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Specialization in foreign language teaching via distance learning: training classroom teacher-researchers

Especialização em ensino de língua estrangeira na modalidade EAD: formando professores pesquisadores da sala de aula

Especialización en la enseñanza de lengua extranjera en la modalidad de aprendizaje a distancia: formando docentes investigadores en el aula

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Abstract

This text presents the results of a study that investigated the objectives of a specialization course in foreign language teaching, which focuses on the education of classroom researcher-teachers, offered by the Federal Institute of Santa Catarina (IFSC) in the distance-learning format. The research, qualitative and ethnographic-based (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994) collected data from 16 English language teachers through a profile questionnaire and reflective texts from the portfolios produced individually by the students over two semesters and presented to a committee as a requirement for obtaining the specialist certificate. The data were analyzed using Content Analysis techniques (Bardin, 2011) and interpreted in light of the study's theoretical framework. The results of the analysis revealed that action research, as a methodology for educating research-teachers, has potential for that purpose, by promoting the deconstruction of traditional paradigms in English teaching, centering the teaching process on the student, conceiving the teacher as a researcher and agent of change, and impacting their professional development.

Keywords: Teacher education. Foreign language. Distance learning. Action research.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de um estudo que investigou o alcance dos objetivos de um curso de especialização em ensino de língua estrangeira, com foco na formação de professores pesquisadores de sua sala de aula, ofertado pelo Instituto Federal de Santa Catarina (IFSC), na modalidade EAD. A pesquisa, qualitativa de base etnográfica (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994), coletou dados de 16 professores de inglês, por meio de questionário de perfil e de textos reflexivos do portfólio produzido individualmente pelos estudantes ao longo dos dois semestres do curso e defendido em banca como requisito para conclusão e obtenção do certificado de especialista. Os dados foram analisados usando as técnicas da Análise de Conteúdo (Bardin, 2011) e interpretados à luz do referencial teórico do estudo. Os resultados da análise revelaram que a pesquisa-ação, como metodologia para formar o professor pesquisador, tem potencial para esse fim, ao promover a desconstrução de paradigmas tradicionais no ensino de inglês, centrar o processo de ensino no aluno, conceber o professor como pesquisador e agente de mudança e impactar o seu desenvolvimento profissional.

Palavras-chave: Formação de professores. Língua estrangeira. EAD. Pesquisa-ação.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio que investigó el logro de los objetivos de un curso de especialización en enseñanza de lengua extranjera, centrado en la formación de docentes-investigadores, ofrecido por el Instituto Federal de Santa Catarina (IFSC) en la modalidad de educación a distancia. La investigación cualitativa, con base etnográfica (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994), recopiló datos de 16 docentes de inglés mediante un cuestionario de perfil y ensayos reflexivos de los portafolios elaborados individualmente por los estudiantes durante los dos semestres del curso y defendidos como requisito para la finalización y obtención del certificado de especialista. Los datos se analizaron mediante técnicas de análisis de contenido (Bardin, 2011) y se interpretaron a la luz del marco teórico del estudio. Los resultados del análisis revelaron que la investigación-acción, como metodología para la formación de docentes-investigadores, tiene potencial para este propósito al promover la deconstrucción de paradigmas tradicionales en la enseñanza del inglés, centrar el proceso de enseñanza en el estudiante, concebir al docente como investigador y agente de cambio, e incidir en su desarrollo profesional.

Palabras clave: Formación de profesores. Lengua extranjera. Educación a distancia. Investigación-acción.

1. Introduction

The creation of the Federal Institutes of Education, Science and Technology (IFs) by Law No. 11.892/2008 contributed to contributed to expanding and enhancing initial and continuing teacher education in Brazil, since, in addition to technical and technological programs, the IFs also began to offer programs aimed at the professional development of teachers. At the Federal Institute of Santa Catarina (IFSC), one of the programs designed for the continuing education of teachers is the specialization in foreign language teaching for Basic Education, whose pedagogical project is theoretically grounded in Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory and in the conception of reflective teacher education. Its purpose is to help English or Spanish teachers working in basic education to reflect critically on and transform their teaching practice through the development of small scale action-research projects in their own classrooms, mediated by pedagogical activities specifically designed for that end, in collaboration with a supervising professor.

As a way of building knowledge from the program's own implementation, and given that our search of the consulted databases revealed no studies on foreign language teacher education at the specialization level with the design*1* and objective similar to those of this program — namely, to develop teacher-researchers through action research methodology, with an investigative focus on a real problem situation of foreign language teaching and learning in their own classroom — the faculty of this Specialization program conduct research*2* on the teacher learning process experienced by the students. The present article results from studies derived from that project.

Among the many relevant research topics, we considered it relevant to investigate the extent to which the objectives of the course project were achieved in its second offering, held in 2024. To that end, from a qualitative perspective, two sources of data collected from 16 students, all English teachers*3* who completed the course. The first consisted of the profile questionnaire answered by the students at the beginning of the course; the second consisted of the students' reflections on their own learning process, documented in the portfolio produced throughout the course and presented to the evaluation committee at the end of the second semester as a requirement for successful completion of the program.

In what follows, we present the theoretical framework, the methodology, the results and discussion, as well as some final considerations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Learning from a sociocultural perspective

The sociocultural perspective on teacher education conceives learning as an interpsychological phenomenon before it becomes an intrapsychological one, insofar as it results from the learner's engagement in activity socially mediated by language, culture, context, and other sociocultural aspects, as stated by Johnson (2009):

> A sociocultural perspective […] recognizes that learning is not the straightforward appropriation of skills or knowledge from the outside in, but the progressive movement from external, socially mediated activity to internal mediational control by individual learners […]. How an individual learns something, what is learned and how it is used will depend on the sum of the individual's prior experiences, the sociocultural contexts in which the learning takes place, and what the individual wants, needs and-or is expected to do with that knowledge (p. 2).

1 When searching the CAPES Journal Portal and its Catalogue of Theses and Dissertations using the descriptors "formação continuada" [continuing education]; "pesquisa-ação" [action research]; "inglês" [English]; "língua inglesa" [English language]; "EAD" [distance learning], we did not identify any study similar to the one proposed by IFSC.

2 The research project was approved by the IFSC Research Ethics Committee (CEP/IFSC) under the number 6.661.494 - 2024.

3 The English cohort was chosen because the authors of this study were the teachers of these participants.

Thus, conceiving learning as a phenomenon in which intersubjectivity precedes intrasubjectivity (Vygotsky, 2007 [1978]) implies understanding that this process originates in human interaction — something we see as extending to the context of intersubjective relationship teacher education. Addressing teacher development from the standpoint of sociocultural theory is to acknowledge the indispensable role of human interaction as the foundation of the learning and development that follow from it. The core of this approach, according to Dellagnelo and Silva (2024), lies in the intersubjective encounter between the learner (the student teacher) and the other (in our case, the pedagogical activities proposed by the specialization course, guided and mediated by a professor). It is through the intersubjective relationship of exchange between the learner-teacher and the course — specifically, the pedagogical activities designed to teach the learner to become a researcher — that intrasubjectivity is formed. The appropriation and construction of knowledge that occur amid these interactions in the context of teacher education, once internalized, become part of the learning subject's independent development (Vygotsky, 2007 [1978]).

Not all knowledge, however, is amenable to assimilation and internalization; knowledge is consolidated only if it relates to the individual's level of development — that is, what is taught must already be in the process of maturing within the individual. On this point, Vygotsky (2007 [1978]) identifies two levels of development: the actual level, at which the human being can perform a task independently, thereby defining functions that have already matured; and the proximal or potential level, at which the human being cannot perform tasks independently but can grasp them with the collaboration of another, thus signaling a propensity to learn and revealing an embryonic level of maturation.

On this subject, Vygotsky (2007 [1978], p. 98) states that:

> The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature but are presently in an embryonic state. These functions could be called the "buds" or "flowers" of development. The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively.

From this conception, we may conclude that the abilities that today lie within a subject's zone of proximal or potential development (ZPD) will, in the future, be integrated into that same subject's zone of actual development. It is therefore important that there be social experiences and meaningful exchanges (intersubjectivity) capable of fostering individual development (intrasubjectivity) through the internalization of knowledge.

Another aspect that has received considerable attention in discussions in the field of teacher education is the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge. Traditionally, these complementary forms of knowledge have been treated separately and often in a way that suggests a hierarchy between theory and practice, with greater value assigned to theory. From the sociocultural perspective, which is dialectical in nature, this division does not hold. Aware that theory and practice each have unequivocal and mutually complementary value in the professionalization of teachers, Dellagnelo and Silva (2024) also emphasize socially mediated that the notion of concepts proposed by Vygotsky (1987) invalidates such compartmentalization, since it conceives knowledge as arising from the necessary integration between what the author calls 'scientific concepts', originating in school instruction, and 'everyday/spontaneous concepts', originating in practical activity and everyday social interaction. This is because, according to the author, scientific concepts are assimilated only through everyday concepts, which do (or do not) give meaning to a new scientific concept.

Vygotsky (1987) maintains that teaching based solely on principles and theories does not result in the development of a concept; on the contrary, he argues that the teaching of abstract rules must occur together with empirical demonstration, observation, or the activity itself. In the author's words:

> Direct instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless. The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism that simulates or imitates the presence of concepts in the child. Under these conditions, the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken over by the child through memory rather than thought. Such knowledge turns out to be inadequate in any meaningful

> application. This mode of instruction is the basic defect of the purely scholastic verbal modes of teaching which have been universally condemned (p. 170).

The author also argues that scientific concepts not anchored in everyday concepts are, as a rule, so abstract that they cannot be put into practice or related to any real situation (Vygotsky, 1987). Teaching grounded in everyday concepts, on the other hand, tends to remain confined to its learning context and is therefore unlikely to be applied to new situations. In teaching and learning situations, this may lead either to an attempt to apply a concept at a moment when there is no convergence between the concept and the classroom situation — what Vygotsky calls "random behavior" — or to the omission of a concept at a moment when its use would have been appropriate. In this sense, Vygotsky (1987) further states that the convergence between formal knowledge and knowledge derived from activity affords learners a form of reflection that goes beyond the level of their own experience, allowing them to make generalizations, to deal with abstract situations, and to apply a concept to a new situation consciously and voluntarily.

It is from this deeper understanding, according to Dellagnelo and Silva (2024) — grounded in concepts (both scientific and spontaneous), regardless of the nature of the participants involved, the objectives guiding the lesson, the knowledge already acquired, or the teacher's beliefs — that knowledge is internalized and, consequently, generates the transformation of the learning subject and of the activity they carry out in their classroom. Such transformation results from the teacher's capacity to adapt classroom activities to suit their teaching context. Corroborating this understanding, Johnson (2009, p. 2) explains that this internalization:

> results in the transformation of both the self and the activity. Thus, cognitive development is not simply a matter of enculturation or even appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but the reconstruction and transformation of those resources and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs.

Teacher education grounded in a dialectical conception of scientific and everyday concepts is therefore the theoretical basis of the educational proposal of the course under investigation, realized through the planning of pedagogical activities by the learner-teachers together with their supervising professors, co-constructing meanings about pedagogical and research practices. In parallel, and still from a dialectical standpoint, the course attends to the fundamental role that intersubjectivity plays in constituting the intrasubjectivity of the teachers participating in the study, given that it is in the interactions between less and more experienced peers (in our case, the learner-teacher and the professors) that the activity of learning about one's own teaching through research that participants plan, implement and evaluate takes on relevance and is reframed.

2.2 Teacher education in Brazil

Studies in the field of language teacher education in Brazil have expanded considerably over the past three decades, driven mainly by the search for models in which student teachers are also protagonists in the process of knowledge construction, so as to replace the technicist model of teacher education with models oriented toward education through classroom research (Cavalcanti & Moita Lopes, 1991; Almeida Filho, 1993; Moita Lopes, 1996; Gimenez, 1999; Liberali, 2008; Magalhães, 2002; Telles, 2004; Vieira-Abrahão, 2002) and critical reflection on pedagogical practice (Freire, 1996; Gimenez, 1999; Liberali, 1997; 2008).

This paradigm shift in language teacher education entailed a reframing of the teacher's role, both in initial education, in undergraduate Languages (*Letras*) programs, and in continuing education programs, in which students — in-service teachers — came to be recognized as agents who also produce knowledge, through an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice by means of reflection-action-reflection. This created fertile ground for the continuous development of teachers, focusing on the technical (what), practical (how) and critical (why and what for) aspects of pedagogical practice,

and recognizing the potential to transform society by articulating teachers' individual classroom practices with the broader social context (Zeichner, 1993; Gimenez, 1999).

Among the pioneers of research on English language teacher education from the perspective of reflective and critical analysis of one's own practice in Brazil, Moita Lopes (1996) stands out. For this author, the theoretical-critical education of the language teacher must involve two types of knowledge: theoretical knowledge about the nature of language inside and outside the classroom, and knowledge about how to act in producing knowledge about language use in the classroom — that is, knowledge of research practices on language teaching and learning.

As a way of putting his perspective into practice, Moita Lopes (1996) proposed language teacher education through action research. Situated within qualitative research, action research involves investigating a problem in a given context — a classroom or an educational institution — with the aim of implementing and evaluating a change in the didactic-pedagogical domain. It is conducted by teachers in their own classrooms, so that teacher-researchers are continually engaged in producing knowledge from their pedagogical practice, in light of scientifically grounded theories.

According to Coradim (2013), since the emergence of this paradigm of English language teacher education in Brazil, numerous academic works have reported research results with this focus. In her study, the author surveyed master's theses and doctoral dissertations that used action research as a research methodology in the field of English language teacher education, in both initial and continuing education, in the period from 1986 to 2010, as made available by the CAPES Thesis Database. As a result of her research, Coradim (2013) identified 64 publications: 57 master's theses and 7 doctoral dissertations. According to the author, these studies resulted mainly from research in which the authors themselves (master's or doctoral students) used and investigated the impact of action research on their own pedagogical practices in the English language classroom or in collaboration with other English teachers.

In a similar study, published by Burns and Edwards (2025), the authors surveyed articles published in English between 2010 and 2020 focusing on the use of action research in English teacher education in different contexts around the world. They identidied 20 publications, which were subjected to a systematic review aimed at identifying the impacts of action research on the participants involved in the studies and on their classroom pedagogical practice. According to the findings, of the 20 articles only one concluded that the approach used was not as effective as expected. The remaining 19 reported positive results for action research in "enabling teachers to gain greater knowledge of students' needs, generating greater student engagement in activities" (p. 395) and in "impacting teachers' knowledge, skills, beliefs and identity in both teaching and research" (Burns & Edwards, 2025, p. 397).

The results of the systematizations conducted by Coradim (2013) and by Burns and Edwards (2025) show that action research, as an element inherent to teaching, needs to be encouraged among teachers and teacher educators, and that it falls to those who work in the continuing education of educators to create opportunities for teachers to develop awareness of action research.

It is on this paradigm of teacher education that the IFSC Specialization Course in Foreign Language Teaching for Basic Education is founded. The course is aimed both at English and Spanish teachers with years of teaching experience and at recent Languages (*Letras*) graduates beginning their professional careers. The main distinguishing feature of this course, compared with other specialization-level offerings in the distance-learning format, lies in the requirement of a final course project (*Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso* — TCC) in the form of an original, authorial portfolio[4] developed over the course, and in its methodological approach, which draws on theories of teaching and learning while directing participating teachers'

[4] The development of small-scale action-research projects in this distance-learning program, with mentoring and supervision by the professor throughout the course, aims to challenge students to produce original work, reducing the possibility of using "resources such as AI" to carry out the final academic project.

attention to their own pedagogical practice in basic education, through the development of action-research microprojects[5] in the teaching contexts where they work (IFSC, 2023).

This is what the IFSC Specialization Course in Foreign Language Teaching for Basic Education seeks to accomplish through its pedagogical project, in which language teacher education is conceived as a process resulting from praxis — that is, from reflection on action theoretically grounded in scientific knowledge (IFSC, 2023), which continuously generates further actions and reflections.

3. Method

3.1 Context and participants

This qualitative, interpretive study, ethnographic and applied in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994), seeks to investigate the extent to which the objectives of the course — training teachers to research their own practice — were achieved. The study is guided by the following questions: a) What is the profile of the English teachers enrolled in the specialization course?; b) Does action research, as a methodology of praxis, have the potential to train the teacher-researcher in a distance-learning course?; and c) What evidence emerges from the study?

The specialization course, the context of this study, has as its general objective the education of teacher-researchers specialized in approaches to teaching foreign languages (FL) — English or Spanish — for Basic Education, helping these teachers to rethink and transform their pedagogical practices in the context of Basic Education. Its specific objectives aim at deepening theoretical-methodological knowledge related to teaching practice and classroom research, knowledge about discursive and linguistic-discursive aspects employed in different social practices in the FL, and knowledge of the use of digital information and communication technologies (DICT) for and in FL teaching and learning (IFSC, 2023).

The course structure comprises six curricular units (Action Research as a Methodology of Praxis I and II; Foreign Language and Cultural Studies I and II; Theories and Practices of FL Teaching and Learning; Digital Information and Communication Technologies Applied to FL Teaching and Learning) plus the final course project (TCC).

The curricular units draw on the book *Ensino de Línguas Adicionais na Educação Básica: perspectivas teórico-práticas para a formação continuada de professores* [Teaching Foreign Languages in Basic Education: theoretical-practical perspectives for the continuing education of teachers] (Silva; Greggio; Silva, 2024). In this essentially theoretical-methodological work, the course faculty — drawing on their academic training, scholarly output, and professional experience in the field of language teaching — present the paradigms that guide teacher education (Dellagnelo & Silva, 2024), the main theories and practices of teaching and learning foreign languages, the potential of digital technologies in language teaching and learning (Dib et al., 2024), the concepts of identity and culture in language teaching and learning (Machado et al., 2024), and the portfolio and monograph genres as options for the final course project (Costa & Valer, 2024), with a focus on the process of development throughout teachers' academic and professional trajectories.

The content and activities of each curricular unit are produced by the professors teaching them, who also provide pedagogical support, mentoring, and supervision of the action-research microprojects. Pedagogical discussions and interactions occur both synchronously and asynchronously, and their frequency varies according to the complexity of each unit and/or the students' needs. Synchronous activities are virtual, conducted via videoconference. Asynchronous activities take place in the Virtual Teaching and Learning Environment — VTLE (Moodle/IFSC), mediated by the course professors.

[5] The concept of action research is understood here as a set of different actions and research initiatives undertaken by teachers on their own practice in order to transform it, as proposed by Stenhouse (1975), and as a "line of research associated with forms of action oriented toward problem solving or transformation objectives", following Thiollent's perspective (2011, p. 13).

Each professor is also responsible for a group of 6 to 8 students, with whom they carry out mentoring work in the first semester, assisting them with their interactions with the course professors, in navigating institutional platforms when necessary, and in designing the pedagogical intervention activity for their own research. In the second semester, this work shifts to supervision of the research intervention, which directly informs the final course project (TCC), in portfolio format, to be defended before a public examining committee composed of one examiner from the course faculty and one external examiner.

Admission to the course occurs through an institutional public call with the following stages: 1) candidates apply; 2) on a pre-established date, a public electronic lottery ranks all registered candidates in each cohort; 3) the top 50 candidates are called to enroll, the mandatory requirement being a teaching degree (*Licenciatura*) in English or Spanish Languages; 4) if any of the top 50 candidates in each cohort fails to enroll, a second call is made to fill the available place(s), following the order established by the lottery.

In its second offering, the English cohort of the course under study had 42 enrolled students. Of this total, 18 progressedcancel to the second semester, and 2 of them requested a leave of absence. The remaining students either canceled their enrollment or dropped out during the first semester[6]. Only the 16 English teachers[7] who completed the course in the 2024 offering took part in this study.

3.2 Data generation and analysis

Data for this study were drawn from the profile questionnaire and from the portfolios of the 16 graduates. The profile questionnaire, consisting of closed-ended multiple-choice questions about professional activity and English language proficiency, was administered using Google Forms. The responses obtained were organized into charts automatically, so that the categories of analysis were the same as those previously established by the answer options for each question.

The second dataset consisted of the final chapter of the 16 portfolios produced by the teachers participating in the study. In that chapter, entitled "A reflective look at my learning", the teachers reflected on their learning in the course. These texts were categorized using Bardin's (2011) Content Analysis framework.

According to Bardin (2011), Content Analysis comprises three stages: 1) pre-analysis, which involves organizing and preparing the data and drawing up a preliminary list of categories, which may be derived from existing theories or emerge from the data themselves — in our case, they emerged from the data; 2) exploration of the material, which involves "the search for meanings and relationships that emerge from the material" (Bardin, 2011, p. 84) and the coding of the units of analysis, which may be thematic, structural, or frequency-based on counting — in our case, we opted for thematic categories; and 3) analysis and interpretation of the findings, which involve "the interpretation of the data and drawing conclusions" (Bardin, 2011, p. 136). At this stage, it is important to relate the findings to the theory and to identify new questions that may arise.

[6] Although relevant, the issue of dropout in the course will not be addressed in this article. Dropout indicators and factors will be the object of investigation in another study, to be carried out after the conclusion of the third offering of the course, since only with data from all three offerings will it be possible to determine whether there has been an increase in the completion rate relative to the two previous cohorts.

[7] In order to protect each participant's identity, participants are identified in this study by the letter P (Participant), followed by a number (P 1, P 2, P 3, and so on).

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Profile questionnaire

Data from the profile questionnaire showed the region of residence of the 16 graduates of the 2024 offering: 32% were from the South, 27% from the Southeast, 27% from the Northeast, 7% from the North and 7% from the Central-West. Among the states, Santa Catarina had the greatest representation (5 graduates), followed by São Paulo (3 graduates), with one graduate each from Alagoas, Ceará, Goiás, Minas Gerais, Pará, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro and Sergipe. These data show that the course has reached all Brazilian regions, providing graduate-level professional development to English teachers working in basic education in municipalities that are often (very) far from where free, high-quality graduate programs such as the one offered by IFSC are available. Salvaterra, on the island of Marajó (PA), Nossa Senhora da Glória, in the backlands of Sergipe, and Cravinhos, in the interior of São Paulo state, are some of the cities located far from major urban centers.

Regarding professional status at the time the questionnaire was administered, employment under a formal labor contract predominated (53%), followed by tenured public-school teachers (33%) and service providers (14%). As for teaching experience, 37% reported having 1–2 years of experience in teaching, 31% more than 10 years teaching English, 19% between 6 and 10 years, and 13% between 3 and 5 years of classroom experience.

One relevant finding regarding professional status and length of service is that, among the 16 graduates, those with the longest service were also those with the greatest job stability, as they held tenured positions. These findings suggest that, for this group, longer service and stability did not lead to professional complacency — which is precisely why they sought in the Specialization course an opportunity for continuing education specific to their field of practice.

As for speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in English, the results indicated a predominance of the Intermediate level in listening comprehension (53%), reading (47%) and writing (40%). In speaking, the most frequent level was Basic (40%), followed by 33% Intermediate and 27% Advanced. This finding points to shortcomings in these teachers' initial education, since having completed an undergraduate degree, one would expect at least an Intermediate level in both oral and written comprehension and production, given the relevance of each teacher's proficiency to the teaching and learning process that takes place in their classroom.

The proficiency data reported by the participants of this study become even more significant given that all of them hold degrees in English Languages (*Letras Inglês*), and also when compared with the number of classes they taught weekly at the schools where they worked: 64% had more than 10 classes, 21% between 7 and 9 classes, and 15% between 1 and 3 classes. These findings suggest that the lower the teacher's proficiency and the greater the number of classes, the greater likelihood of shortcomings in English language education in basic education, which may, in turn, contribute to low proficiency levels among those students when they enter higher education.

Given the cyclical nature of education, any weakness at one stage of education will affect the next, from basic education to undergraduate studies, from there to specialization, and so on. Considering that this cycle has been in place in our country for decades, it is not a novel finding that teachers do not feel proficient at an advanced level in all skills in the language they teach. This was also identified in a study conducted by the British Council Brasil, published in 2015. Changing this situation is a challenge that still needs to be overcome in our country, but one that does not depend solely on each teacher's individual will, as also argued by the British Council Brasil (2019). It requires financial investment from governments so that, during their initial education, students — future teachers — can focus on their studies with priority and quality, as in the case of the *Pé-de-meia Licenciaturas* Program, which grants a monthly financial incentive scholarship to students entering teaching degree programs "in order to promote the appreciation and qualification of the basic education teaching profession and to encourage teaching in Brazil" (Brasil, 2025, p. 1).

On the other hand, an examination of the data of the present study regarding the language skills prioritized as objects of investigation and teaching in the action research developed by the participants, as part of their theoretical-practical learning, we find that oral production was the investigative focus of 11 of the 16 research projects analyzed.

Written comprehension and production, in turn, were addressed in 5 projects. This result shows that the proficiency level reported by the teachers not only did not deter them from choosing oral production as the priority for their intervention work, but may also have been chosen as an opportunity for them to practice, together with their students, a skill that has historically been neglected in Brazilian basic education in favor of others, particularly reading. In justifying this choice, participants made notably frequent use of the adjective "meaningful" in reference to the skill to be developed.

In this sense, the methodology of planning and implementing an action-research project, as part of the learning process in the Specialization course under study, seems to have had a positive impact not only on the education of teacher-researchers — since they planned, implemented and evaluated the research they conducted in their own classrooms — but also on the perception that teaching must be "meaningful", that is, that it must have an impact on students' learning outcomes by focusing on a skill the class needed to develop. Further evidence of the effect of action research on the participants' education emerges from the reflections they wrote about their own educational process, presented in the next subsection.

4.2 Reflections on their own learning process

During the preliminary stage of the analysis, the participants' reflections written upon completion of the course were examined, and an initial set of categories emerged inductively from the data (paradigms, teacher-researcher, teaching approaches, the role of the student, and pedagogical practice). During the exploration stage, these categories were refined through the identification of emerging meanings and relationships. Patterns and recurring themes were then identified, resulting in five thematic categories that illustrate the impact of the course on the participating teachers: (i) Deconstruction of traditional paradigms in English language teaching; (ii) The teacher as a researcher and agent of change; (iii) Student-centered teaching approaches; (iv) Identity and culture in pedagogical practice; and (v) Challenges and limitations in implementing action research. These thematic categories are presented, illustrated with excerpts, and discussed in the subsections that follow.

4.2.1 Deconstruction of traditional paradigms in English teaching

One of the most striking aspects of the participants' reflections is the critique and deconstruction of entrenched concepts in language teaching, such as the idea of a 'standard language' and the construct of the 'native speaker' as an unattainable model. The curricular unit "Language and Culture in Foreign Language Teaching", which addresses these issues, appears to have prompted a profound reconsideration of these beliefs, leading participants to adopt a more flexible and inclusive stance toward the use of English.

Participant 12, for example, notes that the reflections generated by the learning activities in this unit led her to "reconsider concepts such as standard language, native speaker, the importance of dissociating language teaching from a limited view of culture, and the role of the teacher as researcher" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 71).

Participant 9, in turn, expresses a similar view, stating that the idea of a native speaker is an abstraction: "Moreover, the idea of an ideal native speaker, of a model to be followed or of perfect pronunciation, is an abstraction" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 53). Drawing on Machado et al. (2024, p. 331), the student emphasizes: "if we consider that a language is used to communicate with people from different parts of the world, the idea of an 'ideal speaker' loses its meaning".

Participant 15 also highlights this conceptual and ideological shift in English teaching: “From this course I take away the notion of English as a foreign language, aware of the ideological implications I was carrying when using the term ‘foreign language’ — something that changed my practice” (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 58).

This thematic category suggests that participants transformed not only their theoretical perspective on traditional paradigms of English teaching but also their practice, by legitimizing students’ experiences and language variation, encouraging them to communicate in English without feeling the need to imitate the standards of English-speaking countries.

4.2.2 The teacher as researcher and agent of change

The formation of the teacher-researcher identity, which is the backbone of the course, is developed in the unit “Action Research as a Methodology of Praxis” and emerged as a central category in the participants’ reflections. This unit appears to have fostered an investigative and reflective practice in which classroom challenges are perceived as opportunities for professional development and autonomy.

Participant 12, for example, expresses this new identity: “Another fundamental aspect was the formation of my identity as a teacher-researcher. By carrying out interventions and investigating my practice, I discovered that I can seek practical solutions to the challenges found in the classroom” (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 71). This perception suggests that, in learning to conduct research in the classroom, the teacher acquires increased professional autonomy to transform their pedagogical practice.

Likewise, P 10 recognizes the dual roles the course promotes. For her, being a teacher-researcher is challenging but enriching: “This duality required me to be reflective and analytical about my practices, using research as a tool to improve teaching. I saw each class as a pedagogical experiment; it was something new and unique, by recording, observing, and understanding that my pedagogical practice is constantly evolving, shaped both by classroom experiences and by theoretical discoveries” (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, pp. 53–54).

The experience of planning, implementing and evaluating a didactic sequence for teaching English in Basic Education as a means of building the teacher-researcher identity appears to have been positive for the participants. These findings suggest that they are not merely implementers of curricula designed by others, but active agents in the construction of knowledge and in solving educational problems.

4.2.3 Student-centered teaching approaches

The specialization course, particularly through the unit “Theories and Practices of Foreign Language Teaching”, appears to have encouraged the adoption of methodologies that place the student at the center of the learning process. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) were frequently cited as key teaching approaches for connecting learning to real contexts and making language teaching more meaningful.

On this point, Participant 6 notes: “In exploring task-based teaching and project-based learning, I realized the importance of engaging students in practical and meaningful activities that stimulate their involvement. These approaches allow students to assume an active role in their own learning, developing language skills in a contextualized and dynamic way” (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 39).

Participant 11 adds that these approaches “help transform language teaching into something more dynamic, contextualized and geared toward students’ needs and interests” (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 63). For her, the emphasis lies in creating an inclusive learning environment that values students’ experiences. In her didactic sequence, P 11, who works in Youth and Adult Education (EJA, *Educação de Jovens e Adultos*), sought to challenge students to step out of their comfort zone, using the theme “Professions” so that they would reflect on their own histories and potential, which provided evidence of meaningful learning.

The experience of planning their teaching on the basis of new approaches appears to have been equally positive for the participants: not only they, but also their students, stepped out of their respective 'comfort zones' and embraced new challenges in teaching and learning English in the school context.

4.2.4 Identity and culture in pedagogical practice

Another recurring category was the recognition of students' identities and the role of culture in English language teaching from a broader and more inclusive perspective. In the unit "Language and Culture in Foreign Language Teaching", through the themes addressed, and in the unit "Action Research as a Methodology of Praxis", through the conduct of the research, teachers were encouraged to recognize the cultural and linguistic plurality presented in their classrooms.

Participants 12 and 13, for example, who shared very similar reflections on their learning process in the course, state that the critical outlook they developed led them to value students' identities, showing that everyone is capable of learning and using another language authentically. Emphasizing the importance of different accents, cultures and local expressions, P 12 says: "I make it clear that learning another language does not have to be an attempt to imitate a foreign standard, but rather a form of expression with an identity of its own" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 71).

Participant 9 corroborates this understanding, stating that it is "impossible to dissociate culture from language teaching; one complements the other" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 52). She stresses that the teaching approach should approach culture from a pluralistic perspective, including "English-speaking cultures beyond those traditionally represented in language teaching materials, and also approach English language teaching on the basis of the students' local culture" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 52).

Concerning intercultural dialogue, Participant 10 argues that, "although language carries cultural aspects, it is necessary to acknowledge that cultures are dynamic and diverse and cannot be reduced to simplistic or homogeneous representations; learning English should open paths to intercultural dialogue, allowing students to reflect on their own cultures while learning about others" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 53). Accordingly, in her didactic sequence she incorporates learning activities that promote critical thinking, such as the analysis of songs, texts and films that encourage critical engagement with social and cultural issues, adapting teaching strategies to take students' multiple identities into account.

4.2.5 Challenges and limitations in implementing action research

Despite the benefits highlighted in the previous categories, participants pointed out challenges and limitations during their process of learning to conduct research in their own classrooms — for example, lack of time, which limited both learning and reflection on that process throughout the course, and lack of material resources. On this point, Participant 12 comments: "I encountered limitations, such as the lack of time to explore certain aspects in greater depth and the lack of resources that could have enriched the activities and interventions" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 72).

P 10, addressing the use of technology in the classroom, identifies further limitations: "technical challenges, such as the lack of connectivity, and the need for further teacher education to handle these [digital] tools" (Portfolio, Reflection on learning in the course, 2024, p. 56). She stresses that these barriers reinforce the importance of continuing professional development and of educational policies that support the strategic use of technology in the classroom.

The participants' reflections indicate that transformative pedagogical practice, though desirable, faces concrete barriers that demand attention, planning and, often, institutional support and adequate public policies. They also reinforce the importance of continued reflection and of the search for alternative strategies to overcome the constraints or limitations of the school and research context.

As the thematic categories in this section suggest, the participants' reflections on their process of learning to conduct classroom research converge on crucial points regarding the course's impact on how each of the 16 participating

teachers reframed the act of teaching. Starting from the teaching problems identified in their own classes, they sought, through scientific investigation, to transform their practices — aligning them with a more inclusive, critical and contextualized view of English teaching — and to transform themselves, thereby becoming teacher-researchers. In this movement, scientific concepts, originating in academic instruction, became integrated intopractice, and everyday/spontaneous concepts, originating in practical activity and everyday social interaction, rose to the level of abstraction and generalization, integrating with one another and becoming consistent pedagogical knowledge (Vygotsky, 1987).

In this sense, we may conclude that the course's educational proposal — through the design, implementation and evaluation of action-research microprojects — enabled the integration between the formal knowledge addressed in the course and the knowledge arising from teaching activity. This integration afforded participants reflections that went beyond the level of their own experience, allowing them to make generalizations, to move through abstract situations, and to apply concepts consciously in teaching and learning situations, as posited by Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory.

Such transformation resulted from the teachers' ability to adapt and modify classroom activities to suit their teaching context, as evidenced by the participants' statements. Therefore, these findings support Johnson's (2009) argument that the teacher's "cognitive development is not simply a matter of enculturation or even appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but the reconstruction and transformation of those resources and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs" (Johnson, 2009, p. 2).

Thus, these findings reinforce the view that to address teacher education from the perspective of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory is to recognize the indispensable role of human interaction as the foundation of the learning and development that follow from it. The core of this approach, according to Dellagnelo and Silva (2024), lies in the intersubjective encounter between the novice and the expert. That is, it is in the intersubjective relationship of exchange between the teacher participant and the course — more specifically, the pedagogical activities designed to teach the learner to conduct research in their own classroom, in collaboration with the supervising professor — that intrasubjectivity is formed. The appropriation and construction of knowledge that took place amid these interactions in the context of these teachers' education, once internalized, became part of the teachers' independent professional development (Vygotsky, 2007 [1978]).

5. Conclusion

In this article we presented the results of a study that investigated the extent to which the objectives of a Specialization Course in Foreign Language Teaching were achieved, focusing on training teachers to research their own pedagogical practice, offered by the Federal Institute of Santa Catarina (IFSC) in the distance-learning format. The data selected for analysis were the profile questionnaire and the reflective texts produced by the graduates of the English cohort in the second offering of the course.

As the results presented show, teachers from various Brazilian states, with different teaching experiences, years of service, and levels of English proficiency, found in the course more than an opportunity to obtain a postgraduate specialization qualification: through its pedagogical proposal, they were guided through a process of academic and professional development oriented by the methodology of action research.

The fact that 16 teachers completed the specialization course is particularly significant considering the categories of analysis that emerged from the graduates' reflections on their own learning process. The teachers' reflections provide evidence of a transformative process driven by the course. Starting from the deconstruction of traditional teaching paradigms, participants embraced the development of a teacher-researcher identity, adopted the student-centered teaching approaches discussed in the course, valued cultural and linguistic diversity in the didactic sequences they designed and implemented, and evaluated the pedagogical interventions they implemented projects in the process of learning to conduct research in their own classrooms.

As also identified by Coradim (2013) and Burns and Edwards (2025), the results of the present study likewise indicate the predominance of positive aspects of action research in English teacher education and suggest that similar results can also be achieved in specialization courses in the distance-learning format, provided that the methodology is complemented by the human mediation provided through regular synchronous mentoring and supervision.

Based on these findings, we advocate extending this course design, methodology, and delivery format to other fields of knowledge, with a view to expanding professional development opportunities for Basic Education teachers in Brazil. However, owing to the small sample of participants (16 teachers from the English cohort), and aware of this limitation imposed by the high dropout rate, we recognize that the results of this study are specific to the participants included in this study. In this regard, in other investigations we recommend including the Spanish-language cohort teachers, in order to verify whether the results with different subjects, needs and contexts.

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