

THE YOUNGER, THE HARDER: the challenges in teaching english to very young learners

QUANTO MAIS CEDO MAIS DIFÍCIL: os desafios no ensino de inglês para crianças

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Abstract: Considering the expansion of the teaching of English to children in Brazil (TONELLI, 2005, 2008; TONELLI e CHAGURI, 2013; ROCHA, 2008; COX; ASSIS-PETERSON, 2008), this paper reports a study designed to identify the challenges faced by English teachers of very young children during an experience at a kindergarten school in Londrina. The data were generated through a Focus Group (Krueger, 2009) in which participated seven pre-service teachers and through the recording of one English class for a group of four-year-old children. The data analysis showed that teachers of English to children are likely to face challenges related to lesson planning, caring of children, management of children talk, getting students' attention and resolution of conflicts between students. As a result, in the analyzed group it was possible to deconstruct the thought "the younger the better" and conclude that "the younger the harder" for the teacher because it requires specific education for this professional.

Keywords: Foreign language; English Teaching; English to children;

RESUMO: Considerando a expansão do ensino de inglês para crianças no Brasil (TONELLI, 2005, 2008; TONELLI e CHAGURI, 2013; ROCHA, 2008; COX; ASSIS-PETERSON, 2008) este trabalho relata um estudo realizado com o objetivo de identificar os desafios enfrentados por professores de inglês para crianças muito pequenas durante uma experiência em uma escola de educação infantil na cidade de Londrina. Os dados foram gerados a partir de um Grupo Focal (Krueger, 2009) composto por sete alunos-professores e da gravação de uma aula para crianças de quatro anos de idade. A análise dos dados mostrou que os professores de inglês para crianças são susceptíveis a enfrentar desafios relacionados ao planejamento de aulas, cuidados com as crianças, gerenciamento de aula, conseguir a atenção das crianças e resolução de conflitos entre os próprios alunos. Como resultado, no grupo analisado foi possível desconstruir a ideia de que "quanto mais novo melhor" e concluir que "quanto mais novos os alunos mais difícil" para o professor, pois isso requer formação específica para este profissional.

Palavras-chave: Língua estrangeira. Ensino de inglês. Inglês para crianças.

INTRODUCTION

In the University where this study was carried out – State University of Londrina – during the last two years of the English language undergraduate program students go under a supervised internship and they can choose the context they would like to teach during that period. It is quite common to notice that great part of the English language undergraduate students have no interest in teaching children. This fact led us to reflect upon the reasons for that since teaching English to children is an educational field in full ongoing expansion.

According to Assis-Peterson and Gonçalves (2001) there is a myth¹ related to a supposed best age to learn a foreign language (FL) and, there is a tendency to believe that children are best learners (MOON, 2005; PINTER, 2006; CAMERON, 2003). Although there is no research scientifically proving the best age to learn a FL, there are studies which shows the probable advantages and disadvantages for learning another language in each period of life (UR, 1996; ASSIS-PETERSON and GONÇALVES, 2001; SINGLETON, 2001, for example).

Another common saying is that teaching a FL to children is easier than teaching adults and, one of the reasons, would be the fact that children would be faster learners. On the contrary of such assumption, based on our own experience as English teachers, we believe it is harder to teach that language to children than to older students and, even harder to teach very young children, the ones who are not literate in their mother tongue (L1) yet.

Thus, the aim of this research was to investigate the challenges faced by seven pre-service² teachers – including the first author of this article - while teaching very young children at an Early Childhood Education Center. The need of this research arose during the teaching practicum internship of the first author under the supervision of the second, in which we taught English to two different groups. One group of six-year-old children (E6)³ who were having English classes for the second year, and a younger group – four-year-old children (E4)⁴ - having English classes for the first time. This second group (E4) usually caused us

¹ The expressions “myth”, “belief” and “saying” are used in this article as synonyms meaning common sense or things that people state based on no scientific evidences.

² The term pre-service teacher is used here to refer to a college student involved in a school-based field experience under the supervision of a cooperating teacher.

³ The E6 group had English classes during the year before because the English teaching practicum was carried out in that context under the supervision of the second author of this article.

⁴ Composed by 13 students (9 boys and 4 girls).

more frustration due to the challenges we faced when teaching them. Challenges not present when teaching the older group (E6).

Consequently, we felt the necessity to investigate the difficulties faced by that group of pre-service teachers in order to contribute to teachers' education field, more specifically, to the teaching of English to children.

In order to achieve our goal in this paper we first present the literature review, which was the basis for this paper to situate the readers about the teaching of English to children in Brazil, focusing on its shortcomings. Then, the methodology used in this research is presented, followed by the data analysis and discussion. Finally, we conclude this paper presenting some concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TEACHING ENGLISH TO CHILDREN: THE REALITY IN BRAZIL

The teaching of English to children in Brazil is developing at a very fast pace. As stated by Cox and Assis-Peterson (2008) that is because more and more people need to use a FL like never before. English is the most common language taught as a FL in the curriculum of regular schools and, according to Rocha (2008) this is due to the technology advance as well as to the fact that society is becoming linguistically and culturally diverse.

According to official Brazilian educational guidelines, the teaching of a FL becomes mandatory after the 5th⁵ grade. However, this reality is changing and many schools, both private and public, are implementing English in the curriculum of children in early grades (Gimenez and Tonelli, 2013).

The insertion of the English language in the curriculum of primary public schools is growing at a very fast speed. In the city of Londrina - state of Paraná, for example, since 2008 children attending some municipal schools are having the opportunity to learn English through a project named "Londrina Global"⁶.

It is essential to emphasize that in Brazil the insertion of English in the initial years of schooling (kindergarten and primary school) has been coming across some deficiencies

⁵ According to the "National Educational Bases and Guidelines Law" (LDB, 1996) it is mandatory, after the 5th grade, the teaching of at least one foreign language and the school may choose it according to its possibilities. (LDBEN, 1996 – Chapter II)

⁶ Gimenez et al, 2013.

mainly in teachers' education which is still untackled due to gaps related to the lack of public educational policies and teachers' specific education. Some considerations about this topic will be developed in the next section.

LACK OF PUBLIC POLICIES

One of the challenges to be overcome by teachers of English of very young children lies outside the classroom: the absence of official educational policies for the teaching of FL for children in Brazil (CHAGURI and TONELLI, 2013; GIMENEZ, 2013). Without a clear policy it is hard for the teachers because that means there is no official curriculum to work with so the teachers must elaborate their own teaching content leading to "different curriculums"⁷ all over the country.

It is important to make it clear that we do not advocate in favor of a rigid curriculum for all English classes, or any other subject, but we do believe that if we had, in Brazil, a minimum English content to be covered in the first years of schooling it would certainly work as guide to the teaching and, consequently, would influence English teachers' educational programs.

According to Magalhães (2013) since we have no official documents that trace the profile of the English teachers for children, their academic formation⁸ ends up being empirical. In order to find out the desirable profile of the teacher of English to children, the author carried out a research with 96 English teachers and the results showed that 51% believe that the university prepared them partly, 20% think their professional formation was insufficient and only 8% of the participants undergraduate in English Language considered their academic formation adequate to face the challenges of the classroom.

In our case, the English language undergraduate course we were taking at the time this research was being carried out did not provide any specific education to teach English to children, since its curriculum did not offer any discipline directly related to that. The only opportunity to be in contact with that area was provided through extra disciplines⁹, volunteer participation in research projects and the teaching practicum internship.

⁷ Curriculum is understood here as the contents to be taught, the methodology orientation, the assessment instruments to be used, etc.

⁸ Understood here as everything related to the practical and theoretical aspects of teachers' profession.

⁹ Disciplines not mandatory are offered by the teachers and students can choose whether they want to take them or not depending on their personal interest.

In the next session we present some considerations related to the children of English teachers education.

TEACHERS' SPECIFIC EDUCATION

Childhood is the period of life in which essential abilities have to be developed, so the teacher should be prepared to teach the discipline, in this case English, and also to cope with the children's development as a whole. That is, not only cognitive, but also physical and emotional. However, English language undergraduate programs in Brazil do not provide specific teacher's education for teaching children, as discussed in Tonelli and Cristovão (2010).

As children have their personal characteristics, it is required a specific education for teachers. Cameron (2003) contributes to the topic, listing three kinds of knowledge and skills that those teachers need:

“(...) an understanding of how children think and learn; skills and knowledge in spoken English to conduct whole lessons orally, and to pick up children's interests and use them for language teaching; to be equipped to teach initial literacy in English” (CAMERON, 2003, p.6 added emphasis).

Aiming at discussing the desirable profile of the teacher of English to children, Santos and Benedetti (2009) carried out a research in order to identify the expected theoretical and methodological knowledge that professional should master. The results showed that some of the necessary characteristics for the teacher are: to master the FL; to know the necessary contents for each childhood phase; to have know theoretical-linguistic theories; to use attractive methodologies to the teaching of FL to children; to know the theories of children development; to be in constant professional improving, to have willingness to learn; to be dynamic and; to like the area of teaching English.

As stated by Moon (2005), taking into account the fact that very young children have their personal characteristics, teachers must be prepared to deal with those students. The author also says that, in order to teach English to children successfully, it is important to consider the characteristic of that age “because they are still developing cognitively, linguistically, physically and emotionally” (MOON, 2005, p.3). She also states that some points must be considered in order to be a competent English teacher to very young children:

to set realistic aims and expectations, to master age-appropriate methodology and curriculum as well as to know and to use appropriate assessment instruments.

Tutida (2014) carried out a research in order to verify if the public universities in Paraná State are providing specific education for English teachers interested in working with children. The results of that research showed that despite the increase in the number of English classes in primary schools, out of the 14 public Universities in Paraná investigated, none has in its curriculum a specific discipline in English language undergraduate courses focusing on the teaching of English to children.

To conclude this session we bring Pires (2007) who states that:

(...) to teach English (or any other language) to children, mostly the ones who are under six years old, the teacher needs to dominate two areas of knowledge: children education and foreign language, (...) otherwise, we believe that the child will be less harmed if she doesn't have any class. (PIRES, 2007, p.41-42, our translation).

THE YOUNGER THE BETTER. FOR WHOM?

Before exploring the myth that young children are better learners and teaching English to this age group is a simple easy task, it is important to define what is considered young and very young learners. Roth (1998) defines very young learners, children from 3 to 6, and young learners from 6 to 9. This difference is delimited according to the age characteristics concerning the control of muscular movements, emotions, intelligence, language development, sociability and behavior.

There is a belief that, to learn a FL, the younger the better. According to Assis-Peterson and Gonçalves (2001) “children have often been considered fast and successful learners, whereas adults are believed to be slow and less successful learners” (ASSIS-PETERSON; GONÇALVES; 2001, p. 1). In fact, studies have shown that adolescents and adults are in many ways better at learning a new language than children, except in pronunciation (SINGLETON, 2001; ORTEGA, 2009). .

In their research Assis-Peterson and Gonçalves (2001) concluded that if the learning of a FL starts during the childhood, it is necessary to have well-prepared teachers and to use appropriated methods in order to promote the learning and to avoid children to losing interest in the study of a FL, as soon as they began to learn.

Despite the fact that there is not a best age to learn a FL, including English focus of this article, some authors point out some possible benefits of learning a language during the

childhood. Rocha (2008), for example, states that this learning can help the children to build ways to broaden the knowledge about themselves and the society, it can also make children have a better understanding on the context they live, providing an opportunity to integrate children in the world by strengthening a positive and critical view about themselves.

As we could see, English teachers to children have many challenges to overcome and, the most important ones, from our perspective, are: the absence of specific educational policies, the necessity to adequate teachers' education and also the pedagogical aspects, which have to be dealt with during the classes. In other words, due to the absence of specific pre-service education to teach English to children, many times those professionals do not know how to deal with pedagogical issues that arise when they are in the classroom.

In the next session, the methodological aspects of this research will be presented.

METHODOLOGY

This interpretative-qualitative research was carried out throughout the mandatory internship at the Early Childhood Educational Center that belongs to the State University of Londrina.

Our internship aimed at promoting the familiarization of the children from the Educational Center with the English language and also giving the English language undergraduate students an opportunity to experience teaching very young learners.

Based on the assumption of language as social practice and that human communication would be impossible if we did not master genres discourse (Bakhtin, 2000), we decided to teach English to children based on textual genres (Bronckart, 2003). In order to organize the activities that would be used in our teaching practicum, we chose to base our classes on the usage of didactic sequences (DS), which is "a set of organized school activities in a systematic way around an oral or written genre" (DOLZ and SCHNEUWLY; 2004, p. 96).

When working with textual genres organized by means of a DS, a logical sequence of activities must be followed. It starts with the presentation of the classroom project, followed by students' first production of the genre(s) to be explored, the development of the modules and, finally, the fulfillment of the final production.

To generate data two instruments were used: 1) the recording of one class of the E4 group and; 2) a Focus Group (FG).

The recording of one class of the E4 group helped us to identify the challenges faced by the internship students during their teaching practicum, more specifically those experienced by the first author of this paper.

The FG was carried out in order to gain a better understanding of the difficulties and challenges faced by the other pre-service teachers during their experience of teaching English to very young children.

According to Krueger (2009) a FG is a research technique used to obtain qualitative data from group sessions. The discussion developed, based on previously planned questions aiming at providing an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to express their feelings and thoughts about the experience they were having during the internship¹⁰.

All the participants of the FG also took part on a project, which aimed at promoting specific education for those who wanted to teach English to children, and also took disciplines focusing this area¹¹. Part of the internship activities consisted of a weekly meeting when the group used to discuss pedagogical aspects related to their teaching experience. For the FG an extra meeting was arranged and eight questions were previously prepared and asked by a moderator¹². Both, the class recorded and the FG sessions, were transcribed according to Marchuschi (1986) for subsequent analysis.

The previously planned¹³ questions asked for the group during the FG were: 1) In your opinion, what is the best age to learn a foreign language? Why? 2) How do you feel being an English teacher for children? 3) How do you define this experience? 4) Do you feel prepared to perform this role? 5) In your opinion, what are the challenges in the English teaching to children? If any, which challenges are these? Which challenges have you already faced? 6) How these challenges could be solved? 7) Do you consider being an English teacher for children an easy role? 8) Have you ever worked with older students? Do you consider them easier or more difficult than children? Why?

After transcribing the answers provided by the participants of the FG, we selected some excerpts in which they described their own experiences and others in which they gave

¹⁰ Although the first author of this article was part of the group of pre-service teachers and the second author was the internship supervisor, we decided to use the pronoun “we” in order to maintain a certain distance of the phenomenon investigated.

¹¹ The names quoted here will be fictitious in order to preserve participants’ identities.

¹² The professor in charge of the teaching practicum and the second author of this article.

¹³ It is important to explain that the questions were previously planned but during the FG other questions were asked in order to develop different ideas and promote discussion.

examples to support their opinion regarding the difficulties faced by them when teaching English to very young children. The answers were analyzed aiming at identifying the participants' difficulties towards teaching English to very young learners.

In the following session we bring the data analysis followed by the results of this research.

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

THE E4 CLASS

The class recording took 47 minutes, however for this analysis we selected some significant moments in order to achieve our main goal for this research: to investigate the challenges faced by seven pre-service teachers – including the first author of this article - while teaching very young children at the Early Childhood Education Center.

In the analysed class, it was possible to identify three different challenges faced by the pre-service teachers: 1) situations involving conflicts; 2) children's talk in classroom and.; 3) children's care.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN STUDENTS

Psychology researchers have been studying the role of conflicts for the development of children (WALLON, 1995) and, according to Freitas (2011), conflicts are inherent to the human condition.

The first situation happened in the beginning of the analyzed class, when the teacher asked students to sit on their own chairs to do the activity. For that task students had to draw two clouds using crayons. The conflict started when two students wanted to use the same crayon. The teacher was not near the students when it happened.

In the beginning students argued, but in order to solve the problem, one of them took the crayon from his friend's hands and punched him. The punched student started to cry and looked for the teacher to tell her. The teacher addressed to the other student, took the crayon from his hands, told him that it was not right to punch his friends and gave the crayon to the student who cried.

In that situation we noticed that the teacher did not solve the conflict for both students. On the contrary, her attitude favored only one of them. We believe this might have happened due to two different reasons: the first and probably the most concrete one comes from the fact

that the teacher was not prepared for dealing with this kind of situation, her objective was to help one student to stop crying. This attitude might also have happened because the teacher did not see the situation as a whole, she believed in what one student told her, she did not ask to the other student his point of view or his version of the facts. We could say that in this situation the student who looked for the teacher to ask for help was the favored one.

The second situation happened approaching the end of the class, when students were supposed to sit on a circle on the floor with the teachers to present their activity for their classmates. The conflict happened between two students who wanted to sit beside the teacher. In this situation none of them cried, yet the student who talked to the teacher first was the favored one and stayed by her side.

Once more we could say that the teacher did not solve the conflict. She did not try to negotiate with students. She found a way to quickly make students stop arguing and continue the class. Ortega (2002) cited by Sousa and Silva (2006) says that a conflict is not necessarily related to violence, but when a situation of conflict is not adequately approached it can generate a situation of violence and, in the end, it gets difficult to identify the origin of the problem. Sousa and Silva (2006) defend the idea that teachers should develop the role of mediation in a situation of conflict. According to the authors the mediation process can facilitate the constructive dialogue and the negotiation of decision-making, in this way helping to have comfortable interpersonal relationships in school life.

CHILDREN'S TALK IN CLASSROOM

According to Roth (1998) children have a short period of concentration when compared to adults, and for this reason children tend to lose focus easier.

In the analyzed class, in different moments students talked to each other about topics not directly related to the class. It happened especially during the moments when they were doing the activity in groups, when they had finished their own tasks and were waiting for others members of the group, when they had to wait for their turn to speak or when they had already spoken during the presentation time. In all those situations presented, students were talking to each other and they were not paying attention to the class. One interesting situation happened in the beginning of a class, when the teacher was recalling the story that was been worked with. One student started telling the teacher "My mother gave me a radio". The teachers got troubled and answer him "I don't want to talk about radio now". The boy got

upset and insisted on the idea saying “But we can watch the news on my radio” and the teacher said “No, not now”.

Although it was not “relevant” for the class, that is, the subject was not directly related to what was being explored, and talking about irrelevant topics would disturb the progress of the class, it was, somehow, important for the child to share that information. In fact, we could notice that the teachers seemed not to be prepared for dealing with that situation, once she did not allow the student to express what he wanted. The teacher could have had a different attitude explaining to the student that the moment was not appropriated but in the end of the class he could tell her. It would be important for the teacher to emphasize that the moment was inappropriate for that conversation and, at the same time, to demonstrate interest to know the topic later.

Roth (1998) states that children aged between 3 and 6 tend to interrupt activities to gain attention. We could say that, as it is a characteristic related to children’s behavior, it has great probabilities to happen frequently in classes. It is necessary to emphasize that teachers have to be well prepared to deal with this situation.

The results of Santos and Benedetti (2009) research in which they explore the desirable knowledge to be an English teacher for children and one of them is to be familiar with the theory of children development. We could say that when a teacher does not have the desirable knowledge it becomes a challenge in the teachers’ practice.

CHILDREN’S CARE

Very young children are not able to develop some actions that are extremely easy and common for teens and adults, for example, to tie their shoes, to clean their noses and also to use the toilet alone. Such situations happened during the English classes and caused some stress on the teacher. We understand that maybe this is due not only to the lack of theoretical knowledge but also to the need of practice.

In that case, the teacher approached the student to help him with the activity, noticing that he had a runny nose, she asked him to go to the toilet and clean it, and so the student did it. However when he came back, it was worst than before because he spread the dirt over his face.

Another student wanted to go to the toilet; he asked the teacher and used it by himself. When he came back, his pants were on his feet and some children started laughing at him. It was probably an embarrassment to him and the teacher could have avoided it if she knew how

to deal with the situation within being “an English teacher”. That is, the teacher of English to children has to master the language and also know how to face and manage this kind of event. As stated by the “National curriculum framework for early childhood education” (Brasil, 1998) in which it is said that contemplate care in childhood education means understanding it as part of an integral education.

Both situations could be better faced, mainly favoring students, if the teacher had a specific education. It would be not only important but also essential for teacher’s education to be familiar with documents that guide the childhood education in Brazil.

THE FOCUS GROUP

To help us to achieve the goal set to this research the FG transcription was analyzed to identify the challenges faced by all the participants. The most evident challenges identified by us were: 1) difficulties related to lessons planning and; 2) getting students’ attention.

Concerning planning English classes to children the excerpt 1 gives us an example of the challenges faced by the group¹⁴.

Excerpt 1:

TH: *Eu acho que o primeiro desafio é o desafio de planejar. É o desafio que você tem pra planejar a aula, pra pensar numa atividade, aí é aquele negócio, o que você acha que vai dar certo e o que você acha que não vai dar certo né? Então esse é o primeiro desafio, então você já vai, mas pensando “nossa, o que que vai acontecer?”, e daí eu acho que vem os outros desafios daí que são dentro da sala de aula. Que daí, por exemplo, a relação com as crianças.*

According to TH, it is hard for the teacher to plan classes thinking on each age, because although all of them are children, they are in different stages with its own characteristics. This fact affects directly the classes because the abilities required to develop some activities may or may not be acquired by the children.

Magalhães (2013) says that the way children learn is different from adults and teenagers and it varies according to each age phase. The same author also states that teachers should know the particularities of each phase of children’s development and, this should be a prerequisite for a teacher of English to children.

¹⁴ The excerpts will be presented in Portuguese since the FG was conducted in that language.

From our point of view, this is one of the challenges faced by English teachers: children's characteristics are an aspect that is not covered in English language undergraduate programs, therefore, many times teachers do not know what kind of activities are suitable for each childhood phase. In our perspective if we had in Brazil educational policies for the teaching of English to children, our courses would cover this content and, maybe, the teachers would have minimal knowledge about the ideal activities to be used in English classes for children.

Another challenge mentioned by the participants was related to getting students' attention, as shown in excerpt 2:

Excerpt 2:

L: Conseguir a atenção deles.

According to Roth (1998) as children have a short period of concentration¹⁵, teachers should prioritize short activities with lots of varieties, this way students would get more interested and involved in the class.

We believe that the pre-service teachers could have easily dealt with such situation if they had some knowledge on the characteristics of each phase (MOON, 2005).

The experience of teaching English to children was defined by the participants of the FG as positive to some aspects and, at the same time, negative, as it will be shown in this section.

In order to show the participants' opinions concerning their experience when teaching English to children we identified and grouped the adjectives used by them to describe their teaching throughout the FG. Chart 1 brings all the adjectives used by the pre-service teachers:

Chart 1: Adjectives used by the pre-service teachers

Positive Adjectives	Situation(s)	Negative Adjectives	Situation(s)
Fast	Learning feedback	(very) hard	To get students' attention
Satisfying	To be teacher of children	Challenging	To be an English teacher for children
Rewarding	To teach children	Effortful	To teach children
			Because it is necessary to create the material

¹⁵ Kuhn, 1970.

		Physical fatigue.
	Different	Because you have to teach not only English but also other things
	More difficult	When compared to the teaching of adults.
	Tiring	Physically and mentally
	Frustrating	Plan activities and in the end it will not work.

Source: elaborated by the authors

Observing chart 1 it is possible to notice that the participants of the FG used more negative than positive adjectives to describe the teaching of English to children.

The experience of teaching English to very young children is seen by the participants as *hard*, *challenging*, *effortful*, *difficult*, *different*, *tiring* and *frustrating* and, at the same time, it is *satisfying* and *rewarding*.

The adjectives “effortful” and “frustrating” were used to characterize the lesson planning and the elaboration of materials. According to the Oxford Dictionary, effortful means “something that requires effort, it is an arduous act”. The same dictionary brings the meaning of frustrating as *the result of being unable to achieve something*.

Given these definitions we can infer that the pre-service teachers experienced difficulties to create materials and to plan classes because maybe they were having an unrealistic expectation on what children are able to do, and, according to Moon (2005), a competent English teacher to children should have realistic aims and expectations. Considering these points, it seems reasonable to say that planning classes and creating materials would be easily faced by the pre- service teachers if they had a better understanding about children’s characteristics, which converges with Cameron’s (2003) words related to one of the skills that English teachers to children need to have: “an understanding of how children think and learn” (CAMERON, 2003, p.6).

Analyzing chart 1, it is possible to observe that although the the pre-service teachers considered the experience of teaching English to children as something *difficult* and *challenging* the same experience is seen by them as positive when considering the affective factors – being involved with the children - and the learning feedback.

In the final analysis we could conclude that the negative adjectives (*hard*, *challenging*, *effortful*, *difficult*, *different*, *tiring* and *frustrating*) were used to describe the

many challenges that were daily faced during the pre-service practice and had to be overcome, while the positive ones were used to describe their experience as a whole.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our experience in teaching English to children has shown that this is not a simple easy task. Nevertheless, it is common to hear exactly the opposite: as long as the person knows some simple words in English he or she is able to teach the little ones.

During our undergraduate course it was quite rare to hear from other students that they would be interested in having teaching experience with children. Hence, this research was inspired by our personal feeling that, even having the opportunity to take part in a project directly related to that educational context we still faced many challenges when teaching English to children.

The main objective of this paper was to investigate the challenges faced by seven pre-service teachers – including the first author of this article - while teaching English to very young children at the Early Childhood Education Center at the State University of Londrina.

After data analysis it was possible to conclude that the challenges faced by that group of pre-service teachers - planning classes, specifically regarding the types of activities suitable for each childhood phase, getting students' attention, solving conflicts between students, dividing time management between teaching English and caring and managing children talk – are straight related to aspects that need to be carefully explored and studied in the teachers education programs. Therefore, the idea that anyone can teach English to children, even without specific education or qualification does not correspond.

The pre-service teachers were immersed in a context, which provided them a rare opportunity to have specific education to teach English to children, i.e., taking part of projects and disciplines focusing on the area of teaching English to children. Even under such circumstances and having the chance to receive specific preparation, the teachers stated that they still faced some challenges in the classroom.

Taking into account the participants' opinions, it is possible to affirm that maybe the disciplines and the project activities did not approach the essential aspects required to act in that context, such as the stages of child development and strategies to get students' attention. Such assumption may strengthen the idea that teaching English to very young learners is not as simple as people like to put. Actually it is a demanding activity that requires a good range of knowledge.

In 2001 Assis-Peterson and Gonçalves came to the conclusion that there was no scientific evidence regarding what could be considered the so called “best age” to learn a foreign language and until now, in 2015, it has not been verified. In contrast with the myth “the younger the better”, we came to the conclusion that “the younger the harder” when it is related to teaching specially because it requires specific education which has not being offered by most of English language undergraduate programs, at least in the State of Paraná where this research was developed.

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