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International Scientific Journal – ISSN: 1679-9844 Nº 1, volume 16, article nº 06, January/March 2021 D.O.I: http://dx.doi.org/10.6020/1679-9844/v16n1a6 Accepted: 02/05/2019 Published: 26/03/2021

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN A LOGISTICS UNDERGRADUATE COURSE: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

## LÍNGUA INGLESA EM UM CURSO DE GRADUÇÃO DE LOGÍSTICA: PERSPECTIVAS E DESAFIOS

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Abstract: Nowadays, it is common knowledge that English language is important to any professional since it is the main language in areas like: technology, business and science. In addition higher education in Brazil has also started implemented programs and actions aiming at internationalization which can be defined as an integration process of intercultural, international or global dimensions with educational purpose and offers. Research has shown that English is one of the key aspects to internationalization as research partnerships, students and professors mobility programs, EMI courses, MOOCs requires a common language which usually happens to be English. Such facts reinforce the role educational institutions play to develop students' communicative skills in English. This study aims to analyze this language role in a Technology in Logistics undergraduate course offered in a public institution located in São Paulo metropolitan area. In business field, the second most offered undergraduate course is Technology in Logistics, which stands at more than 22% of the courses in the area. The work searches for evidence that students have

the linguistics ability and skills (English) to meet the market and academic demands which are established in the fundamental documents of the course. Thus this qualitative case study uses data from documents analysis and a questionnaire applied to the students. Results show a mismatch between the learning expectations set in the official guiding documents of the course and the implemented actions, low amount of English studying hours and learning difficulties among students. This investigation intends to contribute to future actions in English teaching to better prepare Logistics undergraduate students.

**Keywords:** English teaching; Internationalization; Logistics undergraduate course

Resumo: Atualmente, a importância da língua inglesa pode ser considerada senso comum entre os profissionais, uma vez que é a principal língua em áreas como: tecnologia, negócios e ciência. Além disso, o ensino superior no Brasil já começou a implementar ações e programas focalizados na internacionalização, que pode ser definida como um processo de dimensões intercultural, internacional ou global com propósitos e ofertas educacionais. Pesquisas mostram que o inglês é um dos principais aspectos da internacionalização, pois parcerias de pesquisas, mobilidades estudantil e docente, cursos de IMI, MOOCs entre outras ações exigem uma língua em comum que na maioria dos casos é o inglês. Tal fato reforça o papel exercido pelas instituições no desenvolvimento das habilidades comunicativas dos estudantes na língua. Este estudo tem o objetivo de analisar o papel do inglês no curso de graduação em Tecnologia em Logística oferecido por uma instituição pública localizada na área metropolitana de São Paulo. Na área de negócios, Tecnologia em Logística é o segundo curso mais oferecido, representando mais de 22%. Esta investigação busca evidências de que os alunos têm habilidades e capacidade em inglês para atender as demandas acadêmicas e do mercado que estão estabelecidas nos documentos delineadores do curso. Assim, este estudo qualitativo utiliza dados decorrentes da análise de documentos e de um questionário aplicado junto aos alunos. Os resultados revelam um descompasso entre as expectativas de aprendizado estabelecidas nos documentos oficiais norteadores do curso e nas ações implementadas, baixo número de horas de estudo da língua inglesa e dificuldades de aprendizado entre os alunos. Esta investigação pretende contribuir para futuras ações no ensino de inglês para melhor preparar os alunos do curso de graduação em Logística.

Palavras-chaves: ensino de inglês; internacionalização; curso de graduação em Logística

#### INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions have the responsibility to prepare students to face market demands and to contribute to the society development. Among the abilities to be acquired while in college, it is common knowledge that students must develop their English language skills since it is the main language in business, technology and science. Globalization and advances in communication technology has shown how English has been used as an international language.

On the other hand, studies in English language assessment have pointed that Brazilian college students have not achieved the expected proficiency level required by international educational institutions and as a consequence faced difficulties to be accepted in scholarship programs like *Ciência sem Fronteiras* (Science without Borders), a Brazilian mobility program launched in 2010 that provides international scholarships for undergraduate and graduate students to encourage the internationalization of science and technology (KOBAYASHI, 2016). Such situation raises a doubt about the English proficiency level of college students and how educational institutions have worked on this matter since higher education internationalization is already a reality in the country.

Among the undergraduate technology courses in business field, Technology in Logistics is ranked second in Brazil, which stands at more than 22% of the courses in the area (BRASIL, 2017). Such situation reflects Logistics area growth in the country which is pushing up the demand for professionals. It goes without saying that English is relevant in this area since import and export business requires effective logistics, as well as safety procedures and regulations, transport and insurance may demand knowledge in the language.

Having said it, this study aims to analyze the English role in an undergraduate course in Technology in Logistics offered in a public institution located in São Paulo metropolitan area. Thus, this research investigates if there is evidence that this course's students have or will have linguistics skills (English) to meet the market and academic demands.

An investigation like this becomes more and more relevant once it is expected that students take part in internationalization programs and activities on campus and get better prepared to work in a globalized market. Internationalization is not

restricted to academic environment and its main objective is to better prepare citizens to live, work and interact in a world without boundaries. Besides, this study intends to contribute to future actions in English teaching to better prepare students and also to provide reflections to Logistics and English areas.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

English teaching in public institutions in Brazil has faced many problems which resulted in low proficiency level of the students (LEFFA, 2005; PAIVA; 2011). Large classes, lack of material resources and teachers who are not proficient in the target language or have poor academic background or training are pointed as some of the reasons (SANTOS, OLIVEIRA, 2009).

On the other hand, the hegemony of English as a global language can be seen in 85% of international companies where it is the most used language and also is also in fields like science, technology, trade, culture and education where it is the main language (GRADDOL, 2000). As it is claimed by Swaan (2001, p 65) "the centre of the linguistic galaxy is, of course, English." Besides, the education of a citizen who can be able to understand and interact with the world in a globalized time requires the ability to know how to use a language which allows access to information and also to act in society (LANKSHEAR, 1997).

Concerning the job market, studies also show that companies apply several testing tools in order to analyze the applicants' proficiency level in English (KOBAYASHI, 2010). Lankshear (1997), decades ago, already discussed beyond language and emphasized the importance of foreign language literacy in the new economic and strategic world order. Such proficiency encompasses visual and spoken texts integral to global dealings to meet up the nation's needs.

(...) thereby serving "the Nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education" (NCEE 1983: 26) - genuflections toward more "humanist" rationales notwithstanding. This calls, minimally, for communicative competence allowing functional cross-cultural access to a range of discursive practices and, optimally, for levels of fluency and cultural awareness equal to being persuasive, diplomatic, and strategically effective within sensitive high risk/high gain contexts. (LANKSHEAR, 1994, p.312)

For these reasons English has become a must in business context. Ehrenreich (2010) shows in her study on a multinational company that English is not expected to be used by the workers as a native language but what is really relevant is the effectiveness in communication with English as a business lingua franca. Furthermore the author also identified a general understanding among the staff that they should develop their language skills according to what their position in the company.

Therefore the educational institutions can not postpone any longer actions to promote more learning and better teaching in English. In addition, *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (CAPES) (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) has already demanded that Brazilian universities start work on their internationalization processes (BRASIL, 2017).

Higher education internationalization can be defined as a wide array of academic activities which can encompasses teaching and research in cooperation with scholars and international institutions as well as crossing borders physically (KEHM, TEICHLER, 2007). In QS Stars, which is a rating system which evaluates universities worldwide, there are seven criteria considered very important for institutions to achieve international rankings: 1) international faculty; 2) international research collaborations; 3) international scholars; 4) international scholar support; 5) inbound exchange students; 6) outbound exchange students; 7) transnational diversity.

The CIGE (Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement) Model for Comprehensive Internationalization offers a broad view on how colleges and universities should align policies, programs and also initiatives in order to become more internationally oriented. According to the model, there are six interconnected target areas:

1. Articulated Institutional Commitment: this area provides a map for internationalization implementation and encompasses: strategic planning with mission statements and institution-wide strategic plans; internationalization committee to oversee internationalization implementation; campus stakeholders to discuss priorities and concerns by students, faculty, staff and stakeholders; assessment and measurement of the internationalization progress and outcomes.

- 2. Administrative Leadership, Structure and Staffing: this area refers to the necessary framework for implementing internationalization.
- 3. Curriculum and Learning Outcomes: one of the main goal of internationalization is students learning and internationalized curriculum and co-curriculum allow development of students' global competence. Thus, such curriculum addresses specific knowledge and skills to be developed: the general education requirements set that courses on foreign language, regional studies and global issues are included in undergraduate general education requirements; courses within each major should have international perspectives; programs and activities should address global issues and international elements of the curriculum and support integration of international students; students should be assessed in internationally-focused competencies; technology is used also to enhance global learning, for example, in interactions between students and faculty abroad.
- 4. Faculty Policies and Practices: faculty tenure codes and promotion policies, hiring guidelines and faculty mobility and development programs are all connected to international competences.
- 5. Student mobility: this area refers to programs, orientations, support structures and activities to domestic students to engage in education abroad as well as the inward flow of international students. Student mobility also involves dealing with credit transfer policies, financial and funding, orientation and re-entry programs, ongoing support and programs and academic and social support structure and programs.
- 6. Collaboration and Partnerships: in order to establish and manage collaboration and partnerships abroad, the American Council of Education recommends four steps: strategic planning, review possible structures, identify potential partners and on-going management.

The CIGE Model, particularly the target areas Curriculum (number 3) and Students Mobility (number 5) and the QS Stars criteria on outbound exchange students establish activities and programs related directly to the students and in which a foreign language will be necessary. English is used as lingua franca around the world so it is fair to consider it as the main foreign language in internationalization. In addition, among Curriculum and Learning outcomes one of the steps to the development of the institution internationalization is the using of English

as a medium of instruction (EMI). Thus students are expected to attend classes delivered in English even if they are in Brazil.

In Europe, higher education internationalization has been much more advanced than in Brazil especially after Bologna Process (1999) which allowed more mobility and joint programs. Even so, at that time, language had already pointed out as the main factor in the internationalization process as claimed by Tudor (2004).

The EHEA (European Higher Education Area) will become a reality only if students, researchers, academics and administrative staff in Higher Education institutions across Europe are able to communicate effectively with one another, and this depends crucially upon their knowledge of languages. (TUDOR, 2004, p.1)

The *Ciência sem Fronteiras* (*CsF*) – Science without Borders program launched in 2010 by Ministry of Education with the aim to internationalize science and technology in Brazil have already shown English language relevance. The main objective of the CsF was the international student mobility with the outward flow of domestic students to foreign universities and institutes.

On the other hand, in order to be accepted in international higher educational institutes, applicants had to meet some requirements like academic performance and have an international certificate of English proficiency. The latter turned into the main obstacle to implement the CsF since Brazilian students faced difficulties to reach the required proficiency level. Such situation triggered actions by federal government which covered opening language centers, offering online courses and the application of international proficiency tests. Kobayashi (2016) showed that the requirement for English language certificates to take part in CsF impacted the language teaching in a language center of a federal university and revealed that their students were interested in international mobility programs and acknowledged the importance of English language.

Having said it, the importance of English language in higher education institutions has become very clear. In the Logistics undergraduate course investigated in this study, the language is a demand from the job market as well as from the internationalization programs and activities that the institution must promote sooner or later.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This research can be classified as a qualitative investigation which attempts to understand a phenomena deeply taking into account its context and participants. As it is stated by Yin (1984, p.23) it is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used".

Shank (2002, p.5) defines this kind of research as "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning". Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.3) state that qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach: "this means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them".

#### Scenario

This investigation took place in a public educational institution located in São Paulo metropolitan area. The undergraduate courses offered on this campus are related to Logistics, Mechatronics and Chemistry fields. The admission process is based on the applicants' scores in the *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* (ENEM) (The National High School Exam), a test developed and applied by the Ministry of Education. Every person who has already finished high school can take this test and after that apply for vacancies in colleges and universities that accept ENEM scores.

In this research context, the Logistics undergraduate course offers 40 places annually in the beginning of the academic year. It lasts at least two years and a half or five terms and students have to attend thirty disciplines which encompass mainly general content like mathematics, information technology, communication, business management and specific contents like stock management, production and transports.

#### Data collection

The data collection tools used in this research encompass documents which guide the Logistics undergraduate course like the course program and a

questionnaire applied to the students on their English learning background as well as their current language study.

#### **RESULTS**

#### **Documents analysis**

Concerning the Logistics undergraduate course program, English language seems to be a relevant aspect for the students' education. First of all, one of the course objectives is to prepare future professionals to work in a strategic region of the wealthiest and most important state of the country. Such area is next to main roads, international airports and ports. Besides, the document also refers to contribution to science, technology and arts which constitutes the educational institution proposal.

However, English language is not included in the mandatory disciplines of the course program as it is expected to be offered by the language center of the college. According to the document, the English course has to be offered in afternoon and evening classes and delivered by a qualified professional. In addition, the proficiency levels should be basic, intermediate and advanced. Nevertheless, the number of hours for each level is not mentioned.

On the other hand, the course program does not bring further information on how students' enrollment, attendance, performance and approval in the English course will be controlled as well as the course offering. As a consequence, it is up to the Logistics undergraduate students take or not the classes. Therefore, the availability of English course seems to be enough to promote the language learning for the educational institution.

The English courses offered by the college language center are open to any student or person from the community interested in taking the classes. Thus it is not restricted to the Logistics student. The only requirement was to fill in the registration and present the documents requested by the admission office. Thus, it is fair to say that any Logistics student could register if there was interest in attending the classes.

Business English courses were offered every year from 2016 to 2018, five groups took them adding up to 59 students in the total. Among them, ten were Logistics undergraduate course students at the time which means that around 17% of the places in the English course offerings were taken by them. The rest of the students came from different courses or were people who did not study in the college under this investigation.

In relation to the ten Logistics students' performance in the one-semester course they attended, one failed it, two dropped out and seven were approved. Thus they have not taken other courses offered in the language center.

Taking these results into account, it is possible to claim that most of the Logistics undergraduate students do not rely on courses offered at the language center to learn English. However it does not mean they do not study it. Having said it further investigation was carried out in order to better understand these students' proficiency level.

Although internationalization is not mentioned clearly in the documents, it is underlying the several abilities and competences to be developed during the course like work in Logistics to serve international trade and contribute to science and technology. Moreover internationalization is one of the criteria items applied by INEP in undergraduate course assessments so faculty and institution must be aware of its relevance.

#### Questionnaire

The main objective of the questionnaire applied to the Logistics students is to understand their English studying experience focusing on the number of years, difficulties, frequency of contact with the language and self-learning habits. Participants were asked ten multiple choice questions on a paper survey applied in class. Students from the first, third and fifth terms took part in it which amount people distributed in 34,94%, 39,76% and 25,30% respectively.

About their English studying time (Table 1), 46,99% of the participants claimed they studied it only in high school. However, everybody else has a range of experience studying the language either in a face to face course or an online one, or even in both. In Brazil, English language is a mandatory subject in high school. Thus,

such data show that studying English language seems to be relevant to the participants.

Choices	Percentage
High school	46,99%
High school and face to face course	38,55%
High school and face to face course, High school and	
online course	2,41%
High school and face to face course, High school and	
online course, Other	1,20%
High school and online course	4,82%
Other	6,02%
Total	100,00%

Table 1: where participants studied English

On the other hand, although students have taken English extra courses they did not stay long studying as most of them quitted in less than one year and 18%,03 stayed from one to two years. 16,87% studied longer from three to four years (Table 2).

Choices	Percentage
1 to 2 years	18,07%
2 to 3 anos	15,66%
3 to 4 anos	16,87%
Less than 1 year	20,48%
Blank	28,92%
Total	100,00%

Table 2: Studying time (participants who answered b and c in Table 1)

As a consequence, 84,34% of the Logistics students are not currently studying English (Table 3).

Choices	Percentage
Not studying	84,34%
Studying	15,66%

Total	100,00%
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Table 3 – Students currently studying English

The main reason for not studying the language is lack of time, according to 48,19% of the students. Only 2,4% claim they do not want to study the language (Table 4).

Choices	Percentage
I do not want to study	
it.	2,41%
I do not have time.	48,19%
Other reasons.	37,35%
(blank)	12,05%
Total	100,00%

Table 4 – Reasons for not studying English

In order to identify which four language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) was considered the most challenging, students were asked about how difficult or easy they thought of these skills.(Table 5 and Table 6)

Listening (31,33%) and speaking (25,30%) are considered the most challenging skills followed by writing (15,66%) (Table 5). Some students chose more than one skill, some pointed two, others all the skills, but it is possible to notice that speaking is in all of them.

Choices	Percentage
Writing	15,66%
Writing, speaking	3,61%
Writing, speaking and listening	7,23%
Writing, speaking, listening and reading	4,82%
Writing, speaking and reading	2,41%
Listening	31,33%
Speaking	25,30%
Speaking and listening	2,41%
Speaking and reading	1,20%
Reading	3,61%
None of the above	2,41%
Total	100,00%

#### Table 5 - Difficulties in English language

On the other hand, when asked about which skill they considered easier to learn 34,94% said it was reading, followed by 14,46% who thought it was speaking and 12,05% writing (Table 6). In this question, participants also had the chance to choose more than one skill but the results seem to be balanced.

Choices	Percentage
Writing	12,05%
Writing and speaking	1,20%
Writing and reading	1,20%
Listening	10,84%
Listening and reading	3,61%
Speaking	14,46%
Speaking and listening	1,20%
Speaking, listening and reading	2,41%
Reading	34,94%
None of the above	18,07%
Total	100,00%

Table 6 - Ease of learning English

Although most of Logistics undergraduate students work during the day, 60,24% are not required to use English to perform their job (Table 7). Those who may need the language seldom use it (24,10%). Only 8,43% often use it.

Choices	Percentage
Do not use English	60,24%
Yes, sometimes	8,43%
Yes, often	7,23%
Yes, seldom	24,10%
Total	100,00%

Table 7 – English use at work

Participants were asked how often they had contact with English language. It could be in different ways like music, series, books, reports, messages, which

encompass business and leisure time. The results show that English is somehow in their lives as only 13,25% claimed not to have any contact with the language. All the other students data vary in terms of frequency from daily (38,55%) to once a week (12,05%) (Table 8).

Choices	Percentage
Daily	38,55%
Twice to four times a week	16,87%
Less than once a week	19,28%
Do not have any contact	13,25%
Once a week	12,05%

Table 8 – Contact with English language

Most of the students have never studied English by themselves (44,58%). Those who have such experience studied for a short time (26,51%) or a long time (10,84%), only 10,84% are currently studying the language alone (Table 9).

Choices	Percentage
I do not have such experience	44,58%
Yes, I studied for a long time.	10,84%
Yes, I currently study alone.	18,07%
Sim, but I studied for a short time.	26,51%
Total	100,00%

Table 9 – Studied or study alone

English learning is not considered neither difficult nor easy according to 51,81% of the participants (Table 10). While 30,12% think it is difficult, 18,07% believe it is easy.

Choices	Percentage
Difficult	30,12%
Easy	18,07%



Table 10 - English learning

#### **DISCUSSION**

The data analysis shows that most of the Logistics undergraduate course students have already taken an English course, apart from studying the language in high school, and the face to face method was the most chosen one. Thus it seems to be a generalizing understanding of the language relevance to their lives since money and time have been spent in studying the language. This result shows that these students may be aware of English requirements to work and live in a globalized society as pointed out by Graddol (2000), Lankshear (1997). However, results also show that most of the participants did not study the language for a long time an average of two years and currently 84,34% of them are not studying English. Such situation can hinder progress in language learning.

In addition, although 54% of the students have already taken online English courses, only 18% still studies it. These results also indicate that participants have difficulties in studying English regularly. This fact is supported by the low registration number of Logistics students in the courses offered by the language center of the institution since 17% of the places were taken by them. Besides, 30% of those students who took the course were not able to keep studying in the center.

On other hand the participants claim that the main reason for not studying English is lack of time but the language is somehow in their lives through different ways like movies, music, reading, among others. Thus, English can not be considered an inaccessible language to the participants. On the other hand, a regular and systematic use of the language at work was not pointed by about 60% of the students.

English is considered neither difficult nor easy by most of the students but some skills seem to be more challenging than others. Listening and speaking are seen to be the most difficult ones to the majority of the participants while reading is said to be the easiest skill. According to Logistics course program, reading is the most required skill in class as students are supposed to read academic papers. However, if internationalization actions are put in the picture, listening and speaking skills can no longer be set aside.

These results indicate that Logistics students are likely to face challenges in using English as expected in the job market and mainly in outward flow mobility and other internationalization program and activities which demand the language. It also reflects current issues on English level among Brazilian undergraduate students as pointed out by Kobayashi (2016). Actions to raise students' awareness of the importance of studying English with regularity to reach the proficiency levels required by international universities and the market should be taken by the institution. Since the language is not a mandatory discipline it does not seem to

#### CONCLUSION

This research investigated if students of a Logistics undergraduate course of a public institution have the English linguistics abilities and skills to face the market and academic demands. In order to do that, the course program was analyzed as well as the language center course registrations. Although it is expected that Logistics students take English course at the center, only a very small part of them have studied there. In addition, the data collected with the questionnaire show that less than 20% of the participants are currently studying the language, and most of the students who had already taken a face to face or online course did not study for a long time. Thus students are likely to face challenges in using the language at the level demanded by the market and also by internationalization programs and activities.

As students' opinions were collected through a questionnaire, it would be interesting if they also took an English proficiency test in order to better understand their difficulties in the language.

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