks. The event was an enriching experience for both the students and me as IFMundo is a learning field with infinite possibilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND NOTES

The IFMundo English Project brought significant gains for me as a Second Language English teacher. It was possible to experience in practice a perception gained through reading and classroom experiences but, this time, on a much larger scale.

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High school students generally have little opportunity to actually practice the use of English in the school context. They are housed in an environment in which the current teaching model offers them classrooms with over thirty other teenagers of similar age. The level of knowledge within this environment is vertical with people with low English language skills alongside people who are often almost fluent in the language. In this sense, the teacher is challenged to find a balance so that one or the other group does not feel unmotivated during the classes. This challenge makes it difficult for the teacher to perform better in order to develop key English language skills: speaking, reading, writing and listening.

That said, I highlight an interesting feature in the profile of students participating in this project. They are students from the north of Minas, a region that needs attention from the competent government authorities. Due to being so far away from the big cities, these students are on the fringes of great social and technological advances, as well as other opportunities when compared to other young people from large urban centers. Regarding to the use of the English language, it is modestly used and little explored, since there is still no culture of the importance of learning and mastering English for academic and professional purposes.

The IFMundo's English committee project had, as one of its purposes, to provide a socio-communicative environment where participants interact with each other and with their teacher or tutor, in an environment with a predominantly high language level. This creates an environment conducive to the development of discussions in the target language where it is permissible to make a mistake and, when erroneous, it can be corrected by the participants themselves, who have the opportunity to experience a non-native speaking English with their language addictions, their distorted pronunciations, its grammatical errors and its problems of cohesion and coherence. Unlike listening to a teacher, listening to a colleague speaking English is a different experience because the colleague brings with them these peculiarities. The teacher, in turn, is careful to make the language more comprehensible for his or her learners, using a simpler vocabulary and slower speech rate. The student (or apprentice) is, in most cases, in contact only with the teacher and gets "stucked" to this simpler process of receiving English language input.

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