STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE LEARNING PROCESS OF ADDITIONAL LANGUAGES (ENGLISH AND JAPANESE) IN A BILINGUAL PUBLIC SCHOOL IN MANAUS

PERSPECTIVAS DOS ESTUDANTES EM RELAÇÃO AO PROCESSO DE APRENDIZAGEM DE LÍNGUAS ADICIONAIS (INGLÊS E JAPONÊS) EM UMA ESCOLA PÚBLICA BILÍNGUE DE MANAUS

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to explore elementary school students' perspectives regarding their bilingual learning experiences in a public state school in Manaus, Brazil offering instruction in Portuguese and Japanese. An online questionnaire assessing perceptions of language learning was administered to 165 students in grades 8 and 9, ranging in age from 12 to 14 years old, without distinguishing gender. Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed through the theoretical lens of several prominent frameworks in the field, including those proposed by Ferreira and
Araújo (2021), Cook (2011), Dornyei (2005), Fan and Chen (2011), Gao (2019), Lazar (2007), Locke (1997), Norton and Toohey (2011), Krashen (2011), and Peng and Woodrow (2010). Findings suggest language teaching in this setting could benefit from promoting holistic exposure to the target language by integrating formal and informal learning opportunities that combine linguistic knowledge development with listening, reading comprehension, and cultural immersion. This study provides initial insights into learner perspectives to inform the design of empirically-supported bilingual education programs.

KEYWORDS: Bilingual Education, Public School, Additional Language.

RESUMO: Este estudo teve como objetivo explorar as perspectivas de estudantes de ensino fundamental sobre suas experiências em educação bilíngue em uma escola pública estadual em Manaus, Brasil, que oferece instrução em português e japonês. Um questionário online que avalia a percepção sobre o aprendizado de idiomas foi aplicado a 165 alunos dos anos 8o e 9o, com idades entre 12 e 14 anos, sem distinção de gênero. Os dados coletados no questionário foram analisados por meio do arcabouço teórico de várias abordagens proeminentes no campo, incluindo as propostas por Ferreira e Araújo (2021), Cook (2011), Dornyei (2005), Fan e Chen (2011), Gao (2019), Lazar (2007), Locke (1997), Norton e Toohey (2011), Krashen (2011) e Peng e Woodrow (2010). Os resultados sugerem que o ensino de línguas adicionais nesta instituição poderia se beneficiar de promover uma exposição holística à língua-alvo, integrando oportunidades formais e informais de aprendizagem que combinem o desenvolvimento de conhecimentos linguísticos com habilidades de compreensão auditiva, leitura e imersão cultural. Este estudo fornece insights iniciais sobre as perspectivas dos alunos para embasar o desenho de programas de educação bilíngue apoiados empiricamente.


1. Introduction

Bilingual education has seen considerable advancement in Brazil in recent years; While not the central focus of this present study, a few relevant
works warrant brief mention to contextualize potential avenues for future research. Oliveira et al. (2017) represents one such study exploring curriculum-related questions around bilingual education that could provide a point of theoretical connection. Additionally, Fortes et al. (2023) investigated the experiences of schools implementing bilingualism, presenting empirical data this work may seek to complement or build upon longitudinally.

As the pressures of modern globalization intensify interactions between nations and peoples, there is a burgeoning demand for professionals who can navigate this complex landscape equipped with well-honed intercultural communication competencies. The ability to effectively exchange ideas and establish connections across linguistic barriers has become a highly valued skillset.

Correspondingly, there exists a growing need for multi-competent individuals possessing nuanced understanding of globalization coupled with strong additional language proficiencies that allow deepening engagement with international partners and expanding global networks. As Brazil continues pushing to strengthen its foothold in the international community through avenues like increased diplomacy and trade, cultivating a workforce with multi-lingual, multi-cultural dexterity becomes increasingly strategic.

The expanding role bilingual education plays in cultivating this type of human capital reflects pragmatism regarding modernity's borderless realities and changing economic imperatives. It demonstrates an adaptive response to shifting societal requirements for navigating 21st century interdependence deftly. As global integration intensifies, bilingual training equips new generations of Brazilians to thrive professionally within this paradigm.

While data on bilingual education in Brazil remains limited; available statistics indicate a growing trajectory toward bilingualism as an instructional model. According to a study by the Brazilian Association for International Education (FAUBAI) in 2018, there were approximately 1,300 bilingual schools in Brazil, 70% private schools and 30% public state schools. These
schools catered to approximately 330,000 students nationwide, providing educational opportunities in bilingual settings.

Moreover, a separate study conducted by the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), in 2020, revealed that Brazil boasts the highest number of English language learners in Latin America, around 9.2 million students enrolled in English courses nationwide. This data further corroborates the findings of the aforementioned research conducted by the Brazilian Association for International Education in 2018.

The state of Amazonas shares a similar situation regarding the lack of information on bilingual education. According to a report by Brasil Norte Comunicação (2023), there are in the State Department of Education and Sports (SEDUC-AM), currently, around nine schools implementing bilingual methodologies, reaching approximately 5,500 students in 2023.

In 2023, the inclusion of additional language instruction in state public schools, within the metropolitan region of Manaus, encompasses specific languages, such as English, Japanese and Spanish. This article aims to explore the perceptions made by students during their dual-language learning journey, focusing on the acquisition of English and Japanese as additional languages.

Our hypothesis posits that the learning of an additional language, such as English, alongside a language of perceived political lesser impact, such as Japanese, is influenced by the languages received inputs. Thus, this study proposes that students' exposure to these languages in both formal and informal contexts may have a substantial influence on their linguistic proficiency development. Within this framework, it seems reasonable to infer that increased engagement and interaction with the target language will facilitate a more seamless and efficient learning process.

The objectives of this article are twofold: (I) to discuss theoretical considerations related to the teaching of additional languages, including the distinctive aspects of teaching Japanese and English, particularly within the

2. Literature Review

Zaidan & Aquino (2016) provide a relevant conceptualization of additional language, defining it as one acquired within multilingual contexts where the native language proves inadequate for certain communicative needs. Notably, they position additional languages as capable of being developed through both formal instructional settings as well as informal learning opportunities.

The theorists also put forth a key construct referred to as the "comfort language" - the idiom in which a learner demonstrates superior ease and proficiency, commonly their mother tongue. Zaidan & Aquino (op.cit) propose comfort language can serve as a pedagogical scaffold, especially when leveraged for translation activities, to optimize the learning of supplementary languages and associated literary works.

Their framing offers theoretical grounding for conceptualizing the distance between native and target languages as impactful on learning experiences. Specifically, the affordance of drawing linguistic and cultural parallels to one's comfort language through mediums such as translation holds promise as a means of "overcoming the technical split" (translated by the authors-op.cit, p. 11) that may otherwise inhibit comprehension and integration of supplementary linguistic systems.
Zaidan & Aquino (op. cit) proposed a model advocating learner-centered approaches that capitalize on pre-existing competencies to mediate engagement with additional languages and literatures. Their work provides a framework for interpreting the potential value of proximity-enhancing techniques within multilingual learning contexts.

In the context of this study, the terms additional language and comfort language will be used to designate the language that is added to the other and the language that the speaker is most used to using, respectively. The analysis of the specificities of the teaching of Japanese and English, in particular, may provide useful information to improve the teaching-learning process of these additional languages in the public governamental schools in Manaus-AM.

In Cook (2011), language is an essential concept in the development of individuals' social skills, language does create a significant impact on subjects' social and cultural lives. According to the author, the study of language is not limited only to the development of linguistic knowledge, but also to the ability to use this knowledge in a meaningful way in social interactions.

As emphasized by Gramsci (apud Silva, 2023), the school should be a space for the individual’s integral formation, capable of developing their potential in all directions, including physical, intellectual and moral aspects. In this sense, the study of additional languages might provide essential tools for students to develop meaning negotiation skills and, thus, be able to visualize the world in a broader and more diverse way.

As deemed by Cook (2011), in order to support the previous paragraph, learning a language involves both the development of linguistic knowledge and the ability to use it in a meaningful way in social interactions. Hence, it can be said that the study of additional languages is fundamental for the development of students' communicative skills, the teaching of
additional languages can provide essential tools for students to develop communicative and meaning negotiation skills.

Norton and Toohey (2011) bring attention to the importance of analyzing students' perspectives on the teaching and learning process, considering that inclusive education should be based on a respectful relationship between those involved in the school institution. The conception that the student is a builder of their own learning, and not a blank slate, as defended by John Locke during the Enlightenment, is essential for the construction of an inclusive and respectful learning community.

According to Norton and Toohey (op. cit), the construction of an inclusive and respectful learning community is an ongoing process that requires the active participation of students and critical reflection on the pedagogical practices adopted in the classroom. Students must exercise their communicative capacities in accordance with the identities, building in their reflective maturation. Plurilingual development is a dynamic workflow that involves linguistic, social and economic interaction. Thereby, language teaching ought to take into account both linguistic fluency and the individual's social context, since languages are constructed in interaction among subjects.

In this way, it is essential that the pedagogical practices, adopted in the classroom, consider the student's perspective and their interaction with the social and linguistic world, promoting plurilingual development and a respectful relationship in the midst of those involved in the school institution. In this sense, Norton and Toohey (op.cit) emphasize the need for an inclusive education that values cultural and linguistic diversity and promotes mutual respect among participants in the educational process.

Dornyei (2005) suggests learner identity as a fundamental factor impacting motivation in additional language acquisition, as identities are shaped by personal, social, and economic influences. Consequently, effective pedagogy necessarily considers students' expectations, as aligning
instruction with anticipated goals facilitates the learning process by establishing congruence between content delivered and recipients' intended takeaways. Indeed, the theorist contends (op. cit.) optimal teaching and learning outcomes rely upon alignment between official curricula and articulated needs of the student population.

Acknowledging identities' integral role affirms the importance of needs analysis to discern variances in stakeholder outlooks and optimize curriculum design accordingly. Tailoring objectives, materials and approaches to complement rather than contradict learners' envisioned utility of instruction may enhance uptake by activating intrinsic motivation. Dornyei's identity-based conceptualization thus underscores how considering diverse, context-embedded identities from development through implementation strengthens curricula validity and impact in diverse settings. A learner-centered lens attentive to identities' complexity appears vital for supporting varied trajectories in additional language mastery.

In addition, it is important to note that the lesson plannings should take into account students’ motivation. In the context of teaching English and Japanese, for instance, it is possible to call out social issues, such as the importance of English in a globalized world and the influence of English on culture, as well as the commercial needs and desire to merge Japanese culture with Brazilian culture, given the presence of a large number of Japanese immigrants in Manaus.

Therefore, it can be stated that the motivation of students is a fundamental aspect for the success of the teaching and learning process of additional languages, and the lesson plannings must take into account the expectations and needs of the students, as well as the social issues relevant to the teaching context.

In sum, the literature establishes a foundation for conceptualizing additional language learning as shaped by various interrelated factors. Chief
among these are emotional investment, opportunity afforded by instructional designs, and relevance of content to learners’ lives outside the classroom.

3. Methodology

In designing the methodology, aspects outlined by Paiva (2019) were consulted that pertained to key considerations like the study's nature, format, information sources, theoretical positioning, objective, employed methods, and instruments used to gather data. Foremost, Paiva's (op.cit) suggested guidelines informed choices regarding the investigation's qualitative/quantitative characterizations, genre of manuscript, data provenance, theoretical framing, aims, analytical procedures, and tools utilized to assemble empirical evidence. Adherence to Paiva's (op. cit) proposed constructs lent structure and rigor to the methodology's construction.

As for the nature, it is inserted in a case study carried out in a full-time bilingual state school of Portuguese and Japanese in Manaus-AM, Brazil. It is emphasized that the school follows the Ministry of Education (MEC) regulations and, for this reason, there are the following disciplines: English as an additional language, with a workload of (3) three hours per week, Japanese with (8) eight hours and Portuguese with a total of (5) hours, the disciplines meet the 8th and 9th grades of elementary school II curriculum demands.

As for the genre and source of information, they were given through the application of questionnaires to (165) one hundred and sixty-five students regularly enrolled in elementary school II, divided into: (101) one hundred and one students from the 8th grades and (64) sixty-four from the 9th grade with the aim of understanding the students' perceptions of the process of learning English and Japanese as an additional language.
The approach used was quantitative, through a questionnaire entitled: "Process of learning an additional language - feedback" containing (22) twenty-two multiple choice questions. However, it is worth highlighting that only the most relevant ones were considered and analyzed in this article. The three questions analyzed and considered were: (I) Do you like English? (II) Which language do you believe is easier to learn, English or Japanese? and (III) Which of these languages do you find easier to speak?. There were in the data collection a total of (165) one hundred and sixty-five answers.

The questionnaire was deployed using the Google Docs online platform, maintaining participants' anonymity and facilitating independent responses. No identifying information such as names was collected to assure students could contribute freely without risk of association to their answers. Absence of personal identifiers respected human subject research ethics related to informed consent and privacy. Deploying the instrument digitally also allowed for asynchronous completion according to individuals' schedules, minimizing potential influencers like peer effects or evaluation apprehension that can occur with in-person administration. Employing this questionnaire format aimed to elicit honest, unbiased input reflecting learners' unaided perspectives on their bilingual learning experiences in the target school environment.

The remaining questionnaire items were excluded from the present analysis as they pertain specifically to eliciting students' perceptions of instructor feedback practices, rather than exploring learners' perspectives on their overall bilingual education experiences and language learning processes. Since the aim of this study was to investigate students' views of various dimensions of their bilingual learning in this particular academic setting, questions relating primarily to evaluations of instruction were considered tangential to the core focus. As such, only those survey components centered on illuminating learners' academic experiences, competency development, and preference insights regarding their dual-
language coursework were retained for inclusion in this empirical examination to maintain relevance to the overarching research objectives.

In subsequent sections, the study objectives will be realized through presentation of findings and discussion regarding the bilingual learning observations of the student participants within the case school’s English-Japanese program. The next segment will report quantitative results from the administered questionnaire investigating viewpoints related to these adolescents' learning of the additional languages. Following the results, a discussion section will qualitatively analyze emerging patterns and themes, situating observations within the designed theoretical frameworks. Together, these components aim to elucidate the students' bilingual experiences in order to ultimately fulfill the overarching goal of exploring their views on English and Japanese language education in the particular public state school context of Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil.

4. Results and Discussion

In the present study, the initial issue to be discussed concerns the students' preference for the English additional language, which indicates, in a preliminary way, a certain emotional affinity with the language. As pointed out by Krashen (2011), the emotional filter is a crucial factor for language learning, which reinforces the importance of considering the variable of emotional closeness to the language in question.

Affective filter theory suggests that high levels of anxiety, low motivation, and low self-esteem can create a 'filter' that impedes language acquisition, while a supportive and low-stress environment can facilitate it (Krashen, 2011, p. 79).
Based on the data presented in the graph above, it is possible to observe that the percentage of students in the eighth grade of elementary school II who express appreciation for the English language corresponds to 73%. This piece of information suggests that the vast majority of these students have systematic access to the English language in their social circles. This result may be related to several factors, such as the role of the school in promoting the teaching of additional languages, as well as the interest and parents or guardians’ influence in the learning of additional languages.

Fan and Chen (2001) corroborate to the thought that parents are fundamental structures for the process:
Parents play a fundamental role in the learning process of students, since their participation can positively influence the academic performance of their children" (Fan & Chen, 2001, p. 67).

Just as teachers together with parents positively influence learning, Fran and Chen (ibid.):

Collaboration between parents and teachers can have a significant impact on the teaching and learning process, motivating students to achieve better academic performance (Fan & Chen, 2001, p. 68).

In the second graph presented, it is possible to interpret an even higher percentage of students who demonstrate appreciation for the English language, especially in relation to the students in the ninth grade. This trend can be attributed, in part, to the slightly higher maturity of these students, as well as to the understanding of the English language's importance for their academic and professional lives in the future.

Endorsing the statement above is Ferreira (2021), who argues that the lack of appreciation for the comfort language can make it difficult to learn an additional language.

Bilingual education can be a space for the valorization of the mother tongue and for the promotion of communicative competence in foreign languages" (Ferreira & Araújo, 2021, p. 61) (Translated by the authors).

When considering the first question raised in this study, there is a marked trend amongst students towards the English language, it is evidenced by the students’ interest shown in cultural productions, such as music, films and series, during classes.

Cultural immersion can be a powerful tool for promoting language learning and intercultural competence, and should be integrated into L2 pedagogy whenever possible" (Lazar, 2007, p. 137).

It is observed, from the quote by Lazar (2007), that cultural immersion
has a significant effect on the process of teaching and learning foreign languages, since students come into greater contact with the target language. In addition, the author (op.cit) argues that cultural immersion provides students with the opportunity to build strategies to deal with the cultural differences between the languages involved.

Figure 3 - Students who find Japanese more difficult than English, in a sample of elementary school II students, (eighth grades), from a public state school in Manaus-AM. The data were collected through a questionnaire. Question: "Which language do you find more difficult? Japanese or English?".

Through cultural immersion, learners develop the ability to adapt to new cultural environments and communicate effectively with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (Lazar, 2007, p. 137).

The ease of learning a language is a highly subjective issue, especially since students have little knowledge about the teaching-learning process. For this reason, the word "easy" was used to bring the lexicon of the research closer to the interviewees.

The third question of the present study aims to evaluate the students' inner experiences about learning additional languages, especially Japanese and English. Despite the public institution offering eight hours of Japanese classes per week, against three hours of English classes per week, students perceived that the English language is, somehow, more productive in the learning process. Graph number 3 shows an approximate percentage of 60% of students who believe that English is "easier" to learn, as opposed to
approximately 38% of students who believe that Japanese is easier. A plausible hypothesis for this result is related to the students' interests in the English language and their frequent exposure to different social media, such as social networks and the world around them, which is evident today. On the other hand, the Japanese language presents a denser cultural barrier, with its contact being restricted to specific occasions or social proximity, while the English language is widely used and mandatory in many everyday situations.

According to a study on linguistic immersion conducted by Gao in 2019, it is possible to observe that the increase in the use of the target language in different contexts provides the students with more opportunities to improve their linguistic fluency.

When analyzing the pattern found among students in the ninth grade of elementary school II, a similar trend is observed among students in the eighth grade.

Figure 4 – Students who believe that one language is "easier" than another, in a sample of students in elementary school II (ninth grade) from a public school in Manaus-AM. The data were collected through a questionnaire. Question: "Which language is the easiest? Japanese or English?".

Source: Created by the authors.

The data presented in Figure 4 aims to empirically validate the hypothesis under investigation which is students' perceptions of language difficulty and preferences are related to factors like exposure/proximity to the languages. The figure depicts the perceptions of students from distinct
educational cohorts regarding the relative difficulty of learning English and Japanese. Specifically, it charts the self-reported views of 9th grade elementary school students on this topic and allows for comparison against the perspectives of students from preceding grades.

As discernable from the figure, the plurality of students surveyed - approximately 60% - perceived English learning as the "easier" of the two endeavors. Conversely, Japanese language study was deemed more challenging by the remaining 40% cohort despite receiving disproportionately greater instructional emphasis per the school's curriculum design. This distribution of the students' opinions provides corroborating evidence for the hypothesis advanced earlier in the study, namely, that the severity of perceived difficulty varies predictably across target languages even when accounting for skewed allocation of teaching resources within a given educational paradigm.

In summary, the empirical data presented in Figure 4 validates the hypothesis by demonstrating concordant trends in students' self-assessed language difficulty preferences across discrete academic levels. This adds credibility to the overarching analytical framework and hypotheses proposed.

Another study conducted by Pen and Woodrow in 2010, dealing with the teaching of Chinese, as an additional language, reflects that Willingness to Communicate (WTC) plays a fundamental role in the teaching and learning of a language.

WTC³ is critical for successful second language acquisition because it is a key motivational factor that influences learners’ use of the target language in communicative situations (Peng & Woodrow, 2010, p. 835).

It bears emphasizing that perceptions of linguistic ease or difficulty constitute an abstract construct, owing to students' inherently circumscribed perspectives regarding pedagogical processes. The hypothesis advanced in the present study directly pertains to the proposed interaction between
language distance from one's comfort language as well as individual exposure to the target language through instruction and sociocultural forces.

Language learning is a complex phenomenon dependent on a multitude of interrelated cognitive, psychological and sociolinguistic variables. From the limited vantage point of learners embedded within context-specific educational systems, facile judgements regarding the comparative simplicity of distinct languages may overlook confounding intervening factors.

The hypothesis advanced in this study acknowledges the inherent complexity of language learning as impacted by myriad interrelated cognitive, psychological, and sociolinguistic factors. Specifically, it posits that the relative distance between a target language and one's comfort language or mother tongue, when combined with the extent of experiential learning opportunities afforded, may influence students' expressed perceptions of a language as more or less difficult to acquire. That is, the hypothesis considers the potential interaction effects of linguistic distance alongside magnitude of instructional and practical exposure on emergent beliefs regarding comparative ease or difficulty implicitly held among the learner cohort. By contextualizing perceptions as subject to these hypothesized influence mechanisms embedded within learners' linguistic ecologies, the framework aims to provide a nuanced understanding of variability in subjective difficulty impressions formed across populations differentiated by the posited predictors.

Rather than asserting an objective or universally applicable characterization of any given language's learnability, the hypothesis modestly aims to explain predictable variance in subjective impressions across learner populations differentiated by only these two hypothesized influences. This circumscribed scope acknowledges younger students' constrained understandings of linguistics while proposing a parsimonious analytical framework for interpreting their perspectives regarding this abstract concept. Empirical examination of the hypothesis may thus offer
Students with higher levels of WTC reported more opportunities to use English in the classroom, more encouragement from the teacher, and greater confidence in their ability to speak English (Peng & Woodrow, 2010, p. 840).

Finally, the distribution of responses among ninth-grade students at Elementary School II mirrors the tendencies observed for preceding cohorts, providing further validation for the hypothesis under investigation. Specifically, the majority perception of English as easier to learn aligns closely with the positioning of students in prior grades. This concordance reinforces the assertion that proximity to English, as defined through both direct instructional exposure within the educational system and broader sociocultural contact outside formal learning environments, can have a meaningful impact on framing secondary language acquisition.

By demonstrating congruity in self-reported preferences across discrete class levels despite inherent differences in individual learner profiles, the findings offer corroborating evidence for hypothesizing proximity as a key predictor of variability in difficulty perceptions. As the hypothesis posited, increased nearness to and interaction with English appears to significantly shape the formative learning experiences for additional languages among these student populations. While not conclusively demonstrating causality, the replication of response patterns strengthens the hypothesis' plausibility as an explanatory framework for interpreting observational data regarding this complex, context-dependent issue.

Overall, the alignment of results provides further empirical validation of proximity's proposed influential role in these students' linguistic experiences and beliefs.
5. Conclusion

Based on the statistical analysis of the survey data and information collected, it can be cautiously concluded that sustained contact with an additional language plays an important role in facilitating individuals' linguistic development. At the bilingual state school in Manaus, students demonstrated comparatively stronger English acquisition proficiency than Japanese, which may be partially explained by English's more pervasive daily presence in students' lives through various forms of media like television programs, films, music and internet usage.

However, it is critical to acknowledge that accurately evaluating language learning is a nuanced process dependent on myriad interconnected factors. Methodological approaches, length and nature of exposure, and learner interests and motivation likely also exert considerable influence. Additionally, conceptualizing language learning as solely related to grammatical and lexical mastery is an oversimplification - it necessarily involves cultural and social dimensions as well.

Consequently, additional language instruction should aim to optimize holistic exposure through balanced, multifaceted pedagogical designs combining focus on structures and vocabulary with opportunities to cultivate oral/written comprehension and cultural immersion. While contact appears important, causative conclusions would be premature without accounting for numerous plausible confounds. A well-rounded, experiential approach that leverages learners' natural settings may best facilitate development, though empirical examination of specific techniques remains needed. Overall, while contact seems to correlate with proficiency in this case, language learning is a complex, situated phenomenon dependent on an array of interrelated factors requiring more nuanced study.
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