


## WHAT IF PAULO FREIRE TAUGHT ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN A FEDERAL INSTITUTE IN BRAZIL?

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### ABSTRACT

According to Confucius, an image is worth more than a thousand words. However, we believe a critical perspective is necessary to access the communicative potential of an image. This article aims to defend that learning English can contribute to critical thinking and the exercise of citizenship if viewed from a Freirean perspective. To reach this objective we analyzed an image from the Critical Pedagogy and Education Research Methods in the US and Brazil Project database using the Image Perception Systematization Framework by Amorim and Kress (2020) to reflect on the possibilities of language teaching for Specific Purposes in Brazil from a Freirean perspective. This qualitative research is grounded in the theories of Freire and Giroux. We believe that some changes need to be made for language teaching in Brazil to assume the political task of contributing to the exercise of critical thinking.

**Keywords:** Brazil. English Teaching. Critical Pedagogy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Daring to write from a Freirean perspective is, first and foremost, to reject a supposed objectivity and locate the position from which we speak (i.e., our positionality). In this way, we present ourselves as women who have chosen teaching and thinking through a critical perspective on education as this entails the ability to learn to transform, intervene, and recreate reality. Thus, this study starts from the perspective of one of the authors regarding the place of language teaching at a Federal Institute of Education, Science, and Technology, in Brazil, where she works as an English language teacher. But it makes inroads in the discussions of the other authors who have the mission of educating critical teachers.

In the Brazilian context, the Federal Institutes (hereafter IFs) are supposed to be work environments that allow innovation and teaching practices beyond technical and scientific preparation, in order to enable the citizenship education of students of various levels. In this way, we advocate that learning English is a way of being in the world, acquiring knowledge, and fighting for a more equal and inclusive society. But for this, many times it is necessary to convince our coworkers beforehand, and that is not always easy because it entails other power relations.

Working at an IF in Brazil provides the professional a certain level of autonomy, while being a position in which the professional cannot be fired for any random reason. This fact offers the educator the ground to stand for their beliefs concerning education while being guided by official laws and regulations. The working conditions in IFs are more favorable than in other institutions with markedly more neoliberal biases. However, there is still much to question, especially in the field of humanities. Being from the language area and working in an institution that aims to prepare people for the job market is often challenging. Every course at IFS is vocational. High school courses combine regular academic classes with preparation for a particular career field. Postsecondary programs, called subsequent technical, are short courses 1 year and a half long. There are also the technological majors that are higher education programs designed to prepare students for the world of work in areas related to technology. The curriculum of all levels presented is primarily vocational, and the academic part of the majors is adapted to its needs.

Even though many guiding documents for teaching point to a language teaching that develops competencies and skills that enable students to mobilize and articulate knowledge, as well as socio-emotional dimensions in significant and relevant learning

situations for integral education (BRAZIL, 2018), the ghost of technicality is always present in discussions of formulation and reformulation of Course Pedagogical Projects (PPC), especially in technical and technological courses in which language learning has an almost exclusively instrumental role.

Pardo (2019) summarizes the way people view English: as a secondary and less important subject stating, “with less workload, it is the subject that no one ‘fails’ and that is submissive to other subjects of 'greater value', such as the Portuguese language and mathematics [...]” (p. 218). The struggle begins in the distribution of hours attributed to the curricular component. If there is a need to reduce workload or choose courses that will be taught in the distance learning modality to reduce face-to-face classes, language courses become optional and online more often than others. Technical courses are usually privileged to the detriment of language courses. A question comes to our minds and leads us to reflect on how an English Language Teacher can go beyond teaching methods to develop critical thinking while teaching language learning strategies.

In this sense, based on an image collected by the Critical Pedagogy and Education Research Methods in the US and Brazil Project, we aim to defend that learning English can contribute to critical thinking and the exercise of citizenship if viewed from a Freirean perspective. We support the idea that if Freire were an English language teacher in Brazil, he would find ways to transgress technicality without losing methodological rigor, relating the course contents to the student's reality. According to Freire (2021), “to turn the educational experience into pure technical training is to belittle what is fundamentally human in the educational exercise: its formative character” (p. 34). And that would be something to be changed and transgressed in the way people see the language learning process in IFs.

Without losing sight of the reading techniques that have been used for so long to teach English with specific purposes, a teacher who is dissatisfied with technicality and guided to use an instrumental approach to teach languages based on texts can and should find ways to transgress without necessarily breaking with the prevailing structures, even though this is the desire in many moments. The proposal of the image chosen and analyzed here can be one of the many paths to be taken for this purpose.

## **POINTS TO PONDER: THE WAY THINGS ARE AND THE WAY THEY SHOULD BE**

In recent years, we have witnessed the development of several guiding documents for education in Brazil, among which we highlight the National Curriculum Parameters (1997 and 1998), the Curriculum Parameters for High School Education (2000), the Curriculum Guidelines for High School Education (2006), and the National Common Core (2015-2018). These documents demonstrate the importance of learning a Foreign Language as “a possibility to increase the student’s perception as a human being and as a citizen” (BRAZIL, 1998, p. 63), presenting diversifications over time on the perception of language beyond reading strategies. Despite the changes in language teaching from traditional and grammaticalized methods, focusing upon reading strategies, to broad approaches, connected to social practice and citizenship, in official texts, these guidelines only reach the elementary, middle, and high school levels of education in Brazil. For the context of this study, post-secondary technical courses and technological higher education majors will be taken as elements of the proposed analysis to problematize the operationalization of the discussion.

Besides the legacy of the grammar-translation method, and even the notion that the English language is a cultural reflex of the United States, we observe many aspects that hinder the development of a teaching program to lead students to learn English in k-12 and higher education as a tool to recognize the world as a set of different cultural, social, linguistic, racial, gender identities, etc. If we focus on language teaching in technical courses and technological majors, the guidelines for language teaching in official documents are practically non-existent. Even the notion of citizenship education, beyond the development of common skills, only occurred in 2021 with the National Common Core for Technical and Professional Education at the Secondary Level. This text, which revokes the previous guidelines from 2012, includes socio-emotional competencies in its provisions as an integral part of those required by the professional profile of the undergraduate.

Although some colleagues from the so-called hard areas recognize the importance of foreign language minimally for access to technical knowledge, by the time the projects are being designed, they do not hesitate to reduce the amount of language courses and recommend language teachers to use an instrumental approach, with a focus on reading and textual interpretation, as this allows students to read technical texts in the area faster. Such behavior can be considered a reflection of the conservative wave that flourishes in Brazil and in the world (CHUN, 2013; HOLBOROW, 2012; HILGERS, 2011).

The National Catalog of Technical Courses (BRASIL, 2020) follows the same idea by presenting as a requirement for offering courses only the total number of required credits, the program learning outcomes (which describes what is expected of the professional from a technical point of view), the minimum infrastructure required from the promoting institution, information on the field of action, possibilities of verticalization, and laws that orient professional performance. As it provides little guidance on the subjects, content, socio-emotional skills, and necessary competencies language and humanity courses have constantly had their number of hours reduced, which hinders a more global approach and causes many teachers to succumb to teaching rules and models, reducing language to a system of codes.

It is precisely here that we believe the Freirean ideals must be incorporated, with almost exclusively the role of demanding working conditions and sufficient credits for language and humanities teachers to treat students of vocational courses as subjects who need to enter the world to overcome the obstacles of technicism, exploitation, and subalternity. Foreign language teachers must struggle and, in the face of a reality that sometimes takes time to change, find ways to teach the contents that fall within their responsibility with methodical rigor without being mere content transferors, fostering students' autonomy, curiosity, critical thinking, and the desire to intervene in the world, as Freire advocates. In the next section, we will present the analysis of an image that points to a class activity that promotes critical learning and can stimulate progressive, and decolonial thinking.

## **AN IMAGE IS WORTH MORE THAN A THOUSAND WORDS**

As Freire says, teaching is not just transferring knowledge. It is to create possibilities for the production and construction of knowledge. Moreover, there is no teaching without learning. Therefore, teaching through a critical pedagogy perspective demands active participation of both, teachers and students. It implies "the presence of educators and educating creators, instigators, restless, strictly curious, humble and persistent" (FREIRE, 2022, p. 28). A close look at the picture of the classwork presented below suggests that, through the image of Martin Luther King, teacher and students, together reflected on the differences of being determined and conditioned by History. That is because his image can convey multiple feelings and ideas of citizenship that would require more than a thousand words to be expressed verbally. That is what we will describe from this point on.

The analysis of the selected image will follow the sequence of steps suggested in the framework by Amorim and Kress. The authors of this paper propose a Critical Pedagogical Image Analysis Framework, which they have been developing as one of the outgrowths of a transnational teaching/research collaboration between 3 universities (1 in Brazil, 2 in the U.S.). Using images drawn from our collaborative research and online sources, the authors have been piloting this framework with doctoral students in both nations.

**Table 1:** Critical Pedagogical Image Analysis Framework

Stage	Actions	Synthesis
1. First impressions	Visualize Engage Sensitize	First impressions of the image are written down/expressed, without having to worry about expressing critical and/or analytical aspects. Short words and expressions are used;
2. Describing	Perceive Identify Describe	The image is investigated by analyzing the details, making any connection with the text. Sentences are used to express what was visualized and perceived;
3. Analyzing	Investigate Compare Analyze	The identified elements are analyzed to think about how society (and its individuals) operate in order to strengthen or weaken hegemonic ideas and/or ideologies, making the image and/or text meaningful, bringing out what is between the lines;
4. Developing critical awareness	Infer Imagine Problematize	It is identified what is being expressed by text and/or image from the political, social, economic and cultural meaning of what it is intended to convey.
5. Justifying	Rationalize Theorize	Theorists are brought in, researchers whose arguments supports or refutes elements of the image and/or text;
6. Connecting	Add Know Relate	The search for extra information related to the source is encouraged in order to obtain new, similar or opposite clarifications, opinions or perceptions.
7. Expressing	Express Make a stand Verbalize	The production of meaning is exercised from the perception itself, based on what has already been systematized in items 1 to 6, interpreting the data and expressing ideas, making a stand about what was analyzed, materializing critical thinking through words.

**Source:** (AMORIM; KRESS, 2020, ahead of print).

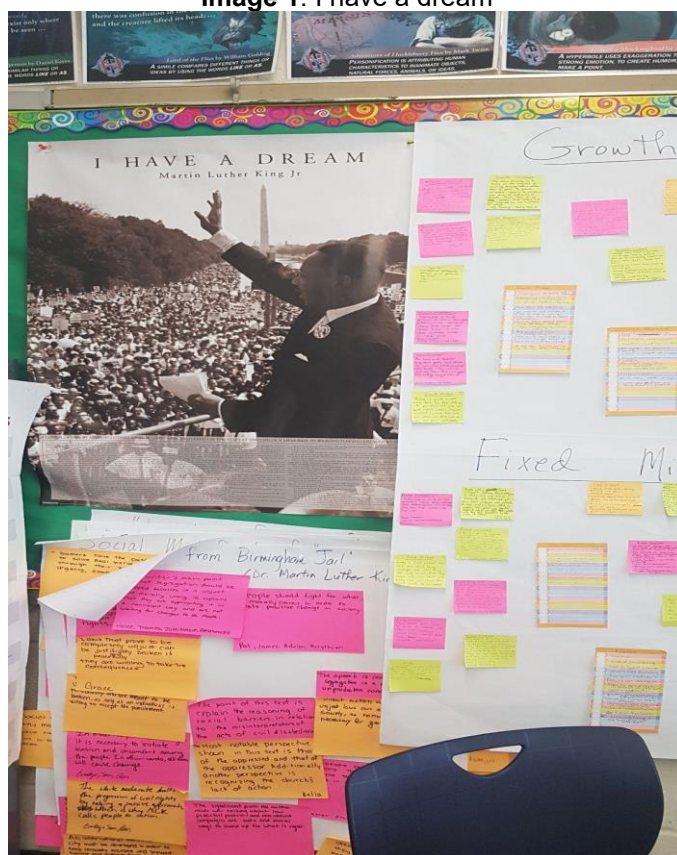
The image chosen to relate to an English language teaching practice is available below and was taken from the group of pictures collected at Hogwarts School<sup>4</sup> during the course of the Critical Pedagogy and Education Research Methods in the US and Brazil Project (2019)<sup>5</sup>. The school is located in the US and mostly has middle class white students attending it.

<sup>4</sup> The real name of the school is not going to be used here to comply with aspects of ethics in research.

<sup>5</sup> In this project, students learned about Paulo Freire's philosophy (developed in the 1960's in Brazil) and critical pedagogy, the U.S. interpretation of Freire's philosophy. Under the partnership with faculty of Molloy College (NY), UMass Boston (MA), Tiradentes University (SE) in Brazil, students gained hands-on experience conducting research about the influence of Freire's philosophy of democratic pedagogy and critical pedagogy in Brazil and the U.S. Students and faculty collaboratively designed research methods, gathered and analyzed data, and developed preliminary findings, culminating in scholarly publication and presentations in scientific events.



**Image 1:** I have a dream



**Source:** *Critical Pedagogy and Education Research Methods in the US and Brazil Project* (2019)

**First Impressions:** it is the result of a school activity displayed in a classroom wall. There are lots of post-its of different colors with information written by hand. The starting point for it is a great inspiration: the picture of Martin Luther King making a speech at the Lincoln Memorial for a crowd. This political activist represents messages of dreams, courage, and hope. Despite the white background, it is an image that mixes various colors.

**Describing:** the report about King's speech seems to be the starting point for classroom discussions. Next to and below the picture, there are white sheets with several different colored post-its. On the top right side, we can see the expression "growth mindset". The students, individually or in groups, write down their perceptions of what it means. On the bottom right side, the key expression is "fixed mindset", and there are several unreadable post-its signed by students. Below the news report, there is a poster titled "From Birmingham Jail" by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and there are larger post-its with texts written by students about the purpose of the text. There is also an empty black chair, which seems to belong to the teacher.

**Analyzing:** The image suggests the culmination of an activity carried out in a classroom and allows some reflections on pedagogical models. It illustrates a classroom context in which students have a voice and reflect on social relationships, historical perspectives, and, above all, the formation of a transformative mindset through access to life stories, such as King's. The empty teacher's chair refers to the idea of decentralization of power in the classroom and student advocacy. This pedagogical setting seems to be connected to or inspired by a critical pedagogy approach.

**Developing critical awareness:** It is a common belief that schools are spaces for social development and contribute to building a more equitable world. In practice, this is not always a reality. Many forms of social oppression are replicated and even produced in schools (GIROUX, 1997). Especially in private schools, teachers have their autonomy curtailed whenever they adopt approaches seen as a means of combatting neoliberal practices. There is a sort of hidden curriculum in which the repetition of colonialist and exclusionary social patterns is reinforced and referenced. Exposing students to characters who have broken with prevailing social norms and creating conditions for them to produce and express their opinions about it can be seen as emancipatory practice.

**Justifying:** One of the questions that motivates teachers the most is expressed and debated by Giroux (1997, p. 34): "How can we make schooling meaningful to make it critical, and how can we make it critical to make it emancipatory?" In his understanding, the design of contemporary schooling aims at educating students to become the future workforce, which we associate with a neocolonialist practice. In the Brazilian context, despite discussions about the need to educate for citizenship, inclusion, and autonomy, in schools we can identify "forces that, in general, socialize students to conform to the status quo" (GIROUX, 1997, p. 67).

Regarding most English courses in vocational training, students should use reading techniques to recognize text genres, identify cognate words, and keywords to make efficient translations aiming at professional situations in which they must read manuals, e-mails, and texts to fulfill their work responsibilities in a world where the language of technology is English. Without disregarding the importance of the techniques and skills, when teaching English for Specific Purposes a teacher can intentionally contribute to the education of critical thinkers and the exercise of citizenship by associating this type of practice with deeper reflections of the social reality in which students will develop their professional activity. Thus, we can reflect together with Freire (2021, p. 42) that



One of the most important tasks of critical-educational practice is to provide the conditions in which the students, in their relationships with each other and the teacher, can rehearse the profound experience of assuming themselves. To assume oneself as social and historical beings, as thinking, communicative, transforming, creative, dream maker, capable of feeling anger because they are capable of love. Assuming themselves as subjects because they are capable of recognizing themselves as objects.

An analysis of the chosen image allows us to infer that the teacher developed an activity in which the students can reflect on themselves. As the teacher provides them with knowledge about a person who fought for the improvement of Black people's living conditions, encouraging them to discuss and write their perceptions about the article in small groups and provides access to the responses of their classmates, he creates conditions for them to assume themselves, dare to be angry, but also dare to dream of a more egalitarian world. These individuals can reflect on their actions as subjects who practice or suffer from racism actions. They can also realize whether they possess fixed or growth mindsets, move away from the condition of docile recipients to critical thinkers.

[...] there is a need to talk about criticism and critical thinking in order to problematize socio-cultural issues and not just raise awareness about it, because only through the development of this type of thinking the subjects will be able to accept and know who they are in relation to others, through their differences, within a collective identity that is based on a regime of truth (BASTOS; PINTO; AMORIM; KRESS, 2022, p. 107).

We think that any teacher can plan and carry out activities to develop critical thinking. And we firmly believe that English language teachers, whose focus is on reading, also have opportunities to intentionally problematize the ways of life to which we are connected. The secret may lie in the choice of texts. A text chosen based on the perception of the type of conflict that needs to be worked on within an academic community can be a valuable object of social transformation. An English language teacher aware of this can contribute to the exercise of critical thinking that can eventually result in the formation of an emancipated society.

**Connecting:** Having the Brazilian context in mind, a teacher could choose a text to bring about problems related to the concepts of the English language as a North American cultural tool, and the United States as a role model nation to open students' minds about the idea that the freedom the United States propagates is far from ideal from a humanistic perspective. In this sense, activities that bring historical examples of resistance and struggle

contribute to the unveiling of reality. Not doing so is to coalesce with a neocolonialist practice and maintain a view loaded with coloniality, submission, and subordination.

The text in the image, like many others, can be used for reading activities that allow students to reflect on the social reality of the world as a process of becoming, not as a capitalist inevitability in which we need to adapt without questioning the logic of the development of automated and conformist professional and social personalities. This is a celebrated Freirean perspective, pedagogy of hope, perfectly possible in language classes whose working material is the text. Learning linguistic patterns and grammar rules from texts like this makes language learning more meaningful.

**Expressing:** The teaching of the English language in Brazil needs to go beyond the neoliberalist utilitarianism of instrumentalization for the job market. On the contrary, teaching a foreign language as a cultural tool fosters critical thinking. The comparative perspective provides recognition of differences and similarities that are important to identity (re)formation and (re)confirmation. Pedagogical approaches that encourage students to perceive the unfolding of history and the exercise of taking a stand can contribute much more to the development of an equitable society, going beyond the lexical-grammatical mastery of a language.

## **SOME CONSIDERATIONS**

If we evaluate the development of guiding documents for teaching in Brazil, we can see progress. From the publication of the National Curriculum Parameters (1997 and 1998) to the recent versions of the Nacional Common Core (2015-2018), we can recognize the idea that teaching English can be a “possibility of increasing the student’s perception as a human being and as a citizen” (BRAZIL, 1997, p. 63).

However, the same documents that defend the importance of learning English for access to the necessary linguistic knowledge to active citizenship, reduce the mandatory offer of the subject in the three years of high school (BRAZIL, 2018). The only subjects that are mandatory in the three years of high school are Portuguese and Mathematics. In other words, while the state recognizes the importance of English as a means of fostering critical and citizen-driven social action, it reduces the opportunities to access this type of knowledge for a significant portion of society that can’t afford private English classes, and it maintains the superiority of subjects such as Portuguese and Mathematics.

Furthermore, while English education in K-12 schools already have support from the government to promote active citizenship and foster critical thinking, as advocated by the Nacional Common Core since 2018, there are countless course plans for subsequent technical and technological courses within an instrumental approach focused on learning reading techniques.

What is the role of an English teacher who does not conform to teach only reading strategies? To study pedagogical models and educational proposals that support transgressive practice, which contributes to build an informed and convincing discourse among students. Certainly, this would be the behavior of Paulo Freire if he taught English for Specific Purposes in a Federal Institute in Brazil, and in this sense, his writings are still very relevant. For him, among other things, teaching requires risk, methodological rigor, research, respect for the student's previous knowledge, critical thinking, aesthetics, and ethics. Of all the demands leveled by Freire, one echoes more strongly: teaching requires critical reflection on practice. Therefore, we must always ask ourselves: what are we doing in the classroom? What kind of education are we contributing to?

It is up to the Paulo Freires of English language teaching to show that learning a language, even in a professional context, has the power to foster other skills beyond mere uncritical decoding of a text. And even though the prestige of these agents is small compared to the defended superiority of the core subjects, there are paths to becoming a Freire of languages. To do this we must keep the flame of hope burning, sharpen curiosity and creativity, and develop tasks like the one analyzed in the text, which allow students to take a position and dream of a better world. We must be active intellectuals, hope, and act.

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