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WHAT CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONDITION OF SUBALTERNITY

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Abstract: In times of implementation of the proposals for the Brazilian basic education policy, the National Common Core Curriculum /2017 (Base Nacional Comum Curricular - BNCC), herein referred to as the Base, and no less important, times of defining the new model of High School, my provocative question “What cat got your tongue ?” brings reflections on how certain practices in the English language (EL)/Foreign Languages (FL) classroom, promoted by a certain group of teachers with certain types of agency, serve to place certain groups of students in a subaltern position marked by silencing and erasure. Thus, focusing on the development of the competencies contemplated in the Base, I seek to discuss some notions, presented on the online course offered by MEC on the AVAMEC platform, for teaching English language (EL) in the last grades of Middle School. The theoretical framework of this discussion encompasses the concepts of subalternity and agency broached in Monteiro (2021), with emphasis on the critical analyzes of Spivak (2010 [1988]) and Andreotti (2007, 2014), added to those of Monte Mór (2013a) on the relevance of studies and problematizations of Brazilian language policies in EL/FL Teachers Education program. Aiming for a responsible, egalitarian and just educational project, I also rely on the critical perspective of bell hooks (2021[2000]), who argues that there is no justice without love. I therefore defend the idea that subalternities arise where there is no love. From my perspective, this project requires loving practices in the classroom with non-hierarchical approaches, seeking to populate the classroom space with student contexts and desires. This calls for critical readings of ourselves (cf. Menezes de Souza, 2011), considering our implications for the continuity of the colonial logic that today permeates the digital universe, with

interventions in data collection, development and learning of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: National Common Core Curriculum, English language in the last grades of middle school, Subalternity, Agency, Loving practices.

“Fire!... They burned ``Palmares``,

``Canudos`` was born.

Fire!... They burned ``Canudos``

``Caldeirões`` was born.

Fire!... They Burned ``Caldeirões``.

``Pau de Colher`` was born.

Fire!... They burned ``Pau de Colher``...

And they were born, and so many other communities will be born that will tire them if they continue burning

Because even if they burn the writing, they will not burn the orality.

Even if they burn the symbols, they will not burn the meanings.

Even burning our people, they will not burn the ancestry.

Antônio Bispo dos Santos (1959-2023)
- Colonization, quilombos: modes and meanings (2015)

INTRODUCTION

The provocation “Can the teacher speak?” brings us to questions of subalternity and agency. Building on some philosophical questions discussed in Monteiro (2021)¹, I seek to share my reflections on the condition of subalternity imposed by a certain type of agency imbued with beliefs, with precepts aligned with neoliberal socioeconomic models, as Monte Mór (2013b, p.19) warns us. I continue to defend in-depth studies and critical analysis of the current education policy, the National Common Core Curriculum – BNCC (2017), which I will refer to as the Base.

1. Master's Dissertation, 2021. The BNCCEM-English: a question of subalternity or agency?
Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.11606/D.8.2021.tde-07062022-150841>.

I seek, then, to invite fellow English language (EL) and Foreign Languages (FL) educators to discuss the proposals for the development of the compulsory general competencies, aiming at acquiring a sense of citizenship, belonging, autonomy and protagonism, in accordance with the aforementioned policy.

Following this analysis, I extend the invitation to reflect on notions of the Base, explained on the online course, offered by MEC through the AVAMEC platform, for teaching English in the last grades of middle school. It is noteworthy that this is an important moment of transition to high school.

I consider this problematization a loving practice for the construction of a just and egalitarian education. I rely on the perspective of love defended by bell hooks² that “Without justice, there can be no love” (hooks, 2021, p.62,72 [2000, p.30]). I extend this notion and defend the idea that where subalternities *arise* there is no love. As discussed in my previous work, Spivak (2019) asserts that it is necessary to investigate not what is, who is, but rather how the phenomenon of subordination arises. To this end, I see a possibility to develop our analyzes based on a (re)reading of the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education - LDB/1996 with the school community, focusing on the notion of pluralism, as well as the (re)reading of the OCEM, focusing on the development of citizenship. As researchers and collaborators in the preparation of the OCEM, Monte Mór and Menezes de Souza (2006) raise important questions about the position, the locus of speech of students in the school space and in society. Andreotti (2007), in conjunction with Spivak’s (2003) ideas about education, leads us to question who is given the right to citizenship and, in

this awareness exercise, consider the fact that Brazilian language policies have been designed to meet the demands of a white elite, as Nascimento (2019) remarks, in his defense of the “racialization of education” (p. 113, free translation).

LOVE FROM THE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE AS AN ACTION FOR INCLUSIVE AND JUST EDUCATION

Based on the theoretical framework mentioned above, I persist with the proposal of constantly (re)reading ourselves and our practices in the classroom, so as not to fall into the traps of the superstructure that engenders the reductionism of everything and everyone a (cf. Arendt, 2007). I am referring to the risk of assuming the position of teachers who simply assimilate the curricular program that is offered to them, acting as “coders and ventriloquists”, as Luke (2004, p. 1434) argues. From this perspective, with the perception of the fatal reduction of teachers to the role of “mere enforcers of norms”, Monte Mór (2013a, p. 221, free translation) defends the importance of in-depth study and critical analysis of Brazilian educational and language policies.

It is based on these conceptions that I persist in reading and critical reflections about the pedagogical guidelines provided for in the BNCC (2017). More specifically, it is necessary to investigate the notions that underlie the guidelines for “what students must know [...] and above all what they must do” (Brazil, 2017). I also highlight the words about the Base’s goal, presented in a diagram available in the online course mentioned above, which is “the student you want” (Avamec, 2023 [2019]). In my opinion, this implies establishing what

2. According to the author, her choice of name in lowercase letters seeks to direct attention to “the substance [of my] books, and not who I am”. From the original: “the substance of [my] books, and not who I am”, excerpt taken from the article: Bell Hooks (1052-2021), On December 15, 2021. Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/news/bell-hooks-1952-2021-2-251224/>. Accessed on: October 9, 2023.

the teacher must know and do, as well as the teacher you want. Regarding the videos that make up this course, I identify and cite here some concepts launched for the construction of a “positive school” (Ibidem) as a space for a possible process of subalternization of teachers and, consequently, their students and their students, namely:

Making agreements and building rules lead people to follow those rules [...] PISA student assessment: good in countries where teachers work cooperatively [...] Conflict is something that has to be talked about and resolved. It is the logic of resolution” (Avamec, 2023 [2019]).

Furthermore, this online course includes complementary readings that corroborate the Base’s proposals, among which I focus on the issue of metacognition as a strategy for learning to learn, obtaining results with autonomy in a successful way. Regarding additional reading for this discussion, the course refers to Diniz (2017)³, who articulates the practice of metacognition based on the metaphor “directing one’s own brain”, as she explains and defends the idea of students being “more metacognitive, that is, more aware and owners of their own learning” (Diniz, 2017, s/p).

As a critical, Indian and feminist theorist, Spivak (2010 [1988]) sought support in Grammatology according to Derrida’s (1973) critique of the conception of the history of philosophy as being the history of the metaphysics of presence. This is a critique of the dominant ideas of “Rousseau’s time”, as the philosopher calls it, right at the beginning in the Warning section (Derrida, 1973, p. VII). In other words, Derrida develops a critique of the centrality attributed to reason (logocentrism), to the male voice linked to reason that makes visible the being that

holds the unique truth of Greek European origin. Based on the premise that the task of grammatology is deconstruction, the author defends the idea that “In a way, then the critique of imperialism is deconstruction as such” (Spivak, 2010, footnote 54 [1988, footnote 47]). The critical point detected by Spivak regarding speaking in a subaltern position, refers to what the author denounces as epistemic violence, that is:

a figure of “woman” [...] one whose minimal predication as indeterminate is already available to the phallogocentric tradition [...] For the “figure” of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are subsumed under that charge [...] The narrow epistemic violence of imperialism gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme (Spivak, 2010, p. 66, [1988, p.82]).

This perception encourages us to reflect on the epistemologies that underlie these discourses launched in the online course mentioned above. The questions they raise are: making agreements, cooperating, resolving conflicts to benefit who? who are we or what are we in this arena?

Here the question of unrepresentability arises in the condition of subalternity, which implies the inability to know and speak properly, highlighted by Spivak (2010, pp. 33-35, 61 [1988, pp. 72-74, 80]).

Still in the approach to videos, I add that the perspective on research work attributed to teaching signals a type of devaluation of the responsible deepening of the researcher/educator’s work, insofar as it is reduced to mechanized work. and commodified, that is, teaching to approve, which implies learning to be approved. Focusing on Freire’s concept of praxis, I highlight Andreotti’s (2006)

3. DINIZ, Ana Maria. Learning to learn: the importance of metacognition in education. ``Estadão de São Paulo``. March 9, 2017. Available at: <https://www.estadao.com.br/educacao/ana-maria-diniz/aprendendo-a-aprender-a-importancia-da-metacognicao-na-educacao/>.

discussion about the notion that “theory without practice is idle; practice without theory is blind” (p. 7). Regarding the focus of the educational standard on learning, another proposal encourages us to give new meaning to learning to learn (Andreotti, 2014, p.143).

I suppose that this critical reflective exercise can be a generator of critical loving pedagogical practices based on an awareness that when we do our best to leave our comfort zone, seeking to deconstruct every thought that corroborates the assimilation of the way of being, thinking and act hegemonic. Through a journey beyond ourselves, it is possible to act in tune with the Other, to be in the world with the Other, according to the notion of worldliness articulated by Samnotra (2020) from the Arendtian perspective. “Wordliness”, being in the world, as the author proposes, is “a form of meaning making practice”, taking into consideration, that “Meaning is something we create in the world with others” (p. 4). As a counterpoint, Samnotra warns that “Wordlessness draws us into the singularity of the “self” (p. 6).

During this process of resignifications based on our relationships with the Other, the constant question “who are we”? It is possible that in the practice of worldliness the discomfort of shame arises within us. When developing an analysis of the worldliness of shame Samnotra argues that “Shame can make us worldly” (p.1). Thus, based on this conceptualization about shame added to the conception of the “implicated subject” by Rothberg (2019), we can situate ourselves in the world and with the world, in a critical and responsible way. I identify an opportunity to develop a discussion based on these concepts in a future article.

That said, based on these reflections about ourselves, I return to the issue surrounding the possible position of the educator as a “shock

absorber” in Spivak’s terms (2010, pp 57-59), serving, albeit in a subordinate position, as an intermediary between the student class and the dominant classes, contributing to the maintenance of subalternities. It is necessary to reject this condition that causes the erasure of subjectivities. It is unacceptable for us to strive to simply apply, without the lens of criticism, what the standard contemplates and, thus, attribute to the Base an agency that contributes to maintaining the verticalization of teaching and reproduction of values according to the ethics of domination, as Freire warns (2017). This risk can also occur when we attribute agency to the Textbook and/or perhaps generative Artificial Intelligence, for example, without the necessary critical analysis.

The Provocation “What cat got your tongue” seeks motivation to speak through loving practices in the perspective of critique, breaking with rhetoric, with the inculcation of ideas and values that contribute to maintaining the status quo. Despite the material precariousness and the difficulties in the daily lives of teachers and students in public schools in Brazil, I believe it is important to occupy the space of our classes with discussions about recent debates about the power of digital platforms.

In view of this, I share an online class experience on the Zoom platform with my student Ronaldo Matos.⁴

In this class, Ronaldo was preparing for a presentation in English, elaborating a critical analysis of these current debates focusing only on digital technologies. Signaling a scenario of digital segregation, Ronaldo presents reflections based on some data provided by the Internet Steering Committee in Brazil (CGI), as well as the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE), and the Information and Coordination Center (NIC. br), namely: the

4. Ronaldo Matos is a journalist and co-founder of a media education and peripheral journalism organization, Unwind and Don't Roll Me Up (<https://desenrolaenaomenrola.com.br>).

CGI reports that 62% of Brazilians (more than 92 million) individuals access the network exclusively via cell phone⁵; NIC.br reveals that the use of the internet only via cell phone predominates among women 64%, among blacks 63%, mixed race 67%, and classes D and E 84%⁶, and of the 62% who only have access to the mobile network, 37% do not check the veracity of the information; according to DIEESE⁷, approximately 9 million Brazilians lost their jobs during the pandemic, of which 71% correspond to black people.

Given this scenario, Ronaldo emphasizes that the black population experiences digital apartheid, a socioeconomic condition that prevents this population from using the internet to study, work and obtain information through anti-racist local media. Furthermore, he highlights that of the 62% of people who only have access to the mobile network, 37% do not check the veracity of the information, a problem that quickly permeates and takes root in different territories.

Based on these data, during our class discussion, Ronaldo Matos proposes a decentralization of the focus of the debate to “debates on the right to memory, historical reparation and the right to life, through the lens of black people: a more collective and ancestral network bringing to the center of our practices the teachings of those who came before us” (Matos, 2023).

This thinking takes me to the notion of agentivity proposed by Menezes de Souza (2019), in line with the Gramscian concept of counter-hegemony, aiming to negate

the subaltern condition through a “moral and intellectual reform”, as members of communities in vulnerable situations are encouraged by individuals within these communities to collectively build a new life project in society, as Roio (2007, p.72, free translation) explains in his studies on Gramsci’s ideas.

Therefore, I highlight the importance and the need for teaching to develop practices that encourage students to think and discuss topics that make sense for their daily lives, seeking to create ethically and collaboratively projects that translate into favorable actions for their material and spiritual growth, as well as that of the people in their communities. In such adverse times, from invasions to genocide, it is important and necessary to educate oneself to identify the productions of meaning and current local practices, supported by the ancestral knowledge and practices of their communities, providing a counterpoint to the condition of subalternity that is imposed to them by hegemonies.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The critical reflections discussed here about the questions of subalternity that may arise in the process of implementing the general proposals established by the educational norm, the Base, highlight the notions of action and agency through critical lenses as a resistance to the impositions of hegemonies, thus seeking an approach and development of a life project based on the principles of inclusive and just ethics.

5. 92 million of Brazilians access the internet only via cell phone, points out TIC Households 2022. CGI.br. May 16, 2023. Available at: [https://www.cgi.br/noticia/releases/92-milhoes-de-brasileiros-acessam-a-internet-just-pelo-telefone-celular-aponta-tic-domicilios-2022/#:~:text=A%20maior%20parte%20dos%20usu%C3%A1rios,Brasil%20\(CGI.br\)](https://www.cgi.br/noticia/releases/92-milhoes-de-brasileiros-acessam-a-internet-just-pelo-telefone-celular-aponta-tic-domicilios-2022/#:~:text=A%20maior%20parte%20dos%20usu%C3%A1rios,Brasil%20(CGI.br).). Accessed on: October 2, 2023.

6. VILELA, Pedro Rafael. The majority of those who access the internet via cell phone do not check information. NIC.br. May 17, 2023. Available at: <https://www.nic.br/noticia/na-midia/maioria-dos-que-acessam-internet-via-celular-nao-checka-informacoes/>. Accessed on: October 2, 2023.

7. Inequality between black and non-black people deepens during the pandemic. DIEESE. Special bulletin November 20th. Black conscience day. pp. 2-11. 19 nov. 2021. Available at: <https://www.dieese.org.br/boletimespecial/2021/conscienciaNegra/index.html?page=1>. Accessed on: October 2, 2023.

Supported by the dialogical, participatory and collaborative educational project proposed by Freire, and adding the notion of love proposed by bell hooks, as a practice in pursuit of the Freirean “being-more so”, on online classes, I seek to create opportunities to develop conversations with students, appropriating this space with these political bodies, their local knowledge and experiences, supported by Jucá’s (2016) proposal of resignification of “know English” (p.254, free translation).

I believe this is a type of loving practice from the perspective of bell hooks’ critical lens, manifested as “the willingness to make every effort to promote one’s own spiritual growth or that of another person” (Hooks, 2021, p. 52). Thus, we can create moments of reflection and action as a political activity expressed in narratives, records of our stories, as proposed by Arendt (2007, p.16).

In line with this notion of preserving political bodies and their knowledge and experiences, (ENFOPLE) - 2023⁸, brings the provocation “Can the teacher speak?” which, in my perception, translates itself into a transformative loving practice, generating exchanges of knowledge and experiences between the guest teachers, Prof. Dr. Kelly Barros Santos (UFRB) and Prof. Dr. Paula Graciano (IFG-Goiânia), and mediator Professor Dr. Giuliana de Castro, together with the participation of listeners in this conversation, on the online format. Regarding this provocation, Prof. Paula, for example, sees it as a situational issue, sharing her daily experience alternated between speaking and

8. XIX Foreign Language Teacher Education Meeting (ENFOPLE)-2023. Language Education in Public Schools: can the teacher speak? Available at: <https://doity.com.br/xix-encontro-de-formacao-de-professorases-de-linguas-enfople>. Accessed on October 2, 2023.

being heard and speaking without being heard. This problem arises due to the weight of her title and academic position, highlighting the hierarchical vision of the hegemonies that form this excluding arc between the academic and school spaces, to the extent that speaking without being heard occurs when her title is not part of the game, as she puts it.

Among the thought-provoking stories narrated by the teachers, during their presentations and responses to comments on the chat, I identify their practices and speeches as loving, transformative ones, creating a counter-hegemonic bridge in their crossings, goings and comings to and from the academy, the public school, the EJA.

A maximum commitment to the personal and professional growth of themselves and their colleagues, positively impacting their students’ vision of the world and being in the world. A work that translates itself into love “as a transformative force” (hooks, 2021, p. 33[2000, p. 10]).

It is through these reflections and actions that, in my perception, we will find resources to develop a sense of protagonism, of autonomy, of belonging and justice, distanced from the ideas about an individualist protagonism that corroborates the increasingly excluding neoliberal agenda. This calls for critical readings of ourselves (cf. Menezes de Souza, 2011), considering our implications for the continuity of the colonial logic that today permeates the digital universe, with interventions in data collection, development and learning of artificial intelligence.

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