

Rolling Out the Red Carpet: A Critique of Neoliberal Motivations Orienting the Promotion of Public Bilingual Schools to Young Learners in Brazil

Estirando o tapete vermelho: uma crítica às motivações neoliberais orientadoras da promoção de escolas bilíngues públicas para crianças no Brasil

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ABSTRACT: When it comes to being a bilingual child in Brazil, it is not about *any* form of bilingualism, however, that is valued. Despite its characterisation, English is seen as a *commodity*, often *sold* as the sole tool responsible for professional development and financial success, even when considering children. The core argument of this paper is that some Brazilian politicians have done the right thing (*i.e.*, promoting a Foreign Language Education, in this case English or Spanish, to young learners) for the wrong reason (*i.e.*, believing they can promote the English or Spanish Language Education to guarantee the children’s professional success in the future). In order to illustrate this viewpoint, excerpts from two Brazilian politicians are considered, besides excerpts from other social actors. As the analysis unfolds, four questions are addressed: (1) To whose desires is a society of the global South responding to whose desires?; (2) Right thing for the wrong reasons?; (3) Who gets to walk on the red carpet?; and (4) Where does the magic carpet promise to take us?

KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism; Language Education; Young Learners.



RESUMO: No que diz respeito a ser uma criança bilíngue no Brasil, não se trata de *qualquer* forma de bilinguismo, mas aquela que é valorizada. Apesar de sua caracterização, o inglês é visto como uma *mercadoria*; frequentemente *vendido* como a única ferramenta responsável pelo desenvolvimento profissional e sucesso financeiro, mesmo quando se trata de crianças. O argumento central neste artigo é que alguns políticos brasileiros fizeram a coisa certa (*i.e.*, promover o Ensino de Língua Estrangeira, neste caso o Inglês ou o Espanhol, para jovens aprendizes) pelo motivo errado (*i.e.*, acreditando que podem promover o Ensino de Língua Inglesa ou Espanhola agora para garantir o sucesso profissional das crianças no futuro). Para ilustrar esse ponto de vista, são considerados trechos de dois políticos brasileiros, além de excertos de outros atores sociais. À medida que o desenrolar, quatro questões são abordadas: (1) Aos desejos de quem uma sociedade do Sul global responde aos interesses; (2) Coisa certa pelos motivos errados?; (3) Quem pode andar no tapete vermelho?; e (4) Onde o tapete mágico promete nos levar?

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Neoliberalismo; Educação Linguística; Aprendizes jovens.

The future isn't something hidden in a corner. The future is something we build in the present.

Paulo Freire

1 Opening Remarks

When it comes to being a bilingual child in Brazil, it is not about any form of bilingualism, however, that is valued. It is about speaking Portuguese, which is the first language, and English, which has been labelled by Brazilian applied linguists researching English Language Education of young learners with various adjectives, that is, foreign (*e.g.* Kawachi-Furlan; Malta, 2020; Tonelli, 2018), additional (*e.g.* Kawachi-Furlan; Tonelli, 2021), second (*e.g.* Tonelli; Kawachi-Furlan, 2020) language, etc. applied to the research context. Despite its characterisation (Tonelli, 2023), English is seen as a *commodity* (Lucena; Torres, 2019), often *sold* as the sole tool responsible for professional development and financial success, even when considering children.

Most of the private schools in Brazil have shown an unprecedented desire to become dual-language schools (Souza, 2021). Dual language schools often precisely and carefully select the languages using economic criteria: Portuguese, which is the country's official language, imposed by Portuguese colonisers, and English, the language currently seen as the representative of economic trade and tool for success (Graddol, 2006). Nonetheless, Brazil is also constituted by more than 150 indigenous languages (Jornal da USP, 2020), which, not by coincidence, do not get to walk on the proverbial red carpet in that they are not elevated to the same level of distinction as Portuguese and English. The reader might wonder whether this is just a coincidence or if such schools are genuinely deeply concerned about language education. Based on this unequal set of educational circumstances, we examined (i) competition among private schools, (ii) increased tuition fees, and (iii) the intensification of the neoliberal discourse in the Brazilian educational landscape, which is a way of getting financial support from external sources.

And even though the Brazilian public schooling system is the focus of this paper, the neoliberal motivations to teach English to young learners may be traced to other countries such as Nepal (Sah, 2021), Spain (Lasaosa, 2021), and Japan (Smith, 2021). In short, the English learning fever is a global phenomenon (Sayer, 2019). As we will illustrate in this paper, it is not only the English language that has been promoted to young learners based on neoliberal motivations, Spanish – at least in certain areas of Brazil – has also benefited from this line of neoliberal reasons.

Regardless of the ideological and structural changes in Brazilian private schools caused by a neoliberal agenda, we argue that such an agenda has also found its way to public primary schools by means of expanding and intensifying the misconceived idea that acquiring English and Spanish will guarantee the children's future professional success (Munoz, 2014). Such an ideology has also been incorporated in the political discourse by local representatives in order to justify the inclusion of English or Spanish Language Education into the curricula. In this paper, we aim at answering the following four questions: (1) To whose desires is a society of the global South responding (2) Is this the right thing to do (even if it might be for the wrong reasons)?; (3) Who gets to walk on the proverbial red carpet?; and (4) Where does the red carpet promise to take us?

In order to answer – or, at least, reflect upon – the aforementioned questions, we firstly bring to the discussion the concepts, the characteristics, and the implications of a Global South and North perspective, focusing on how it impacts not only the Brazilian language education context, but also language education worldwide. Secondly, we introduce a Duty-Based Approach of ethics to argue that decision-makers have done the right thing (*i.e.*, promote foreign language education, in this case English and Spanish, to young learners) for the wrong reason (*i.e.*, believing that the acquisition of English and Spanish will guarantee children's professional success in the future). The examples of this second section come mostly from Brazilians, namely, local mayors, but also from a business owner and a Secretary of Tourism.

Relying on authors who have extensively discussed the neoliberal agenda in (language) education (Windle, 2010; 2017; 2019), we problematise the excerpts from local representatives broadcast on the news. Thirdly, we address what is the *ideal* language user and the *ideal* language that has been portrayed on the news. Fourthly, we question whether it is really possible to foresee the future – precisely its economic impact – when promoting foreign language education among young learners. In the last section, we invite the reader to think otherwise by offering the reader translanguaging as an alternate perspective.

2 A Society Of The Global South Responding To Whose Desires?

To varying degrees, we are all born and raised before promises made and goals pursued. And it is human nature to aim at getting to promised lands, benefiting from prestigious education degrees, and financially experiencing the goods and services desired. However, such promises, goals, and ideals are usually conceived and advertised by others, those beyond the oceans or in highly secured territories that seek to prevent the entry of the ones called 'aliens'.

The scenario indicated can easily refer to the relationship between the Global South and the Global North. The former concerns people whose identities have been historically, economically, culturally, and politically marginalized, whereas the latter refers to highly valued peoples, knowledges¹, bodies, and cultures. Even though this distinction is often associated with only a geographical aspect, that is, the countries from the North(ern) Hemisphere imposing their worldviews on the ones located in the South(ern) Hemisphere, we align ourselves with Mignolo (2011) who astutely observes that privileged groups within countries from the Southern Hemisphere can also dictate how other groups are expected to live, interact, behave, and use their language(s) (see also Heller; Duchêne, 2012).

Put differently, “the term global South refers to the geopolitical rather than geographic regions of the world and their people who have been paying the costs of colonization and economic globalization. It includes regions and peoples which have historically been politically or culturally marginalized.” (Chiappa; Finardi, 2021, p. 26). In that sense, it is possible to identify communities or groups whose characteristics are interpreted from a Global South perspective, even though they live in the North(ern) Hemisphere; and the opposite is equally feasible.

Following this line of thought, Mahler (2017, online) argues that:

[...] the Global South captures a deterritorialized geography of capitalism’s externalities and means to account for subjugated peoples within the borders of wealthier countries, such that there are economic Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South. While this usage relies on a longer tradition of analysis of the North’s geographic Souths – wherein the South represents an internal periphery and subaltern relational position – the epithet “global” is used to unhinge the South from a one-to-one relation to geography.

The author emphasizes the inexistence of physical, geographical borders to separate the Global South from the Global North. What does seem to exist, however, is a hyper-valorization of global North worldviews imposed on the South ones. The same understanding is shared by Saavedra and Pérez (2018, p. 750) who argue that “[t]he global north is not just a geographical positioning or region of the world, rather a worldview that is dominated by Eurocentric, white male onto-epistemologies and ‘all their satellite oppressions...increasingly more specialized in transnationalization of suffering...’ (Sousa Santos, 2014, p. 10).” Bearing this asymmetrical scenario in mind, education, and language education specifically, can play a pivotal role in shaping individuals’ futures. According to Wit, Leal, and Unangst (2020, p. 572), “[...] education as a means to transform a reality historically marked by unequal geographies of power, knowing, and being.”

In our viewpoint, the concept of Global South (and its direct antonym: Global North) may be interpreted as a sociological, historical, and political standpoint: sociological as it affords grained reflections concerning peoples’ normalized ways of interacting with each other and mobility; historical as it sees the root causes of such ways of interactions and mobilities as historically and oppressively constituted; and

¹ Inspired by decolonial reflections - even though they are not directly discussed in this paper, we have decided to use knowledges, in the plural form, as a way to recognize and legitimize their plurality. In our understanding, the use of such a term in the singular form subtly stresses the mainstream knowledge, which is often labeled as scientific, neutral, and trustworthy. As Mignolo (2011) put it, knowledge in the singular form conveys the idea that they (*i.e.* male, white, European or North-American) have *the* knowledge, whereas we (*i.e.*, queer, non-white, non-European or North-American) have only culture, which is non-scientific, biased, subjective, and locally constructed.

political because it takes a clear stance in speaking out against cases of prejudice and discrimination, which are daily materializations of oppressive and naturalized interactions among human beings.

Considering the prominence of this theoretical perspective, it is not surprising that numerous scholars have been mapping their critical reflections on to the language education field. Referring to a few context-dependent research studies, we briefly comment on the experiences described in Kyereko and Fass (2021), Saavedra and Pérez (2018), and Anderson-Levitt (2005). As they reflect upon local contexts that are also globally situated, we are also inspired by their motivations, provoked by their inquiries, and challenged to consider the whys and hows underpinning the phenomena they report.

Given such a perspective, it becomes essential to read between the lines when initiatives are announced because bilingual teaching comes to reinforce promises of inserting children into the world of others, especially when the ‘others’ are adults who might get prominence from such actions. On this matter, we agree with Baptista (2022, p. 53) when she asserts that “language coloniality” is a practice of coloniality that also affects language.

In his writing, Anderson-Levitt (2005, p. 987) problematises “how schooling as a global phenomenon affects the experiences of children around the world and the cultural construction of childhood.” The author reflects upon studies carried out in and his own observations from schooling systems in the Republic of Guinea, United States, and France. When systematising his impressions, Anderson-Levitt (2005, p. 989) comments that “[t]here are two contrasting images of schools, then: children clinging to the gate wanting *out* in the global North, children clinging to the gate wanting *in* in the global South.” According to Anderson-Levitt, in the former context, children feel the pressure of competitiveness promoted in the schools, which leads them to seek a way out; in the latter context, children find food, comfort, and an opportunity of advancement.

Anderson-Levitt (2005, p. 989) goes on to argue that “the contrast implies that schooling does not mean the same thing everywhere, nor do children experience it in the same way around the world.” Even though schooling is not identical across Brazil, we will later argue that bilingual language education has been promoted to young learners based on neoliberal motives, regardless of their geographical locations in Brazil. Anderson-Levitt also maintains that “Western-style schooling also has supplanted or is supplanting other systems for reproducing social statuses, and not just the system of direct inheritance of wealth” (Anderson-Levitt, 2005, p. 996). In that sense, even though Brazil is geographically distant, we breathe and sustain the Western-centered schooling ideology, one that is mostly constituted of competition, development, and goals.

Centered on North American experiences, Saavedra and Pérez (2018) reflect on the neoliberal influence on areas such as schooling metrics, teacher education, and – more precisely – bilingual and early childhood education. As far as the last foci are concerned, the authors comment that “In early childhood education, advocating for financial support is often positioned within an economic investment framework” (Saavedra; Pérez, 2018, p. 753). In order to support such a statement, they refer to Heckman, who is a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, who points out that “suggesting that investment in early childhood education is ‘a cost-effective strategy for promoting economic growth’” (Saavedra; Pérez, 2018, p. 753). Saavedra and Pérez then go on to argue for the need to imagine new, local, and South oriented practices that weaken the competitiveness of schools and instead enhance the culturally sensitive environment of schools.

The third local reflection on the Global South and North that has influenced language education comes from Kyereko and Fass (2021), who comment on the case of migrants in Ghana. Through a case study, Kyereko and Fass carried out interviews with children in English and in other (at least four) languages. Based on their findings, the authors emphasized “the complex linguistic barriers facing migrants youth in an anglocentric educational system”, as well as the need for awareness to face a scenario increasingly constituted by “postcolonial multilingual nations in the global South” (Kyereko; Fass, 2021, p. 1).

Building on these key insights, we propose that there is a way of interrupting the global North prominence on the global South language education, and that is through teacher education. Related to the scope of this paper, the study conducted by Saavedra and Pérez (2018) points out another issue concerning decisions made when the subject is bilingual education: the need to care for teacher education that disrupts global North neoliberalism. As stated by Saavedra and Pérez’s, “neoliberalism is the global north, neocolonial mechanism that produces policies of economic interest and cultural appropriation throughout the world” (Saavedra; Pérez, 2018, p. 75). In that sense, we argue for teacher education practices that not only question the global North neoliberalism influence on the global South, but also promote opportunities for other bilingual education experiences to emerge (*e.g.*, sign languages, indigenous languages, and etc., that is, not focusing solely on English as a language of prestige).

In sum, in this section we have introduced the concepts of Global South and North, as well as their characteristics and consequences to (language) education worldwide. At this point, we invite the reader to reflect upon the reasons that lead authorities – whose decisions are mediated through public initiatives – to decide on implementing bilingual education even when such actions are imbued with ‘good intentions’. This is the topic of discussion in the next section.

3 The Right Thing For The Wrong Reasons?

Different ethical frameworks offer different diagnoses of the problems we face, and different propositions as to how we should respond (Stein; Andreotti; Susa, 2019, p. 25).

The evaluation of a certain action as either ethical or unethical is more a matter of which perspective of ethics than the adoption of a single-answer attitude. In this sense, the ethicality – or its absence – is always a matter of the perspective considered.

A Duty-Based Approach of ethics, for instance, is mostly concerned with the reasons for conducting ourselves in certain ways. According to this approach, in order to judge whether an action is ethical, instead of focusing on either the action itself or its consequences, we need to analyse the motives and the intentions of the action (Sandel, 2009). When it comes to English and/or Spanish language education of young learners in Brazil, some would argue that it is fruitless to spend so much time questioning the reasons behind the actions when we, language teachers, have so much work to do in the classroom.

Our response to such comments has always been that if you do not clearly know the reasons, you might get lost along the way; and our motives for teaching English (or any other language), should guide us as we design our course goals, select and produce our teaching materials, and manage students’ expected

outcomes. Put bluntly, if you do not know *why* you started teaching in the first place, there is a high likelihood that you will not know where you are heading.

As noted, the core argument on this writing is that some Brazilian politicians have done the right thing (*i.e.*, promote a foreign language education, in this case English and Spanish, to young learners) but for the wrong reason (*i.e.*, believing that English or Spanish language education will guarantee the professional success of children in the future). In order to illustrate this viewpoint, excerpts from four Brazilian politicians are considered.

In September 2021, Ibioporá, a Brazilian town in the State of Paraná, in the South of the country, launched, in partnership with a public state university, a program whose goal was to create the first bilingual primary public school in the State. During the program's inaugural class for the school teachers, a local TV channel interviewed several educational partners involved in the program, namely, the mayor, a university professor and a few teachers from the school. For the purpose of of this paper, only the mayor's statement is presented and discussed here: "We are aiming to realize a dream, that is, to have a bilingual public school in Ibioporá, which may offer opportunity for the future citizens that will be in the job market"². (Tarobá Jornalismo, 2021, online)

José Maria Ferreira, Ibioporá's mayor, mentioned neither the development of critical awareness nor a possibility for interaction with multicultural people as students' benefits; what he did mention, however, was that the school's students will become "future citizens that will be in the job market". In other words, the idea of language education is being *sold* based on the argument that the primary school children, whose ages vary from 6 to 10, will be 'future citizens in the job market'. On this matter, Rocha (2006; 2010) and Rinaldi (2011) have caution us about the mistake of overlooking other possibilities, reasons, and benefits of exposing children to another language other than than this material reason. Rinaldi (2011), for example, highlighted that 'the future is now', when she chose the title of her doctoral dissertation. Importantly, critical Brazilian researchers have asked us to question the 'promised land' to be reached, if a voyage on the magic carpet of learning English as early as possible is taken. With this red carpet metaphor, we seek to unpack a commonly cited rationale for learning English, that is, it will enhance one's social mobility.

The second excerpt comes from Mário Hildebrandt, the mayor of Blumenau, which is located in the State of Santa Catarina (also in the South of Brazil).

The idea of bilingual public education in Blumenau started after requests came to me directly from entrepreneurs in our city. The request only made me see even more how much opportunities and a better future our children and teenagers will have with this³. (Redação Sec Hoje, 2021, online).

Different from the former mayor who commented on future professional benefits for the children, Hildebrandt identifies which sector of society is interested in dual language schools and convinced him to start implementing them.

² In Portuguese: "Caminhar para a realização de um sonho, que é de ter uma escola pública de Ibioporá, bilíngue, que possa oferecer oportunidade para os futuros cidadãos que vão estar no mercado de trabalho."

³ In Portuguese: "A ideia da educação pública bilíngue em Blumenau começou depois de pedidos virem até mim diretamente de empresários de nossa cidade. O pedido só me fez enxergar ainda mais o quanto oportunidades e um futuro melhor nossas crianças e adolescentes terão com isso."

The neoliberal ideology, which supports both the mayor's and the secretary's motivation to teach English to young learners in Brazilian public schools, is not a mere coincidence; it is a global phenomenon. It is important to note that the goal of this paper is not to condemn the teaching of English (or any other foreign language) to children; rather, our intention is to question the reasons why the language teaching has been implemented. In the case of bilingual initiatives, mainly in public schools, we ask ourselves about the urgency to promote such teaching shortly after the publication of the Resolution 02/2020 (Brasil, 2020).

All things considered, although most of the time when discussing bilingual education in childhood, it is the English language that comes to mind. The third example that we examine is a public initiative in Bombinhas, Santa Catarina, where, in 2019, a bilingual programme was inaugurated. The programme aimed to have 50% of the schools fluent in Spanish by 2024. As we analyze a piece of news entitled "Bombinhas must be the first full time public, bilingual school of Santa Catarina"⁴ (G1, 2018, s/p) that was published in 2018 next.

At first sight, such an initiative seems to break away from the idea that only the English language has been inserted into the 'bilingual' public education system. However, that turns out not to be the case since the reasons are also centered around the motivation behind it, namely, meeting the needs of the local economy. Although the title refers to the newest public, bilingual education in Santa Catarina, one of the two agents who was interviewed was the then Secretary of Tourism, Vinicius Lummertz, who stated: "Full-time schools geared towards the economies of the regions. This is a model that should be followed because it makes sense"⁵ (G1, 2018, s/p).

The Secretary not only directly indicated the final goal of the initiative, that is, to gear education towards meeting the needs of 'the economies of the regions', but he also expressed his belief regarding the effectiveness of the project, to the extent of it serving as a 'model that should be followed'. The second agent interviewed was Alvino da Silva, a local business owner, who commented on the long-term benefits to the tourism industry of having citizens speak Spanish. He stated that: "If they order something that we know, we can serve and assist them. If we do not understand them, we ask a friend for help"⁶ (G1, 2018, online).

According to the news, it is possible to notice that although the language being included in the referred context is not English – as it is more common to find in the Brazilian local realities – the reasons behind such a decision remain driven by neoliberal motives.

Another illustration comes from the city of Jundiá, in the state of São Paulo. In April 2022, the mayor, Luiz Fernando Machado, was interviewed about the most recent education initiative, entitled *Innovative School*. He stated that:

Preparing future professionals for the job market in Jundiá is one of the public policies we have developed in Jundiá. English is already present in the municipal education network from the age of 4 and now we have taken another step to expand the contact

⁴ In Portuguese: "Bombinhas deve ter a 1ª escola pública integral bilíngue de SC".

⁵ In Portuguese: "Escolas de tempo integral vocacionadas para as economias das regiões. Isso é um modelo que deverá ser seguido porque faz sentido."

⁶ In Portuguese: "Se eles pedem alguma coisa que a gente sabe, a gente responde para eles. Ou pede algum amigo para responder pela gente".

of the children of the Innovative School with the English language. (Jundiaí City Hall, 2022, online)⁷

The emphasis placed by the mayor on the future job market that children will be part of is not an isolated perspective; rather, this perspective is also shared among the city management authorities, as reflected in the statement by the Education Secretary, Vastí Ferrari Marques:

The English language transcends other areas such as history, geography, arts, physical education and can be taught to young students by using playfulness. The bilingual program is yet another initiative that aims to provide children with the development of their potential, *in addition to preparing them for the professional future they will face in 10, 15 years*. Studies show that bilingual/plurilingual training results in cognitive, *economic* and social *benefits*. (Jundiaí City Hall, 2022, online, emphasis added)⁸

Even though the Education Secretary's understanding is similar to the mayor's, which is grounded on neoliberal reasons for including the teaching of an additional language to young learners, as we will argue in the Closing Remarks section, the real implementation of any education policy – in this case, a bilingual language policy – relies on the teachers' attitudes in the privacy of the classroom. This line of argument is raised here because of a student's quote presented on the same piece of news. His quote and a comment of his performance is as follows:

"I am learning a lot more English. I have already learned to speak and the meaning of yes. It is nice to have the two teachers in the class and learn more", said the boy who also sang the excerpt of a song recently taught by teacher Alessandra "Todos são diferentes, e isso é ok" (It is okay to be different). (Jundiaí City Hall, 2022, online, our translation)⁹.

Although it is not clearly mentioned by the student, it seems that at the end of the quote, there is a mention of the book *It's okay to be different*, by Todd Parr. Such a book is known for its openness to cover social, subjective, and critical topics when adopting it in (language) classrooms. Based on such an assumption, we may problematise that whoever decided to take this book to the classroom seemed to be more concerned with a humanistic perspective than with a neoliberal one. In this case, we could say that teacher agency is being enacted, even when a neoliberal ideology is promoted. From our perspective, this last example seems to reinforce the idea that, again, some initiatives were motivated by the Resolution 02/2020 (Brasil, 2020) without taking into account the real needs of the school community and, ultimately, the children themselves.

⁷ In Portuguese: "Preparar os futuros profissionais do mercado de trabalho de Jundiaí é uma das políticas públicas que desenvolvemos em Jundiaí. O inglês já é presente na rede municipal de ensino a partir dos 4 anos de idade e agora avançamos mais um passo para ampliar o contato das crianças da Escola Inovadora com a Língua Inglesa".

⁸ In Portuguese: "A Língua Inglesa transpassa as demais áreas como história, geografia, artes, educação física e pode ser trabalhada desde os pequenos estudantes com o uso da ludicidade. O programa bilíngue é mais uma iniciativa que visa proporcionar às crianças o desenvolvimento das potencialidades, além de prepará-las para o futuro profissional que vão enfrentar em 10, 15 anos. Estudos apontam que formações bilíngues/plurilíngues resultam em benefícios cognitivos, econômicos e sociais."

⁹ In Portuguese: "'Estou aprendendo muito mais de inglês. Já aprendi a falar e o significado de yes. É legal ter as duas professoras na classe e aprender mais', afirmou o garoto que ainda cantou o trecho de uma música recém ensinada pela professora Alessandra 'Everybody is different, that's ok' (Todo mundo é diferente, está tudo bem)."

Even though neoliberalism can be broadly interpreted as “as a search to increase the rate of exploitation and find new fields for profit through the reorganization of capital (including financialisation) and as an ideological effort to establish a new set of hegemonic relationships” (Windle, 2010, p. 522), it is crucial to locally interpret its manifestations and mechanisms (Windle, 2019). In other words, the neoliberal discourse as embraced in the Global North does not portray the reality of the Global South, as the latter hands over most of its natural resources and labour force to the former.

It is equally pertinent to indicate that even though the roots of neoliberalism may be traced to the capitalism mindset (Bernstein; Katznelson; Amezcua; Mohamed; Alvarado, 2020), it does not provide the full picture as it has been transformed, more often than not, into “a hidden form of power, cultural capital, built up over time through socialization in the home, that is determining in the production of educational inequalities” (Windle, 2019, p. 4).

The critique of neoliberal motives behind teaching English to young learners draws on the “expansionist power of transnationally mobile capital”, taking over and reshaping the logic of various sectors, being education one of them (Windle, 2019, p. 3). Although the focus is on the influence of the neoliberal logic on the reasons to teach English to young learners, aspects of such an ideological perspective could also be traced to (1) the linguistic repertoire used to refer to the education (*i.e.* you need to *invest* in your future), (2) the institutional changes to educators’ workload (*e.g.* educators having their planning time systematically reduced whereas also being assigned more responsibilities), and (3) the goals set to English language education (*e.g.* standardized tests to *measure* students’ development).

Given the efforts to offer “bilingual” teaching, Carder (2013, p. 285; emphasis on the original) asserts that bilingual schools are “perceived by elites as providing symbolic capital” including the families since “many discussions with parents have revealed that they are grateful for *any* school which can accommodate their children with English as the language of instruction since it is the global lingua franca”. The author expresses his concern with such a scenario and states that “my perception is that such elites focus principally on their children becoming fluent in English, while not considering what might happen to their children’s own language and identity” (p. 285). We align our stance with his since, again, we foresee a grave risk of perpetuating the misconceived desire to migrate from the global South at any price.

From our perspective, it seems evident that the motives to implement a ‘bilingual’ system in public contexts rely on the efforts to follow the same neoliberal logic of private schools to spend money on language education for children. This is the same line of thought that we had previously introduced through an example of a professor of economics from Saavedra and Pérez (2018). This is also discussed by Mejía (2013) when the author discusses the bilingual education in Colombia and states that, in that country:

it is considered worth investing considerable sums of money in, as it provides access to a highly visible, socially accepted form of bilingualism which leads to the possibility of employment in the global marketplace. However, bilingualism in minority Amerindian or Creole language leads, in most cases, to an invisible form of bilingualism in which the native language is undervalued and associated with underdevelopment, poverty and backwardness. (Mejía, 2013, p. 44)

In this section, we have illustrated how Brazilian, local initiatives have been moving forward with the implementation of public bilingual education for young learners by relying on a neoliberal agenda. In such examples, this agenda has been translated or justified by the promise of preparing professionals for the future so that they can be equipped to join the job market. In the case reported in Santa Catarina State, it seems to be clear that it is the city that will benefit from the decision to bring the Spanish language to the young learners because, in the future, they will be able to deal with the tourists who visit the city and inevitably contribute to its development. We have also indicated that, even though it has been the case with the English language, Spanish has benefited from this ideology, too. Despite the growing and constant promotion of this neoliberal agenda, ingrained attitudes have invited us all to think otherwise.

4 Who Gets To Walk On The Red Carpet?

This section explores the following query ‘What languages deserve to be taught to young learners in Brazilian public schools?’. Along with this question, two other inquiries are also relevant and necessary: Who chooses what languages are worth learning in public schools? What criteria are employed for choosing a language instead of another one? Let us tackle these questions, then.

A fruitful concept here is *elite languages*. According to De Costa (2018, p. 1), such languages are often “constructed in instrumental terms and assigned market value”, as well as “viewed as possessing the necessary cultural capital that is needed to succeed in contemporary society”. As language speakers, and teachers, in a globalized world, we come to realize that not all languages happen to be considered *elite*, for various reasons.

In our viewpoint, historically, the languages usually understood as elite are those from European countries forced upon the colonies during imperial times (Mignolo, 2011); these languages are also currently reinforced by means of a neoliberal ideology (Windle, 2010; 2017; 2019). However, this argument has to be socially and carefully interpreted as what is considered elite in one place may not be so in another one. For instance, in Argentina, Spanish, currently seen as the country’s official language, is indeed the colonizers’ language. In that specific place and time, Spanish may be taken as an elite language. However, on the one hand, this same language is less valued when used in classrooms in Massachusetts where English-only policies exist (Maddamsetti, 2021); contrastively, this language is highly valued in Bombinhas, a city in the state of Santa Catarina, as we have indicated and discussed above (G1, 2018). In sum, contextual, historical, political, and economical evidence matter to indicate what languages are considered to be elite.

In the aforementioned local contexts, English and Spanish are undoubtedly ‘elite languages’, for the reasons previously. Nonetheless, language policy implementation is not a smooth process. At the state level, for instance, the Spanish language has historically experienced a back-and-forth ruling regarding its presence in public schools. The most recent movement concerns efforts to re-insert the language into the curriculum of the public schools (Paraná, Bill 003/2021), after it was taken out following the publication of Brazilian National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC – Portuguese acronym) (Brasil, 2017).

From a language education perspective, we unequivocally support children having contact and learning as many languages as possible. We seek to provoke some reflection concerning who has decided

what languages *deserve* to be learned in schools and why they have been deemed *legitimate* languages, and thus worthy to be both taught and learned. For instance, in a country constituted by more than 150 indigenous languages (Jornal da USP, 2020), why have we (in Brazil) only seen this almost unstoppable promotion of bilingual English or Spanish language education?

As discussed by Bernstein *et al.* (2020), the U.S. context is – to some extent – similar to the Brazilian one. In their study, they analysed some settings in which bilingual education has been implemented. By interviewing principals from different schools/programs, they noticed that bilingual education can work both ways, by either promoting a more just society through language education or reinforcing historical, social inequalities. For example, whereas some principals referred to the bilingual programmes as a way of bringing students from varied contexts closer together, others revealed neoliberal arguments for implementing such programs. Based on the latter, some students were excluded from participating in the bilingual programs as they did not have adequate English proficiency.

Relating Bernstein *et al.*'s (2020) findings to the excerpts analysed in this paper, the reasons behind the promotion of bilingual education in public contexts are driven by neoliberal logics. As previously stated, some principals from Bernstein *et al.* (2020) study indicated that the professional development of their students was the driving force for promoting the bilingual programs. In our investigation, we found following our analysis of interviews by secretaries of education and tourism, as well as a business owner, that this neoliberal ideology was also deeply entrenched in the Brazilian education system.

As we have indicated by analysing politicians' discourses, the reasons for such an education are very much related to a neoliberal agenda. To the Applied Linguistics field, in general, we hope that this paper will fuel and foster reflections related to the new spaces we are occupying as language educators. Moreover, and in alignment with the other theme of this special issue, such an expanded teaching context may benefit from a translanguaging perspective (García, 2009) to better promote a language education that is more consistent and more coherent with Brazilian young learners' language repertoires.

As we have argued and illustrated, the proverbial red carpet seems to be selective in terms of what languages are worthy of greater attention. Many accept the burden of walking on the red carpet because of the promised potential of social mobility, that is, Brazilian children who can speak English (and/or Spanish) will be *successful professionals* who will subsequently be able to contribute to the local economy.

5 Where Does The Magic Carpet Promise To Take Us?

Being aware that a “neoliberal critique is an insufficient analytical model to account for the complex processes involved in the production and reproduction of educational inequalities around the world” (Windle, 2019, p. 1), it is necessary to build other futures, in the plural, that respect the diversity of linguistic repertoires, as well as value the local cultures, histories, and peoples (García; Lin, 2016). In that sense, the concept of translanguaging is fruitful to better understand the linguistic fluidity that is inherent to *every* speaker. According to García (2009, p. 140), “[translanguaging] is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential.” Put differently, translanguaging calls into question the myth

that all bilingual speakers will walk on the same red carpet and, consequently, be professionally successful. To individuals who strongly believe and advocate for an English or a Spanish Language Education based on such an assumption, we pose the following clarifying questions: What mechanisms do you employ in order to comprehend the past and the present in order to foresee the future in, let's say, fifteen, twenty years from now? Put simply, what is the basis of the prediction that children who learn Spanish and English today will indeed become successful professionals?

That being said, moving towards a red, magic carpet – one that might not be ideal – can still be seen as an initial meeting point, however. Viewed differently, one could also argue that the futures (in the plural) of foreign language education in Brazil will not be red, but colourful; it will not be characterised by *English* or *Spanish only*; rather, it will be multilingual and inclusive rather than exclusive. That is our aspiration and we invite you to be part of this vision.

6 Final Remarks: An Invitation To Think Otherwise

It is not that easy to think otherwise when neoliberal pressures take you in a certain direction. However, in a highly linguistic and culturally diverse country like Brazil, we see it as of paramount importance to not only question what has been *sold* to us, but also to propose and implement feasible alternatives (always in the plural) to the current scenario. One might wonder, though, what is left to do once isolated administrative policies are implemented in primary, public schools. Our response is driven by two principles.

Firstly, when the classroom door is closed, it is the teacher's interpretation of what is to be done that is actually implemented. In that sense, the teacher is the final – and we argue, one of the most important – agent(s) in the realization of such decisions. Because the teacher often ultimately decides what to do in the classroom, it seems reasonable to us to promote programs that can educate those professionals to not only teach the language but also make decisions that will affect how languages are learned and taught in language classrooms in global South countries like Brazil.

The second principle entails valuing children's home language. In that respect, the acceptance and practice of translanguaging practices in the language classroom is key and requires a reorientation of classroom practices (Cole, 2019; Wu; Leung, 2022), language policies (Mazak, 2017; Menken; García, 2010; Wedin; Wessman, 2017), and language assessments (Wolf, 2020), among other things. From such a perspective, language is interpreted as a social construct, culturally, historically, politically, and economically oriented; it is everything but natural. Even the so-called nomination of languages, which many would take as a less questionable process, is problematized by scholars who investigate translanguaging (García, 2009; García; Lin, 2016). In that sense, labelling a certain language as English and another as Spanish is often related to certain hidden agendas that might not represent reality in a trustworthy manner.

As you, the reader, consider our invitation to think otherwise, we end this article by offering your three possible routes to explore. We ask that you pick a *route* and come with us:

The student route: think retrospectively about the reasons that motivated you to start studying an additional language. What speaker identity did you project onto yourself? Were your motivations

more aligned with a humanistic or a neoliberal agenda? From a student perspective, did you use learning materials that encouraged you to bring your identity into the classroom or leave it outside in order to assume a new one?

The speaker route: consider how contrived most of the classroom experiences in relation to languages we have available outside of the schools. How often have you mixed languages in an unexpected way? Have all your interactions using languages always been successful? If they have not, what happened? To what extent can we, as language speakers, predict and control the interactions in which we participate?

The teacher route: observe local language policies imposed by governmental levels. Then ask yourself if you can do otherwise. How can we teach a new language without erasing the one(s) the students already speak? How can we teach a new language while emphasizing its fluidity even though we often need to adopt fixed, structured teaching materials? What is our social responsibility to the students as we talk from and teach in the global South? We hope these questions will help you/us to consider which carpets are being rolled out and by whom in a critical manner.

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