

COMPETENCE AND PERFORMATIVITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

Competência e Performatividade na Formação de Professores de Inglês

DOI: [10.14393/LL63-v35nEsp2019-13](https://doi.org/10.14393/LL63-v35nEsp2019-13)

Vanderlei J. Zacchi^{1*}

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to explore how English teachers in elementary education in Sergipe are dealing with diversity in the classroom and with the previous knowledge brought by students, especially about new digital technologies. The analysis was done from data generated through questionnaires and interviews, involving in-service teachers and undergraduates of an English Letras course. Talking about teacher education is a task that involves a great deal of uncertainty, due to the constant transformations that are taking place in a variety of fields that affect the production and dissemination of knowledge, the way we communicate and interact, socio-cultural relations and social life as a whole. With this scenario in mind, we can say that teacher education is essential to prepare them for the uncertain, the unpredictable and the unexpected. The analysis will be based on the theoretical concepts of competence, performance and performativity.

KEYWORDS: Diversity. Digital Technologies. Performativity. Competence.

RESUMO: Este trabalho busca explorar como professores de inglês do ensino básico em Sergipe estão se relacionando com a diversidade em sala de aula e como estão lidando com o conhecimento prévio trazido pelo aluno, especialmente quanto ao manuseio das novas tecnologias digitais. A análise será feita a partir de dados gerados por meio de questionários e entrevistas. Participaram da pesquisa professores em serviço e graduandos de um curso de Letras-Inglês. Falar em formação de professores é uma tarefa que envolve uma alta dose de incerteza, devido às constantes transformações que estão ocorrendo nos mais variados campos e que afetam a produção e disseminação de conhecimento. É com esse cenário em mente que se pode afirmar que é fundamental uma formação de professores que os prepare para o incerto, o imprevisível e o inesperado. A análise será efetuada com base nos conceitos de competência, performance e performatividade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Diversidade. Tecnologias Digitais. Performatividade. Competência.

¹ Associate Professor of English at Universidade Federal de Sergipe in Brazil and Adjunct Associate of the Centre for Globalization and Cultural Studies at the University of Manitoba in Canada. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3126-524X>. E-mail: vanderlei.ufs(AT)gmail.com

This paper is derived from research partly funded by Capes and Fapitec (process # 88881.157702/2017-01). The research also benefited from a research initiation scholarship from CNPq for one year (2017-2018).

1 Introduction

Foreign language teachers nowadays are exposed to a number of factors that can challenge not only their authority, but also the very knowledge about the subjects that they are supposed to teach. In previous times teachers were recognized as the holders of knowledge par excellence, by means of which they would exert their authority. Teachers used to follow a predetermined program, usually through a textbook, and were the only ones to have access to the answers, scripts, etc. Also, the contents were relatively fixed and unchanging (grammar, notions and functions, communicative tasks with a predetermined goal/skill), so that the emphasis would fall on competence, stability and planning.

Nowadays, however, teachers are dependent on the context of the classroom as a starting point from which to design the contents of their classes. They are thus forced to deal with the unknown, the uncertain, the unexpected. The focus, then, is placed on performance and performativity rather than competence, instability rather than stability and improvisation rather than planning.

This paper will focus on two aspects that have the potential to destabilize the English language classroom, setting the stage for the uncertain and the unexpected: digital technologies and social diversity (ZACCHI, 2015). The former may come about through students' previous knowledge, which in most cases is liable to surpass the teacher's competence in the field. As for social diversity, it may be the cause for a good deal of heterogeneity in the classroom, challenging any kind of homogenization that might erase difference and the identities of minority groups. It may be the case then, as mentioned above, to emphasize performance, performativity and a more situated version of competence.

In the following sections, I will first present a brief discussion about the theoretical framework of this paper, more specifically, the concepts of competence, performance and performativity. In the sequence, I will present the research that gave origin to this paper, with its methodology and an analysis of its results, involving public school English teachers and undergraduate students in an English Letras course in Sergipe. Based on the above assumptions, one of the aims of the research project was to provide ideas for contextualized teaching practices and the development of new curriculum concepts and classroom materials.

2 Competence, performance, performativity

Before starting a discussion about performance and competence, it would be useful to review some basic linguistic concepts based on similar binary oppositions, mainly those put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky. From the former, the main concepts related to this idea are *langue* and *parole*, whereas from the latter, performance and competence themselves. What is mostly useful for this discussion is the fact that these concepts are based on a binary opposition where one of the pairs is chosen as the main tool for the proposal of a discussion about language. Such opposition also highlights a preference for static systems as the basis for the study of language.

Starting with Saussure (2002) and his *langue-parole* opposition, it is well known that he gave preference to the studies involving “*langue*”. *Langue* for Saussure – as the “real object” of Linguistics as a science – is essentially social, exclusively psychic and independent from individuals. On the other hand, *parole* is considered secondary by Saussure. Its object, utterance, is the individual part of language and is psycho-physical. He chooses *langue* over *parole* (language over utterance) because, as an abstract and homogeneous system, it synchronically presents little change.

Saussure’s approach falls into what Bakhtin (2010) calls abstract objectivism. Bakhtin lists a series of aspects that describe this trend, such as: stability, abstractness, systematization, reification of isolated linguistic elements, representation of language as a ready-made artifact, among others. Under this trend, language is considered to be a system of normatively identical forms, a system which was taken to account for all linguistic phenomena and which rejects the utterance as something individual. As mentioned above, Saussure dismisses *parole* as the main object of Linguistics exactly because it is “absolutely individual” (BAKHTIN, 2010, p. 89). Thus, for Saussure (2002) *langue* relates to *parole* in the same way that the social relates to the individual.

Bakhtin points out another dichotomy in Saussure’s framework which also relates to the *langue-parole* system: synchronicity and diachronicity. In the latter, there is no system, only an accidental succession of terms. *Parole*, therefore, is rigorously opposed to language as a synchronous system. Bakhtin states that Saussure’s view of history is typical of a rationalist frame of mind, according to which “history is an irrational domain which corrupts the logical

purity of the linguistic system” (BAKHTIN, 2010, p. 90).

Chomsky’s view on linguistics seems to follow the same trend as Saussure’s:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. This seems to me to have been the position of the founders of modern general linguistics, and no cogent reason for modifying it has been offered. (CHOMSKY, 1965, p. 3-4)

Chomsky offers a necessary distinction between competence and performance. Whereas the former relates to “the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language”, the latter means “the actual use of language in concrete situations” (p. 4), so that it is a reflection of competence. With a few reservations, Chomsky himself recognizes that this distinction is related to Saussure’s *langue-parole* one. He admits that “in actual fact” performance could not directly reflect competence. Nonetheless, the role of the linguist, according to him, would be to determine from natural speech “the underlying system of rules that has been mastered by the speaker-hearer and that he puts to use in actual performance” (CHOMSKY, 1965, p. 4). As a result, he labels linguistic theory as mentalistic, rather concerned with “a mental reality” than with actual use of language, which “surely cannot constitute the actual subject matter of linguistics, if this is to be a serious discipline” (p. 4). Therefore, “A grammar of a language purports to be a description of the ideal speaker-hearer’s intrinsic competence” (p. 4).

One way of turning this competence-performance relationship upside down is to make use of performativity. One of the main aspects of performativity is that, rather than thinking about language and identity as *performed*, i.e. as the products of who we are, those are in fact *performed*, and therefore have great influence on who we are. As Loxley (2007, p. 118), based on Derrida, puts it, we do not do and say what we do and say because of who we are. Instead, we are who we are because of what we do and say. Therefore, our actions and discourses help to shape our identities: “Our activities and practices, in other words, are not expressions of some prior identity, [...] but the very means by which we come to be what we are”. In Butler’s (2017) words, it is an ethics that precedes ontology, and not the opposite.

As these practices are repeated through time, they also help to establish the limits and

boundaries of systems and conventions. Thus, repetition both reinforces previously defined conventions and presents new possibilities for contradicting them, setting the stage for the establishment of new ones. This idea is represented in Derrida's work through the notion of iterability:

because the iterable mark must be capable of breaking with any context, and being grafted into new contexts, it is also always capable of opening the code of which it is part to an as yet unimagined future. The iterability that is essential to the elements of such systems is precisely the constant possibility of new and different systems. No set of conventions, therefore, will ever be able ultimately to close on itself; no code can ever be assumed to be complete or properly bounded. (DERRIDA, 1988 *apud* LOXLEY, 2007, p. 105)

In that case, sameness and difference go hand in hand, since iterability reinforces sameness, but only on the basis of a difference, a repeatability, "that marks it at its origin and therefore makes it always different from itself or open to the other" (LOXLEY, 2007, p. 109). Performativity, thus, both stresses sedimented practice and opens up possibilities for change, or, as Pennycook puts it (2007, p. 77), for "the refashioning of futures".

As for the relation between competence and performance, Pennycook (2007, p. 58) mentions that the above mentioned dichotomies – langue (system)/parole (use), competence/performance – have created a distinction between system and realization, so that the focus of linguistics tends to be placed on the former term, the abstract, underlying abilities of language users, rather than on the actual use of language in daily life. Although, according to him, numerous attempts to expand these underlying competences beyond the grammatical, including sociolinguistic, discursive and pragmatic competences, among others, they still keep competence as the underlying capacity and performance as its realization.

A focus on performance, on the other hand, is a focus on texts in contexts, since "what ties performances together is not a competence that lies within each individual but a wide array of social, cultural and discursive forces" (p. 60). Language performance, thus, is "the socially embedded and culturally embodied use of language", so that "it is the repeated performances of language and identity that produce the semblance of being" (p. 63), which takes us back to

performativity.¹

Canagarajah (2018) considers text and context as part of the same complex. As with other dichotomies, as the ones mentioned above, he is inclined to believe that it was the European Enlightenment that established binaries and hierarchies, granting the mind with a superior status. That idea was then taken up by linguistics, which through structuralism would treat language as “a self-defining and autonomous grammatical system internalized in the human mind” (p. 2). Following a materialist orientation, Canagarajah’s approach treats all resources working together as an assemblage for meaning-making, whereas structuralist linguistics treats grammar as internalized and providing a representational system of meaning-making. Such an approach, by seeking to provide a mental blueprint for life, can be called “representationalism”.

And that is the reason why Canagarajah is not keen on separating text and context. The former, according to him, is usually considered to be the unit of analysis, whereas the latter, of secondary importance, serves largely to frame the text for analysis. So, from an assemblage point of view, all those aspects that are relegated to context, “such as social networks, setting, objects, or time” (p. 5), could also be part of the text. Dismissing predefined structures does not necessarily imply the abandonment of any attempt at discovering patterns and organizing principles. For Canagarajah (p. 4), structures “will simply be more situated, emergent, and dynamic”. So, he calls for a notion of competence that is free from the cognitivism and representationalism that inform structuralist notions, as well as their tendency, in language learning, to account for competence in terms of grammar, cognitive mastery and individual agency. By “materializing competence”, Canagarajah means to attribute it not to the individual or to the mind, but to the context, the environment and all the resources and agents that generate the text.

That is one way of doing away with the competence/performance – and by extension with the langue/parole – distinction, whereby performance is taken to be the realization of competence. Canagarajah also resorts to performativity to stress this notion of performance, since it “treats doing as facilitating thinking and communicating, and not the other way around”

¹ In defense of a “more contextualized understanding of language”, Pennycook (2007, p. 74) states that the English language is “part of complex language chains, mobilized as part of multiple acts of identity; it is caught in a constant process of semiotic reconstruction”.

(p. 16). Following the quantum physicist Karen Barad (2007), he states that performative inquiry treats activity as the starting point for analysis, so that language is shaped by other material resources in meaning-making, and representation emerges in and through activity. So, performativity also counteracts the representationalism implied in language use, for people do not come ready with the ideas and words to generate action. Activity constitutes and generates meanings: “In certain cases, we do words with things” (CANAGARAJAH, 2018, p. 8).

3 The research

The aim of this paper is to discuss performativity in English language teaching and teacher education, especially when it comes to how teachers behave, or act, in face of unforeseen events in the classroom. THE MASTERING OF THE ENGLISH language is usually said to be one of the main competences (if not the main one) of the English teacher and is usually part of his or her education. From that perspective, teaching is usually taken as a kind of competence acquired through education in order to be embodied in performance in the classroom. However, teachers very often have to face unexpected events, and then competence in the language – and perhaps even in teaching – may not suffice. This is when performativity and improvisation may be more useful for handling impromptu situations. The question is: how could language teacher education prepare them for such situations? It is not my intention to answer this question here, but the below analysis may serve as a suitable starting point for a discussion in the field.

The below data were taken from a research project conducted in Sergipe with in-service and pre-service English teachers. The research team was comprised of three professors, one graduate and three undergraduate students from Universidade Federal de Sergipe. The data collection process proceeded in three phases between the years 2017 and 2019. In the first phase, a questionnaire was applied to 18 in service teachers and 53 undergraduate students in their first and final years of study. The questionnaire was comprised of both closed and open-ended questions.

In the second phase, interviews were conducted with 10 teachers and 10 students from the first phase. The interviews lasted about 1 hour; they were recorded and transcribed. The teachers were selected taking into consideration all the 10 educational districts of the state.

Finally, in the third phase, a focus group was set up with participants from the second phase. Apart from the research team, approximately 3 teachers, 2 students in their final year and 2 students in their first year took part in the meetings. There were 5 meetings in total and the attendance in this case was fluctuating, since it was difficult to SCHEDULE MEETING TIMES WHERE all participants could be present.

A fourth research instrument may also be considered here: all the members of the research team developed a field diary to register their ideas, impressions and feelings about the research, comprising not only the data collection process, but also the research team meetings to discuss issues about the research as well as theoretical and methodological readings. The team used to meet on a fortnightly basis along the two years of the project.

The data presented below were taken from all three phases, and they were chosen so as to illustrate the discussion proposed here. Since the volume of data is very large, it is not possible to account for all of the issues in this paper. The below selection can give a good account of the performative way in which teachers may act when faced with unexpected situations in the classroom.

Regarding the main topics of the project, our idea was to focus on technology and diversity as strong sources of unpredictability, even more so when students' previous knowledge is taken into account (see ZACCHI, 2015). Therefore, in our preliminary questionnaire, we included one question related to each one of these topics:

- 1) Technologies: How do you deal with students knowledge of technologies? Which technology-related aspects should or could be dealt with in the classroom?
- 2) Diversity: Which diversity-related aspects should or could be dealt with in the classroom? When should or could these aspects be approached? Could you mention a situation that took place in your classroom?²

It is understandable that teachers might not feel confident about students' previous knowledge, especially as far as technology is concerned. A few teachers preferred to rely on

² 1) Tecnologias: Como você lida com os conhecimentos dos alunos relacionados a tecnologia? Que aspectos relacionados à tecnologia podem ou devem ser abordados em sala de aula? 2) Diversidade: que aspectos da diversidade podem ou devem ser abordados nas aulas de inglês? Quando esses aspectos podem ou devem ser abordados? Você poderia citar um exemplo que tenha acontecido em sua aula?

their own knowledge on the field. See, for instance, how Lucas³ describes his practice in his answer to the questionnaire: “I expand and share my experiences with technologies with my students. The good use and the importance of it.” As for the second question (“When should or could these [diversity] aspects be approached?”), he answered: “Whenever I introduce a new topic/subject.” Lucas avoids dealing with the unexpected, relying on his competence to share his knowledge with the students, without considering the possibility of a reversed course. In the second case, he relies on a linear and previously planned way of presenting contents (in this case, related to diversity), thus also trying to avoid unexpectedness. Finally, despite stating that something connected with diversity had already happened in his classroom, he did not go on to narrate his experience.

Jó⁴, on the other hand, has a different view on both matters. Regarding the first question, she stated:

For a while I resented that my way of teaching was losing consistency and this caused me a lot of discomfort. The use of smartphones by students has transformed the way of learning. I think I deal well with technology (“despite using it with an accent”). However, this did not happen overnight. Studies and reflections have made me more coherent, and I have come to see them not as objects that should not be idolized, but as teachers we must recognize their role as an indispensable tool for the 21st century. I use it whenever necessary, because the students themselves know a lot and better about the advantages and possibilities of technological resources for better classroom performance such as dictionaries, language learning applications, google translator, conversation, music, etc.⁵

She describes how she needed to adapt to new circumstances, in a slow, steady way, despite still keeping some “accent”, probably because she does not see herself as a digital

³ At the time of the research, Lucas was in his final year in the Letras course but was teaching English at a private institution. He took part in phase 1 of the research only. All the participants’ names in this paper are fictitious, in order to preserve their anonymity.

⁴ Jó has been teaching English for the past 10 years in a state school in a small town in Sergipe. She also took part in phase 1 of the research only.

⁵ “Por um tempo lamentei, pois a minha forma de ensinar foi perdendo consistência e isso causou-me muito desconforto. O uso de smartphones pelos alunos transformou a forma de aprendizagem. Acredito que lido bem com a tecnologia (“apesar de usá-la com sotaque”). No entanto, isso não aconteceu de uma hora para outra. Estudos e reflexões me fizeram mais coerente e passei a vê-los não como objetos que não devem ser idolatrados, mas que como professores devemos reconhecer seu papel como ferramenta indispensável para o século XXI. Utilizo sempre que necessário, pois os próprios alunos sabem muito e melhor das facilidades e possibilidades dos recursos tecnológicos para melhor desempenho em sala de aula como: dicionários, aplicativos para aprendizagem de um idioma, google tradutor, conversações, músicas etc.”

native. And she recognizes that students know “more and better” about how to use technologies in the classroom. It is true that she devises a way of using them in traditional terms, since dictionaries, conversation and songs can be accessed through more traditional media (web 1.0 – see LANKHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011), even in print. That is a tendency among most of the participants in the research, what makes it even more difficult for them to deal with all the knowledge that students bring to the classroom.

As for diversity, she answers all three questions: “I believe all aspects related to diversity can and should be addressed in English classes. / When needed or provoked since in ‘such modern’ times, diversity is seen as something strange and intolerant.” Differently from Lucas, she is prone to deal with diversity when necessity rises and not only by following a previously planned set of contents. She is aware that it is not an easy task, since diversity can show up as “something strange and intolerant”. But it is her full account of something that happened in her classroom that shows how open she is to the unexpected:

[...] Last year, some students from the afternoon shift told me that R. had turned gay. R. was part of the class, but this year he was on the night shift. I became interested in the subject and asked: what do you mean? Then the students stated that he had changed his way of dressing, that he was wearing a hair bun and that he would now be gay. R. is an introspective and very intelligent rural boy who had been through many failures, not because of his abilities, but because of a history of absences and an age-grade distortion which made him discouraged (my opinion). Given the situation, I could not pretend that nothing had happened, because R. had not so far shown that he would take action with such an impact on his life. So I asked: why are you telling me this? They tutted, some laughed, others said nothing, because they knew I didn't know. But what they really wanted was to see my reaction, how I would react. So I acted naturally and said that he would continue to be an excellent student as usual and that his attitude should be respected. Since I had not met with R. to find out what had actually happened, I was straightforward and brief. However, the R. subject came back on the following days, so I created situations (texts, videos, debates). The situation was not the most comfortable as we were referring to someone very close who had family and colleagues in the room. The words and attitudes could have major repercussions for that boy's life. I have not shirked my responsibility as a citizen and as a professional by placing the need for respect and acceptance of differences, and I could see that the fact that school teachers have the same stance, R. can continue to be more comfortable and confident with his choice.⁶

⁶ “[...] ano passado, alguns alunos do turno vespertino me disseram que R. tinha virado gay. R. fazia parte da turma, mas nesse ano estava no turno noturno. Interessei-me pelo assunto e perguntei: como assim? Então os alunos afirmaram que ele havia mudado a forma de se vestir, que usava um coque no cabelo e que agora seria gay. R. é um menino da zona rural, introspectivo e muito inteligente que havia passado por muitas reprovações, não por ter capacidade, mas por ter um histórico de faltas e está com distorção idade/série o que o deixava desestimulado (minha opinião). Diante da situação, não podia fingir que nada acontecia, pois R. até então não havia deixado

It is not unusual in this context for students to try teachers out by asking out of context questions. These questions may be related to English language or not, as is the case above. So, according to the teacher, the students wanted to see her reaction to that event, which for them sounded like gossip. The teacher's response comes in stages. She first states that she "acted naturally" and highlights the student's abilities, prompting the other students to respect R.'s attitude and to "accept differences". Since the interest in the subject would not fade away, she decided to formally address it in the classroom by bringing written texts and videos to foster some discussion.

In this way, Jó left the comfortable, discursive attitude about "tolerating differences" and decided to take action. Tolerating and accepting differences may sound very well intended. However, it is not sufficient for problematizing the situation and may imply, at best, a certain neutrality from teachers and students as something positive. Jó went out of her way to bring this discussion to classroom and to problematize the situation so that her students could approach it from a different angle. Shifting away from her course plan due to a situation that erupted in the classroom could not be credited to her competences, especially a competence in English language. She chose to approach a subject (gender diversity) that was not probably part of her teacher education, moving into uncertain territory.

As mentioned above, according to Pennycook (2007, p. 60), "what ties performances together is not a competence that lies within each individual but a wide array of social, cultural and discursive forces". Jó's above account shows the important role that context plays in language teaching. The decision that she made about bringing other texts and discussions to the English classroom was directly related to the event that took place with her student. Instead of ignoring all the forces that were at play and relying on her linguistic competence – and

transparecer que tomara uma atitude com tamanho impacto para sua vida. Então perguntei: você estão me contando isso por quê? Eles tutubiaram, alguns riram, outros disseram que por nada, porque sabiam que eu não sabia. Mas o que eles queriam mesmo era ver minha reação, como eu reagiria. Então, agi naturalmente e disse que ele continuaria sendo um excelente aluno como sempre e que a atitude dele deveria ser respeitada. Como não havia encontrado com R. para averiguar o que de fato havia acontecido, fui direta e breve. No entanto, o assunto R. voltou nos dias seguintes, então fui criando situações (textos, vídeos, debates). A situação não era das mais confortáveis, pois nos referíamos a alguém muito próximo que tinha familiares e colegas na sala. As palavras e atitudes poderiam ter grandes repercussões para a vida daquele menino. Não fugi de minha responsabilidade como cidadã e como profissional colocando a necessidade de respeito e aceitação das diferenças, e pude perceber que o fato dos professores da escola terem a mesma postura, R. pode seguir mais confortável e confiante com sua escolha."

therefore focusing on teaching language in and of itself –, she made a shift to encompass other important aspects in young students' education, such as gender diversity and personal choices. By doing so, she brings text and context together, thus “materializing competence”, which, according to Canagarajah (2018), means to attribute it not to the individual or to the mind, but to the context, the environment and all the resources and agents that generate the text.

A different approach is taken by Mônica.⁷ During the interview, we showed her a picture of a British boy wearing a dress and a tiara. The picture was the front page of a Brazilian magazine about education and the caption read that the boy had been expelled from school because of his outfit (see Appendix). Mônica told us that there are boys who dress like girls in her school. But then she added that the teachers treat them like any other student, whereas the students tend to be very respectful towards each other. Overall she tended not to take sides and to be very careful about dealing with certain issues. In this case specifically, differently from Jó, she did not take the initiative to address the subject in classroom because she does not feel comfortable about it. And she added that she would not know how to react if a student showed up in class dressed like the boy in the picture.

A second issue was related to religion. We showed her a picture of a boy dressed in uniform and also wearing some pieces of candomblé gear. The caption says that he was expelled from school that day for wearing those (see Appendix).⁸ In the discussion that followed, Mônica said that religion is not to be discussed, since everyone has their own and all of them should be respected. And concluded: "God is only one".

Mônica believes that she is unprepared to deal with such issues as religion in the classroom and needs some type of external supervision, since it is a subject that she does not know enough about. Again she emphasizes the need for respect, and that is what should really be worked in class. Once more she finds it difficult to take sides and prefers not to get involved, so to say. She adds that there is no need to differentiate or to divide, “after all the rights are the same [for everyone]”. However, in an apparently contradictory way, she affirms: “We don't know what comes from the other side [from the students], so we need to be prepared for

⁷ Mônica has been teaching English for nearly 30 years and currently teaches in a state school in a small town in Sergipe. She was interviewed on August 11, 2018 and took part in all phases of the research.

⁸ In total, we showed the interviewees three pictures, without captions, and asked for their comments. After that, we showed them the captions and asked a few questions.

everything”.

Being prepared in this case may reinforce the notion of the “cognitive locus of ‘competence’” (CANAGARAJAH, 2018, p. 9). For Mônica, these issues would be better addressed if she were prepared for them or, better still, if they were dealt with by a sociology teacher, since he or she “has to cope with these things everyday” and therefore should be prepared for them. Such an approach poses the question of the role of the language teacher in the classroom. Mônica believes that sociology issues are not to be treated by English teachers, who do not own this type of competence. In a transdisciplinary approach she might think about the possibility of sharing her classes with a sociology teacher. However, she never mentioned such possibility. Even in English classes, textbooks usually raise such issues, so dealing with them does not necessarily mean letting go of teaching language matters.

In a way, that is the idea that another teacher, Thadeu,⁹ supports. In one of the focus group sessions, he stated:

I have a very serious problem because [the students] reveal society and I see myself as being outside and how they reveal these things very easily so I think language is a way of approaching everything. However, what do students say when I talk about gender? “Is this a biology or English class? Why is a biology text going on?” Because it's also language, because with language I can talk about biology.¹⁰

Mônica, in the end, prompted by the interviewers, recognizes that English language teacher education should prepare teachers for the issues discussed in the interview. Even so, she believes that these undergraduate courses do not prepare “English teachers”, since these students would have to take additional English courses outside university in order to become fluent speakers. So Mônica brings competence and linguistic features to center stage again, making them the most important aspects in English teaching. It is understandable that she focuses on cognitive processes, once in this way she has control over the contents and prevents

⁹ Thadeu has been teaching for about 5 years and currently teaches in a state school in Nossa Senhora do Socorro, close to Aracaju, Sergipe’s capital city, in primary education. He took part in all three phases of the research.

¹⁰ “Eu tenho um problema muito sério porque [os alunos] revelam a sociedade e eu percebo estando do lado de fora e como eles revelam essas coisas muito fácil então eu penso que a língua é um meio de se abordar tudo. No entanto, o que os alunos retrucam quando eu falo sobre gênero? “Isso é aula de biologia ou inglês?” Por que está passando um texto referente a biologia? Porque também é língua, porque com a língua eu posso falar sobre biologia.”

unpredictable events from coming up during class. Her ambiguity is part of the process. English teachers are usually exposed to different, contradictory discourses (ZACCHI, 2018). Mônica agrees that most of these discourses are relevant, but still she clings on to more structural, less contextualized aspects.

Her approach to technology is also full of ambiguity, since she thinks that there are both good and bad aspects about it. Like Jó, she recognizes that the students have better knowledge about technology than she does. In fact she mentions that she feels “disconnected” and asks for help when necessary. She also refers to the biology teacher, who created a Google Classroom for his students. Even so, however innovative Google Classroom can be, one can use it in traditional, analogical ways. In fact, from her account in the interview, it is possible to conclude that she fails to both use technology in a situated manner and take advantage of students’ previous knowledge. Again, both cases may be ways of avoiding unpredictability and keeping to the plan. For instance, she allows students to use cell phones to search for subjects related to the contents of the class, in strict similarity with traditional print dictionaries. However, she resents the fact that the students use their cell phones otherwise:

I think technology is very welcome, but I have restrictions. For example, I think you using your cell phone in class, the fact that you copy a subject will help you learn. And today it is very much like this, the teacher prepares the class, puts the subject on the board and then the student takes a picture. They don't want to copy anymore and that gets in the way of writing too, nowadays they write very badly. In the old days when we copied it down, it was a way for you to train your writing, the way you spelled words correctly. So there are good points and bad points, I am not absolutely in favor of just technology, I think some things have to remain, and I demand some things from my students. I don't like to put a subject on the board and see the student taking a picture and spending the rest of the class chatting. You pass an exercise and they no longer want to copy that exercise. They want to take snaps and just answer. But if the photo gets lost how will you study for your exam? The exercise is a way for you to study for your exam.¹¹

¹¹ “Eu acho que a tecnologia é muito bem vinda, porém eu tenho restrições. Por exemplo eu acho que você utilizar o celular em sala de aula, o fato de você copiar um assunto vai te ajudar a aprender. E hoje está muito assim, o professor prepara a aula, coloca o assunto no quadro e o aluno vai lá e bate foto. Eles não querem mais copiar e isso atrapalha a questão da escrita também, hoje eles escrevem muito errado. Antigamente quando a gente copiava era uma forma de você treinar a sua escrita, a sua maneira de escrever corretamente as palavras. Então tem pontos positivos e pontos negativos, eu não sou absolutamente a favor de só tecnologia, eu acho que algumas coisas têm que permanecer, e eu cobro dos meus alunos algumas coisas. Eu não gosto de colocar um assunto no quadro e ver o aluno tirando foto. E passa o restante da aula batendo papo. Você vai passar um

As we can see, she complains about their refusal to copy the contents down on the notebook, resorting to taking pictures of the blackboard. As a consequence, she adds, “nowadays they write very badly”. She also argues that the contents are meant for the written tests. So she does not take into account the new affordances that are available in digital technologies and which demand different literacies and strategies. Their technological performance in classroom is hardly valued, whereas their poor competence in writing is brought to attention. Also, she follows a linear and hierarchical process in content development: the teacher writes it on the blackboard, then the students copy it down and study it for the tests.¹²

She takes part in the WhatsApp school group, which already existed before she started teaching there. She said that she is not a WhatsApp enthusiast, mainly because she thinks that all that the students post in the group is “nonsense”. As for the other teachers, according to her they post activities and materials in the group. Once again, this is the case to wonder whether they are using a digital technology in digital ways or in analogical, traditional ways. During the interview, Mônica seems to refer to technology in a distanced, detached way, as if she were not willing to commit herself. All in all, she does not seem to take full advantage of the students’ potential to create and act. Technology in this case is only a means to an end, with a predictable and previously planned target. Contexts of use are left aside and students’ potentialities are left unexplored in order to accommodate the teacher’s planning.

One last example about whether keeping to the plan or not comes from one of the focus group sessions, held on 4 May 2019. One of the members of the research team asked the participants if they had already been in the situation of needing to adjust their classes to the audience. One teacher, Eliana¹³, told us of her problem about teaching speaking to her students, who at the time were in the 9th grade. According to her, the students showed great resistance to practising conversation activities, so she decided to work with songs in the classroom, thus

exercício e eles não querem mais copiar o exercício. Eles querem bater foto e só responder. Mas se a foto se perde você vai estudar como para a sua prova? O exercício é uma forma de você estar estudando para a sua prova.”

¹² In the interview and in a focus group session, Mônica also talked about interesting projects that she had developed with her students involving different media and formats. Even so, she affirmed, in the interview, that it was she who proposed the topics and activities. The students would be only in charge of putting them into practice.

¹³ Eliana has been teaching for about 16 years and currently teaches in a state school in Aracaju, Sergipe’s capital city, in both primary and secondary education. She took part in all three phases of the research.

diverting from the course plan. At first, she did some fill in the gaps activities and asked them to translate the lyrics, so that “they could understand the meaning of the song”. So she decided to pay a tribute to Michael Jackson, whose songs “they all enjoyed listening and dancing to”.

Having noticed that there was some sexism among the students (both boys and girls), she took advantage of the process to work with a Beyoncé’s song, “If I were a boy”¹⁴. So the students watched the video and studied the lyrics. As a result, they prepared posters, in English, with phrases and images against sexual violence and offensive words. Some of the students also wrote cartoons about the subject, and all this material was then exhibited in the school main areas. So the speaking activities were left for the following year, when she took advantage of the above experience to work with songs again. She noticed then that the students felt much more interested in doing the activities.

As we can see, her first approach to teaching with songs was fairly traditional, using translation and fill-in-the-gaps activities, with no consideration to the students’ contexts. But she was sensitive to their interests and brought some music that was popular among them. It was then that she noticed that she could go further to tackle a problem that she had noticed in the classroom. So Eliana went out of her way when she saw that what she had planned to do was not working because the students were not interested in it. In her new approach, she tried to come closer to the students’ context. And when she took notice of a behavioural problem in the classroom, she did not see the need of a specialist or of some type of specialized knowledge to deal with it, bearing in mind that teachers face such challenges on a regular basis. She just accommodated this “new” content into a broader framework of language teaching. She left the comfortable situation of teaching abstract content based on verbal language to embrace music, video, images and prompt the students to prepare some material to be exhibited in alternative spaces outside the classroom.¹⁵

So, Eliana’s competence in English would not suffice to face the unexpected situation that erupted in the classroom. On the one hand, there is a materialist orientation

¹⁴ According to Wikipedia (2019), “the lyrics of ‘If I Were a Boy’ are about a gender-swapping thought experiment, through which Beyoncé analyses the ideologies of a tense relationship. As she sings about things she would do if she were a boy, Beyoncé highlights the vulnerability of a woman and ponders how things would be different if men had women’s sense of empathy”. The song was a commercial success at the time of its release, in 2008.

¹⁵ All the data presented in this paper come from reports made by the participants (through questionnaire, interview or group discussion). No class observation or recording took place.

(CANAGARAJAH, 2018) to her approach, since meaning is made through an assemblage of resources working together and not as a result of an internalized representational system. Competence, in this case, is not attributed to the individual or to the mind, but to the context, the environment and all the resources and agents that generate the text. On the other hand, performativity is also at play here, since it “treats doing as facilitating thinking and communicating, and not the other way around” (p. 16). As mentioned above, performative inquiry, according to Canagarajah, treats activity as the starting point for analysis, so that language is shaped by other material resources in meaning-making, and representing emerges in and through activity. Eliana resorts to a set of material resources (videos, songs, posters, images, the environment) to generate meaning, blending text and context in order to engage her students in the process of learning a foreign language.

4 Conclusion

The old dichotomy between competence and performance is now, more than ever, inadequate to describe, or better still deal with, all the multiplicity of phenomena involving language, especially language as social practice. In this paper, I tried to bring to attention the ways in which English teachers may face unexpected situations in classroom, more specifically related to issues linked to digital technologies and social diversity. In such cases, having competence in the language, usually regarded in its abstract form, i.e. grammar, would not suffice to provide these teachers with a repertoire of actions to deal with these events. Thus being competent in the language does not equip these teachers to perform adequately in open, unpredictable situations.

According to Canagarajah (2018), traditional views on competence place it in the mind, separated from context and from situations of use. He proposes then to “materialize” competence, so as to attribute it to all the resources and agents that generate the text. Also, in performativity – for him as well as for other authors (see BARAD, 2007; LOXLEY, 2007; PENNYCOOK, 2007) – activity is the starting point for analysis, so that language is shaped by other material resources in meaning-making. In the above analysis, I tried to show that this seems to be a better way to approach unplanned situations in the classroom, since these concepts treat language in its context of use and taking into account the diverse actors that

emerge in classroom interactions.

Two aspects are worth mentioning in connection with this analysis: lesson and course planning and students' previous knowledge. Whereas the former can be treated as an antidote against unpredictability, the latter may be a good source of it. It may be then a natural behavior for teachers to rely on planning and try to avoid being too much exposed to the vastness of knowledge that students bring to the classroom. This could be a way to assure that the content to be taught is circumscribed within the limits of the teacher's competence. However, the lived reality of classrooms in Brazil points to the opposite, with situations where teachers need to leave their comfort zone and explore the potentialities of the unknown.

This may be a major challenge to English teacher education courses. We might start to think about ways to go beyond the "safe" and predictable limits of competence as a representational system and embrace the wider possibilities of performance and performativity.

References

- BAKHTIN, M. (Volochínov). **Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem**. 14. ed. Trad. Michel Lahud e Yara Frateschi Vieira. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2010.
- BARAD, K. **Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning**. Durham / London: Duke University Press, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128>
- BUTLER, J. **Relatar a si mesmo: crítica da violência ética**. Traduzido por Rogério Bettoni. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2017.
- CANAGARAJAH, S. Materializing "competence": perspectives from international STEM scholars. **The Modern Language Journal**, v. 102, n. 2, p. 1-24, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12464>
- CHOMSKY, N. **Aspects of the theory of syntax**. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1965. <https://doi.org/10.21236/AD0616323>
- LANKSHEAR, C.; KNOBEL, M. **New literacies: everyday practices and social learning**. 3. ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press / McGraw-Hill House, 2011.
- LOXLEY, J. **Performativity**. London / New York: Routledge, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203391280>
- PENNYCOOK, A. **Global Englishes and transcultural flows**. London: Routledge, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203088807>
- SAUSSURE, F. de. **Curso de lingüística geral**. Org. Charles Bally e Albert Sechehaye. Trad. Antônio Chelini, José Paulo Paes e Izidoro Blikstein. 24. ed. São Paulo: Pensamento / Cultrix, 2002.

WIKIPEDIA. If I were a boy. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If_I_Were_a_Boy. Retrieved: 8 Jul 2019.

ZACCHI, V. J. Esperando o inesperado: formação de professores numa era de incertezas. *In*: MOTA, M. B. *et al.* **Língua e literatura na época da tecnologia**. Florianópolis: EDUFSC, 2015. p. 259-276.

ZACCHI, V. J. Global Englishes, local histories. *In*: GIMENEZ, T.; EL KADRI, M. S.; CALVO, L. C. S. (Ed.). **English as a lingua franca in teacher education: a Brazilian perspective**. Berlim: De Gruyter Mouton, 2018. p. 13-30. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501503856-002>

Appendix – Pictures used in the interviews



Recebido em: 10.07.2019

Aprovado em: 23.10.2019