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FROM ENGLISH EXPOSURE TO MEANINGFUL LANGUAGE USE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN BRAZILIAN PRIVATE SCHOOLS

DA EXPOSIÇÃO AO INGLÊS AO USO SIGNIFICATIVO DA LÍNGUA: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO DA EDUCAÇÃO BILÍNGUE EM ESCOLAS PARTICULARES BRASILEIRAS

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of bilingual education in Brazil has significantly influenced the linguistic and pedagogical landscape of Brazilian schooling, particularly through the growth of Portuguese-English bilingual programs in the private education sector. This qualitative study examines how bilingual and additional-language pedagogies are implemented in Brazilian schools, with particular attention to teachers' instructional practices, students' participation, and opportunities for meaningful English language use. Data were collected through direct classroom observations conducted in different schools in Santos, São Paulo, Brazil, across early childhood and elementary/middle school contexts. The observations focused on language use, teacher–student interaction, instructional strategies, scaffolding, student participation, the integration of language and academic content, and the use of bilingual and technology-supported resources. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the observed classrooms. The findings revealed substantial variation in the implementation of bilingual pedagogies despite relatively intensive exposure to English and the use of international or bilingual materials. In particular, the observations indicated a gap between students' exposure to English and their spontaneous use of the language in peer interaction and everyday communicative contexts. The findings also highlighted the importance of teacher scaffolding, developmental considerations, classroom conditions, and opportunities for meaningful interaction in supporting language learning. Beyond pedagogical implementation, the study discusses the broader social implications of the expansion of bilingual education in Brazil, particularly the commodification of English, unequal access to high-quality bilingual learning opportunities, and the potential relationship between linguistic capital and educational inequality. The study argues that

effective bilingual education should be understood not simply in terms of increased exposure to English, but in terms of the quality of interaction, pedagogical implementation, and equitable opportunities for students to use the language meaningfully.
Keywords: bilingual education; bilingualism; English language learning; additional-language pedagogy; classroom observation; language use; educational inequality; Brazil.

RESUMO

A expansão da educação bilíngue no Brasil influenciou significativamente a paisagem linguística e pedagógica da escolarização brasileira, particularmente por meio do crescimento de programas bilíngues português-inglês no setor de educação privada. Este estudo qualitativo examina como as pedagogias bilíngues e de línguas adicionais são implementadas em escolas brasileiras, com atenção particular às práticas instrucionais dos professores, à participação dos alunos e às oportunidades de uso significativo da língua inglesa. Os dados foram coletados por meio de observações diretas de sala de aula realizadas em diferentes escolas em Santos, São Paulo, Brasil, em contextos de educação infantil e ensino fundamental (anos iniciais e finais). As observações concentraram-se no uso da linguagem, na interação professor–aluno, nas estratégias instrucionais, no scaffolding, na participação dos alunos, na integração entre língua e conteúdo acadêmico e no uso de recursos bilíngues e apoiados por tecnologia. A análise temática qualitativa foi utilizada para identificar padrões recorrentes nas salas de aula observadas. Os achados revelaram variação substancial na implementação das pedagogias bilíngues, apesar da exposição relativamente intensiva ao inglês e do uso de materiais internacionais ou bilíngues. Em particular, as observações indicaram uma lacuna entre a exposição dos alunos ao inglês e seu uso

espontâneo da língua na interação entre pares e em contextos comunicativos cotidianos. Os achados também destacaram a importância do scaffolding do professor, das considerações desenvolvimentais, das condições de sala de aula e das oportunidades de interação significativa no apoio à aprendizagem de línguas. Além da implementação pedagógica, o estudo discute as implicações sociais mais amplas da expansão da educação bilíngue no Brasil, particularmente a mercantilização do inglês, o acesso desigual a oportunidades de aprendizagem bilíngue de alta qualidade e a potencial relação entre capital linguístico e desigualdade educacional. O estudo argumenta que a educação bilíngue eficaz deve ser compreendida não simplesmente em termos de maior exposição ao inglês, mas em termos da qualidade da interação, da implementação pedagógica e de oportunidades equitativas para que os alunos usem a língua de forma significativa.
Palavras-chave: educação bilíngue; bilinguismo; aprendizagem da língua inglesa; pedagogia de línguas adicionais; observação de sala de aula; uso da linguagem; desigualdade educacional; Brasil.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon involving linguistic, cognitive, social, cultural, and educational dimensions. Rather than being defined solely by equal or native-like proficiency in two languages, bilingualism may involve different levels of competence and patterns of language use depending on individuals' experiences, social environments, educational contexts, and communicative needs (Baker, 2001; Hamers & Blanc, 2000).

In Brazil, bilingualism and bilingual education have received increasing attention, particularly through the expansion of

Portuguese-English educational programs. The growth of these programs has been associated with globalization, international communication, academic opportunities, and the social and professional value of English. Recent scholarship has highlighted the rapid development and diversification of bilingual education models in Brazil and the need to examine their practical implementation (Megale et al., 2025; Reis et al., 2022).

However, the increasing presence of English in Brazilian schools raises an important question: Does increased exposure to English constitute bilingual education?

The answer cannot be determined solely by the number of English classes offered in the country. Bilingual education involves more than the presence of additional languages in the curriculum. It concerns how languages are used for teaching, interaction, knowledge construction, and participation in educational activities.

This distinction is particularly relevant in Brazil, where schools may adopt different models of English-language education while maintaining the Brazilian national curriculum. Some programs increase the number of English classes per week, while others integrate English with academic content through bilingual curricula, approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) other with some projects.

The present study focuses on the relationship between institutional provision and classroom implementation. Specifically, it investigates the pedagogical methodologies used to support additional-language acquisition among students between 5 and 14 years of age in private schools in Santos, São Paulo.

This study examines classroom practices rather than evaluating bilingual education solely through institutional labels. It asks how teachers use English and Portuguese, how they support students' comprehension and participation, how language is integrated into classroom activities, and what pedagogical strategies are employed to facilitate additional-language learning.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptualizing Bilingualism

Bilingualism has been conceptualized in various ways. Earlier definitions sometimes emphasized proficiency in two languages, whereas contemporary perspectives recognize that bilingual individuals may have different levels of competence across linguistic domains and may use each language for different purposes.

Hamers and Blanc (2000) emphasized that bilingualism should be understood in relation to individual and social dimensions rather than exclusively through linguistic competence. Similarly, Baker (2001) describes bilingualism as a multidimensional phenomenon in which individuals develop and use their linguistic resources differently depending on the context and experience.

This perspective is particularly relevant in school settings. Students entering English-language or bilingual programs may have different previous experiences with English, different levels of exposure outside of school, and different opportunities to interact with speakers of the language.

Consequently, bilingual education cannot assume that students begin with a homogeneous linguistic background.

2.2. Bilingual Education In Brazil

The expansion of bilingual education in Brazil has created a diverse educational landscape. Private schools have increasingly incorporated English into their curricula through extended language instruction, bilingual programs, international materials, and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching.

Recent Brazilian scholarship emphasizes that bilingual education should not be reduced to an intensified version of traditional foreign language teaching. Instead, bilingual education involves questions concerning curriculum, language allocation, teacher preparation, assessment, and the role of language in the construction of knowledge (Reis et al., 2022; Megale et al., 2025).

This distinction provides an important analytical framework for the present study. Therefore, the research does not assume that a school is pedagogically bilingual simply because it offers a substantial number of English classes. Instead, the study examines what teachers actually do with the additional language in classroom contexts.

2.3. Additional-Language Acquisition And Classroom Interaction

Second- or additional-language acquisition is strongly influenced by opportunities for meaningful interactions. Contemporary approaches to language learning emphasize the importance of contextualized communication, learner participation, interaction, and opportunities to use language for meaningful purposes (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ortega, 2014).

In classroom settings, teachers can support additional language development through scaffolding, visual resources, gestures, repetition, modeling, contextualized instructions, collaborative activities, games, and opportunities for students to communicate.

Therefore, the effectiveness of language instruction should not be evaluated solely based on the amount of language exposure. The quality and nature of this exposure are also relevant.

2.4. Content And Language Integrated Learning

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between language and academic learning. Coyle et al. (2010) describe CLIL as an approach in which an additional language is used in the teaching and learning of both language and subject content.

From this perspective, English functions not only as an object of instruction but also as a resource through which students engage with concepts, solve problems, interact with their peers, and construct knowledge.

This framework is relevant to the present study because some observed classroom practices involved integrating English with activities extending beyond explicit language instruction.

However, CLIL should not be considered a universal solution. Its implementation depends on student proficiency, teacher preparation, curriculum planning, instructional resources, and assessment practices.

2.5. Play-Based And Communicative Practices

In early childhood education, playful activities may provide opportunities for students to encounter and use additional languages in meaningful contexts.

Songs, games, stories, visual resources, movement, demonstrations, and classroom routines can create opportunities for comprehension and communication without requiring students to rely exclusively on direct translation.

These practices are particularly relevant when working with younger learners because language development is connected to social interaction, participation and contextualized experiences.

Therefore, the present study considers play-based, communicative, interactive, and content-oriented practices as part of the broader range of pedagogical strategies used to support additional-language acquisition.

2.6. From Institutional Models To Classroom Practice

An important premise of this study is that institutional provision and classroom implementation are not necessarily equivalent in their effects.

A school may offer several English classes per week, use international materials, or identify its program as bilingual. However, these institutional characteristics do not, by themselves, demonstrate how students experience the language during classroom instruction.

The analytical focus of this research is therefore the relationship between:

School model → curriculum/materials → teacher practice → classroom interaction → student participation → opportunities for additional language development.

This framework allows bilingual education to be examined as an enacted pedagogical practice rather than solely as an institutional designation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, naturalistic observational research design.

The objective was to examine how methodologies for additional-language acquisition were implemented in authentic classroom contexts rather than relying exclusively on institutional descriptions or theoretical assumptions.

The study focused on classroom practices, including teachers' instructional strategies, language use, student participation, classroom interaction, and the integration of English into learning activities.

3.2. Research Context

In Brazil, the recognition and implementation of bilingual education have been increasingly shaped by national curricular guidelines established by the National Council of Education (Conselho Nacional de Educação—CNE) and aligned with the Brazilian National Common Curricular Base (BNCC). Under these guidelines, bilingual

education is distinguished from conventional foreign-language instruction. A bilingual school is expected to implement an integrated curriculum in which an additional language functions as a medium of instruction rather than being offered solely as a separate subject. Thus, simply increasing the number of English classes does not, by itself, constitute bilingual education.

The guidelines emphasize several characteristics of bilingual schooling. First, the additional language should be used to teach curricular content, allowing students to engage with subjects such as Science, Mathematics, Arts, or History through the additional language. Second, language and content objectives should be integrated within a unified curriculum rather than organized as separate Brazilian and foreign curricula. Third, bilingual education should be incorporated throughout the educational stages offered by the institution. The guidelines also establish minimum proportions of instructional time in the additional language, ranging from 30% to 50% in Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education and at least 20% in Secondary Education.

Teacher qualifications are another important component of the guidelines. Teachers responsible for instruction in the additional language are expected to demonstrate appropriate language proficiency and pedagogical preparation, including training related to bilingual education. Consequently, schools that primarily expand the number of traditional English-language classes without integrating the additional language into curricular content may be more appropriately characterized as schools offering extended additional-language instruction rather than as bilingual schools.

This regulatory context is particularly relevant to the present study because it provides a framework for examining the relationship between institutional definitions of bilingual education and their implementation at the classroom level. The distinction between teaching English as a subject and using English as a medium of instruction is central to understanding the pedagogical practices observed in the schools included in this study.

The study was conducted in 15 private schools in Santos, São Paulo, Brazil. At the time of the study, no public schools in the city offered bilingual programs that met the selection criteria established for this research.

Schools were selected according to the following criteria:

1. They were private educational institutions;

2. They offered more than three 50-minute English classes per week.

3. They used international or bilingual instructional materials;

4. They included students within the age range examined in the study.

The selection criteria were intended to identify schools with relatively intensive exposure to English and institutional practices oriented toward additional-language learning.

3.3. Participants And Classrooms

The study included:

- 15 schools
- 30 classrooms
- 30 teachers
- Students between 5 and 14 years of age

Two classrooms were observed in each school:

- one early childhood education classroom; and
- one elementary/middle school classroom.

Thus, the study included two different educational stages, allowing the analysis to consider how pedagogical approaches to additional-language acquisition may vary according to students' developmental and educational levels.

Importantly, the unit of analysis was primarily the classroom practice, rather than individual student performance.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected over an eight-month period.

Six classroom observations were conducted at each participating school, resulting in a total of:

15 schools × 6 observations = 90 classroom observations.

The observations focused on the relationship between lesson planning and classroom implementation.

Two principal sources of data were considered:

Lesson Plans

Lesson plans were examined to identify:

- instructional objectives;
- planned language activities;
- content areas;
- proposed learning strategies;
- opportunities for English-language use.

Classroom Practices

Classroom observations examined:

- teachers' use of English and Portuguese;
- instructional strategies;
- language scaffolding;
- teacher–student interaction;
- student participation;
- communicative opportunities;
- use of visual and technological resources;

- play-based activities;
- integration of language and content;
- classroom organization;
- opportunities for students to use English meaningfully.

This combination allowed the study to examine the relationship between what teachers planned and what occurred during classroom instruction.

3.5. Observation Protocol

The observation protocol was organized around two complementary dimensions:

A. Lesson Planning

The analysis considered:

- learning objectives;
- planned language objectives;
- content objectives;
- instructional sequence;
- planned activities;
- materials and resources.

B. Classroom Implementation

The observations considered:

Category	Focus
Language use	English and Portuguese used by teachers and students
Teacher practices	Instructional strategies and scaffolding
Student participation	Engagement and communicative opportunities
Teacher–student interaction	Questions, feedback, and negotiation of meaning
Learning environment	Classroom organization and resources
Bilingual practices	Use and alternation of languages
Content and language	Integration of language and academic content
Technology	Digital resources used during instruction

3.6. Qualitative Thematic Analysis

The observational data and lesson plans were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Field notes and lesson-planning materials were reviewed systematically to identify recurring patterns in teachers' pedagogical practices and students' opportunities to engage with English. Initial analytical categories were developed from the study's observation protocol and included language use, instructional strategies, teacher scaffolding, student participation, teacher–student interaction, learning environment, bilingual practices, content-language integration, and technology use. The data were then examined comparatively across the participating

schools and educational levels to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns in the implementation of additional-language pedagogies. Particular attention was given to the relationship between planned instructional practices and their enactment in the classroom.

Following this initial review, the field notes were manually coded to identify recurring words, behaviors, interactions, and instructional practices. Different colors were used to distinguish excerpts according to their initial analytical meaning. For example, observations related to language use, student participation, teacher practices, classroom interaction, and content-language integration were assigned different color codes. The coded excerpts were then compared across observations to identify recurring patterns and similarities. Codes addressing related aspects of classroom practice were grouped into broader categories, which were subsequently reviewed and refined into the final themes. This process allowed the themes to emerge progressively from the observed data while remaining connected to the initial analytical categories. Throughout the analysis, the original field notes were revisited to verify that the emerging themes were supported by the observations and remained grounded in the classroom data.

Throughout this process, I revisited the original field notes to verify that each emerging theme was supported by observations from the classroom data and that the interpretation remained grounded in the observed practices.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Variation In The Implementation Of Additional-Language Pedagogies

The observations revealed substantial variation in the implementation of additional-language teaching practices across the participating schools.

Although all selected schools provided relatively intensive exposure to English and used international or bilingual materials, the presence of these institutional characteristics did not necessarily result in identical classroom practices.

In some classrooms, English was integrated consistently into instructional activities, classroom routines, interaction, and content-related tasks. In others, English was more strongly associated with explicit language instruction, while Portuguese was used more extensively for explanations, classroom management, and more complex academic interactions.

This variation suggests that the number of English classes offered by a school is not, by itself, sufficient to characterize the nature or quality of bilingual pedagogical implementation.

4.2. Teacher Practices And Scaffolding

Teachers played a central role in mediating students' access to English. Observed strategies included repetition, gestures, visual resources, modeling, contextualized explanations, questions, demonstrations, and other forms of scaffolding.

These practices were particularly relevant when students encountered unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts. Rather than

immediately translating every unfamiliar expression, teachers could use contextual clues, visual support, demonstrations, and interaction to facilitate comprehension. Such practices are consistent with perspectives on language learning that emphasize meaningful input, interaction, and contextualized communication (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ortega, 2014).

For instance, during one observation in an elementary classroom, the teacher introduced a new activity in English and initially provided visual support while modeling the expected response. When several students appeared uncertain about how to respond, the teacher repeated the instruction using simpler language and gestures, including Total Physical Response (TPR), before gradually encouraging students to complete the task independently. This interaction illustrated how scaffolding was used to reduce students' linguistic uncertainty while maintaining their participation in the activity.

4.3. Student Participation And Communicative Opportunities

The observations also revealed differences in the extent to which students were encouraged to actively use English.

Some classroom activities created opportunities for students to answer questions, interact with peers, participate in games, solve problems, and communicate ideas.

Other activities were more teacher-centered, providing students with fewer opportunities for extended oral production.

For example, in one observed lesson, students were primarily expected to listen to the teacher's questions and provide short,

predetermined answers. Although students participated and responded correctly to several prompts, the activity provided limited opportunities for them to initiate communication, elaborate on their ideas, or interact spontaneously with classmates.

This distinction is important because exposure to English does not necessarily guarantee meaningful language use. Students need opportunities to participate in interaction and use the additional language for purposes that extend beyond repetition or isolated vocabulary practice.

4.4. Integration Of Language And Content

Another important pattern concerned the relationship between language instruction and academic content. In some classrooms, English was used as a medium for activities involving concepts and knowledge from other areas.

For instance, in one classroom, English was used while students engaged with a science-related activity, requiring them to follow instructions and discuss the content presented by the teacher. In this context, the language served not only as the subject of instruction but also as a means through which students accessed and discussed academic content.

These practices were particularly relevant to CLIL-oriented approaches because students encountered English as a resource for engaging with academic content rather than exclusively as the object of language instruction.

However, the degree of integration varied among classrooms.

This finding reinforces the distinction between simply increasing English instruction and implementing educational models in which an additional language plays a meaningful role in learning.

4.5. Early Childhood And Elementary/Middle School Contexts

The inclusion of two educational stages in each school provided an important comparative dimension for examining the implementation of additional-language pedagogies across different developmental contexts. In early childhood classrooms, language exposure frequently occurred through routines, songs, games, stories, movement, visual resources, and playful interaction. Among older students, classroom practices more frequently involved structured academic tasks, explanations, problem-solving, projects, and content-oriented activities. These differences suggest that additional-language pedagogy needs to consider students' developmental stages rather than applying a single instructional model across all age groups.

The classroom observations also revealed significant challenges related to the implementation of bilingual practices across early childhood and elementary/middle school contexts. These challenges extended beyond the use of the additional language as part of the daily classroom routine. In several classrooms, teachers were responsible for relatively large groups of students, often without the support of a classroom assistant. At the same time, classrooms included students with diverse learning profiles, abilities, and educational needs, adding complexity to the implementation of consistent language-learning practices.

These conditions raise an important pedagogical question: how can teachers create an inclusive and linguistically rich learning environment while ensuring meaningful opportunities for language use for all students? The observations suggest that effective bilingual education requires more than exposure to English or the availability of bilingual materials. Teachers must simultaneously manage classroom organization, respond to diverse student needs, provide appropriate linguistic scaffolding, and create opportunities for meaningful interaction. This becomes particularly challenging when one teacher is responsible for a large and diverse group of learners.

For example, in classrooms with larger groups of students, teachers frequently had to divide their attention between maintaining classroom organization, monitoring student participation, and providing linguistic support during activities. Under these conditions, opportunities for individualized interaction in English could become more limited, particularly for students who required additional support to participate in the activities.

Therefore, an important area for further investigation concerns how classroom practices, teacher preparation, and institutional support can be strengthened to promote more inclusive and effective bilingual learning environments. The findings indicate that the successful implementation of bilingual education depends not only on the amount of English exposure provided but also on the conditions under which teachers and students interact with the language.

4.6. From Exposure To Meaningful Language Use: Challenges In Developing Functional Communicative Competence

One of the central findings of the study is that increased exposure to English does not automatically result in equivalent forms of bilingual learning. The schools included in this study were selected precisely because they provided relatively intensive English-language instruction and used international or bilingual materials. Nevertheless, classroom observations demonstrated variation in how those resources and instructional opportunities were translated into pedagogical practice.

Classroom observations revealed a gap between students' exposure to English and their ability to use the language spontaneously in everyday communication. In approximately 60% of the schools observed, teachers appeared to face challenges in creating consistent opportunities for students to use English in meaningful, natural interactions. Although students were often able to recall and reproduce vocabulary presented during lessons, they demonstrated more limited ability to apply this vocabulary spontaneously in common, everyday exchanges.

This pattern suggests that exposure to linguistic input and vocabulary instruction alone may not be sufficient to support the development of functional communicative competence. The findings therefore raise questions about which pedagogical practices may need to be reconsidered or strengthened in the classroom and whether ongoing teacher education should place greater emphasis on strategies that promote meaningful interaction, spontaneous language use, and the transfer of classroom learning to everyday communicative contexts.

For instance, during an observation in an elementary classroom, the teacher introduced a science concept entirely in English and used

visual slides to support comprehension. Although students were able to follow the teacher's instructions, they consistently reverted to Portuguese when interacting with peers to solve the assigned task. This observation illustrated a distinction between students' ability to comprehend English during teacher-led instruction and their ability to use the language spontaneously during peer interaction.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Commodification Of Bilingual Education And Educational Inequality In Brazil

The findings of this study raise a broader social question concerning the commodification of bilingual education in Brazil. Although bilingualism is increasingly associated with academic, professional, and social opportunities, access to high-quality bilingual education remains strongly influenced by socioeconomic status. In the Brazilian private education sector, bilingual programs are frequently presented as an educational advantage and as a form of cultural and linguistic capital, making English proficiency an additional resource available primarily to families who can afford the associated costs. As a result, bilingualism may function not only as an educational opportunity but also as a mechanism that reinforces existing social and educational inequalities.

This issue becomes particularly relevant when the availability and quality of bilingual education in the public sector are considered. Access to English instruction in Brazilian public schools does not necessarily constitute access to bilingual education. While English is part of the national basic education curriculum, instructional time, available resources, teacher preparation, and opportunities for

meaningful communication may be insufficient to provide students with the same sustained linguistic exposure and learning experiences available in many private bilingual programs. Consequently, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may have fewer opportunities to develop functional communicative proficiency in English, despite the increasing importance of English in academic and professional contexts.

The situation is particularly relevant in the local context examined in this study. In Santos, São Paulo, the classroom observations conducted for this research revealed differences between the pedagogical possibilities associated with bilingual education and the opportunities available to students in public educational settings. The limited availability of structured bilingual programs in public schools, combined with the constraints of conventional English-language instruction, may contribute to an unequal distribution of opportunities for language development. This disparity suggests that when bilingual education is concentrated predominantly in the private sector, proficiency in English may become a form of educational privilege.

From this perspective, the central issue is not simply whether bilingual education should be expanded, but how access to effective bilingual learning opportunities can be democratized. If bilingualism increasingly represents an important form of linguistic, academic, and professional capital, restricting high-quality bilingual experiences to students who can afford private education risks reproducing broader patterns of socioeconomic inequality. Public education therefore has an essential role to play in developing policies and pedagogical models that provide students from diverse

socioeconomic backgrounds with meaningful opportunities to learn and use English.

The findings also reinforce the importance of distinguishing between English-language instruction and bilingual education. Offering additional English classes may increase students' exposure to the language, but bilingual education involves broader questions concerning the role of language within the curriculum, classroom interaction, academic learning, and knowledge construction. The observations suggest that teacher practices are central to this distinction. Teachers determine, to a significant extent, whether English functions primarily as an instructional object or whether students have opportunities to use English as a communicative and academic resource. This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize language learning as socially mediated and dependent on interaction and meaningful participation.

The results further reinforce the relevance of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as an analytical framework. When English is integrated with academic content, students have opportunities to use the language to perform meaningful cognitive and communicative tasks. However, the observed variation suggests that CLIL-like practices require curricular planning, appropriate resources, and teacher preparation rather than simply the introduction of English into content-related activities. Similarly, interdisciplinary approaches such as STEAM may provide opportunities for students to use English in collaborative, inquiry-based, and problem-solving contexts. Their implementation, however, depends on institutional conditions that cannot be separated from broader questions of educational access and equity.

The study therefore supports a more nuanced understanding of bilingual education in Brazil. Rather than asking only “How much English is offered?”, it may be more productive to ask: “How is English used, by whom, for what purposes, and under what pedagogical conditions?” This shift from quantity of exposure to quality of implementation represents an important contribution of the study.

More broadly, the findings highlight that the development of bilingual education cannot be separated from questions of social rights and educational equity. Access to meaningful and effective language education should not depend exclusively on a student's socioeconomic background or ability to attend a private bilingual school. Strengthening bilingual education in Brazil therefore requires a commitment to equitable educational opportunities, including access to qualified teachers, adequate instructional resources, meaningful exposure to English, sufficient instructional time, and pedagogical practices that support genuine language development. Recognizing bilingual education as part of a broader commitment to equal educational opportunity may contribute not only to improved language learning but also to reducing the reproduction of socioeconomic inequalities through unequal access to linguistic and academic capital.

Ultimately, expanding equitable access to effective bilingual education should be understood not merely as a pedagogical challenge, but as a matter of educational rights and social inclusion.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN BRAZIL

The findings of this study also need to be considered in light of the broader challenges of English-language proficiency in Brazil. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides an internationally recognized framework for describing language proficiency, ranging from A1 and A2 (basic users) to B1 and B2 (independent users) and C1 and C2 (proficient users). At the lower levels, learners can communicate in familiar and routine situations, whereas higher levels involve increasingly spontaneous, complex, and effective communication for academic, social, and professional purposes.

Recent international data indicate that Brazil continues to face significant challenges in English proficiency. According to the 2025 EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), Brazil ranked 75th among 123 countries and territories, with a score of 482, corresponding to the organization's low-proficiency band (EF Education First, 2025). The country's scores also reveal an important discrepancy among language skills: reading received a score of 516, while listening, speaking, and writing received lower scores of 468, 464, and 442, respectively. These results are particularly relevant to the present study because the observed classrooms revealed challenges in moving beyond vocabulary recognition and controlled language practice toward spontaneous and meaningful oral communication.

The Brazilian context therefore raises an important educational question: if English is taught throughout a student's school years, why do many learners still feel the need to pursue additional language instruction outside formal schooling in order to develop functional communicative proficiency? This question should not be interpreted as evidence that formal schooling is ineffective in all contexts. Rather, it suggests the need to examine how English is

taught, how much meaningful interaction students experience, how language is integrated with academic content, and whether students have sufficient opportunities to use English for authentic communicative purposes.

Brazil's relatively low English proficiency cannot be explained simply by insufficient exposure to English; it raises questions about the quality, intensity, communicative orientation, and pedagogical conditions under which that exposure occurs.

International comparisons further demonstrate that lower- and middle-income countries can achieve substantially different levels of English proficiency. In the 2025 EF EPI (EF Education First, 2025), for example, Malaysia scored 581 and was classified in the high-proficiency band, while the Philippines scored 569 and Argentina 575. Vietnam scored 500 and was classified in the moderate-proficiency band, whereas Brazil scored 482 and was classified in the low-proficiency band. These comparisons should be interpreted cautiously because the EF EPI is not a representative population survey and countries differ substantially in educational, linguistic, socioeconomic, and historical contexts. Nevertheless, the variation suggests that economic development alone does not determine national outcomes in English proficiency and that educational policy, teacher preparation, exposure to English, opportunities for meaningful language use, and broader sociolinguistic conditions may also play important roles.

For bilingual education in Brazil, these findings reinforce the need to move beyond the simple expansion of English instructional hours. The central issue is not only how much English students encounter, but what they are able to do with the language as a result of that

exposure. The observations in the present study suggest that bilingual programs may need to place greater emphasis on meaningful interaction, spontaneous oral production, language-content integration, differentiated instruction, and sustained teacher development. In this sense, bilingual education has the potential to contribute to a broader shift from learning English as a school subject toward using English as a language for communication, learning, and participation.

The findings have several implications. First, schools seeking to expand bilingual or intensive English-language programs need to consider teacher preparation as a central component of program implementation. Second, curricular planning should establish clear relationships between language objectives and academic objectives. Third, students should be provided with meaningful opportunities to communicate in English rather than being exposed primarily to decontextualized language exercises.

Fourth, evaluation of bilingual programs should consider classroom implementation rather than relying exclusively on institutional labels, number of English classes, or instructional materials. Finally, bilingual education policies and practices in Brazil should consider the diversity of educational contexts and the different linguistic backgrounds of students.

The central implication is therefore not simply that Brazilian students need more English, but that they may need different opportunities to use English: opportunities that allow them to communicate, negotiate meaning, solve problems, interact with others, and transfer classroom learning to situations beyond the classroom.

7. LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations.

First, the research was geographically limited to private schools in Santos, São Paulo. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all Brazilian schools or to public education contexts.

Second, the study examined classroom practices rather than directly measuring students' long-term linguistic or academic outcomes. Consequently, the findings cannot establish causal relationships between particular pedagogical methodologies and students' language proficiency.

Third, although six observations were conducted at each school over an eight-month period, classroom observations capture particular instructional moments and may not represent every aspect of teachers' practices throughout the academic year.

Finally, the study focuses on schools meeting specific selection criteria more than three English classes per week and the use of international or bilingual materials. These criteria limit the transferability of the findings to schools with different models of English-language education.

These limitations, however, also identify directions for future research, particularly longitudinal studies examining the relationship between classroom practices and students' linguistic development.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined methodologies for additional-language acquisition in 15 private schools in Santos, São Paulo, focusing on how English-language pedagogies were implemented across 30 classrooms and 90 classroom observations conducted over an eight-month period.

The findings indicate that the presence of English in the curriculum does not necessarily result in consistent bilingual pedagogical practice. Although the participating schools provided relatively intensive exposure to English and used international or bilingual materials, substantial variation was observed in teachers' instructional strategies, language use, student participation, and integration of language with academic activities.

The findings therefore suggest that bilingual education should not be evaluated solely according to the number of English classes offered. More important questions concern how English functions within classroom interaction, how teachers support students' comprehension and participation, and whether learners have meaningful opportunities to use the language for communication and knowledge construction.

The study also highlights the importance of teacher preparation, curricular planning, pedagogical consistency, and developmentally appropriate instructional strategies. In early childhood contexts, play-based and interactive practices can provide meaningful opportunities for language exposure and participation, while older students may benefit from increasingly integrated language-and-content activities.

More broadly, the study contributes to discussions of bilingual education in Brazil by emphasizing the distinction between institutional provision and classroom enactment. The expansion of bilingual education creates important opportunities for language learning, but its educational value depends substantially on how bilingual pedagogies are implemented in practice.

Future research should investigate these processes across different regions of Brazil and include longitudinal measures of students' linguistic and academic development. Such research could further clarify which pedagogical conditions most effectively support additional-language acquisition and equitable access to high-quality bilingual education.

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