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LET

Departamento de Letras e Artes da Cena

Pós-Graduação *Lato Sensu* em Língua Inglesa

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**“MR. CASTRO, YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT US, DON’T YOU?”**

Rio de Janeiro  
AGOSTO 2025



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**MR. CASTRO, VOCÊ REALMENTE SE IMPORTA COM A GENTE,  
NÉ?**

Monografia apresentada ao Departamento de Letras e Artes da Cena da PUC-Rio como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de especialista em Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora:  
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## ABSTRACT

A change in my work setting led me to experience new professional and reflective moments. Over time, I began to feel puzzled by a recurring comment among colleagues and school staff: that English is merely an “extra” subject, not as essential as other core disciplines. This perception triggered a desire to better understand how students themselves viewed English classes. The present paper reports on practitioner research, within a qualitative perspective, carried out with 7th and 8th-grade students at a private school in Nova Iguaçu, Brazil. The main aim of the study is to investigate students’ perceptions of English lessons. This inquiry is grounded in the principles of Exploratory Practice, an approach that emphasizes understanding classroom life rather than simply solving problems. Throughout the process, the teacher and students engaged collaboratively in the pursuit of understanding through Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs), which were integrated into regular classroom practices. The experience revealed not only valuable insights into how students make sense of their language learning but also contributed to the teacher-researcher-author’s professional development.

**Keywords:** Exploratory Practice, understanding, English lessons, PEPAs.

## RESUMO

Uma mudança no meu ambiente de trabalho me levou a vivenciar novos desafios profissionais. Com o tempo, comecei a me sentir intrigado com um comentário recorrente entre colegas e membros da equipe escolar: o de que o inglês seria apenas uma disciplina “extra”, sem a mesma importância das demais áreas do conhecimento. Essa percepção despertou em mim o desejo de compreender melhor como os próprios alunos viam as aulas de inglês. O presente trabalho relata uma pesquisa do praticante, de abordagem qualitativa com estudantes do 7º e 8º anos do Ensino Fundamental em uma escola particular localizada no município de Nova Iguaçu, no Rio de Janeiro. O principal objetivo do estudo é investigar as percepções dos alunos em relação às aulas de inglês. Essa investigação se fundamenta nos princípios da Prática Exploratória, uma abordagem que prioriza o entendimento da vida em sala de aula em vez da simples resolução de problemas. Ao longo do processo, professor e alunos engajaram-se colaborativamente na busca por compreensão por meio de Atividades Pedagógicas Potencialmente Exploratórias (APPE), integradas à rotina das aulas. A experiência revelou não apenas *insights* valiosos sobre como os estudantes interpretam sua aprendizagem de línguas, mas também contribuiu para o desenvolvimento profissional do professor-praticante-autor.

**Palavras-chave:** Prática Exploratória, compreensão, aulas de inglês, APPE.

## SUMMARY

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## 1. FIRST, A FEW WORDS

After several years of teaching English at language schools – a context where people of all ages seek to learn an additional language to maximize their future opportunities –, I transitioned to teaching in mainstream education, specifically in the later years of elementary school (known in Brazil as *Ensino Fundamental Anos Finais*<sup>1</sup>, covering grades six to nine).

Handling novelty requires much effort, and after three months, I began to question myself if I had done the right move: everything was different from what I had imagined. Learners would not come solely for my classes; they would meet me for a short period of time; teachers would finish their classes unpunctually, compromising my amount of time with the group; I was asked to elaborate exams and assign projects. There were many aspects of this new context to familiarize with and, somehow, they were exhausting me both physically and mentally.

Half a year had passed before I could feel more adjusted to that educational setting. It was when I started to pay attention to a recurrent discourse in which English as a subject was perceived as an ‘extra’ by fellow teachers from other fields of knowledge and even coordinators, which suggests some subjects are fundamental to learners while others are not. To me, such distinction sounded very much contradictory, considering where I had come from and the fact that I was working for a private school that had opted to adopt a bilingual programme.

Never had it ever crossed my mind that English could be seen as an unimportant subject, especially because the number of bilingual individuals is a global phenomenon that largely reflects the processes of globalization and immigration. The increased movement of people across national borders, despite the growth of political and legal restrictions in some regions, contributes to this phenomenon. Ramírez and Kuhl (2016 apud Gabriotti; Zomignan, 2020) write that approximately two-thirds of the world’s population understand or speak at least two languages. In addition, the new global conditions – globalization – have created increasingly complex sociocultural contexts of communication and have driven individuals to learn additional languages, especially English, as it serves as an international language.

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<sup>1</sup> Brazilian equivalent to lower secondary school (grades 6–9, usually ages 11–14).

Being a subject with such understandings and perceptions, I remember feeling upset every time coordinators would ask me to give in my lessons to Portuguese or Mathematics teachers because they needed to apply an exam or finish some content, they could not finish within their class time. What about me who teaches two books and has to go through each page of them? While dealing with this unsettling feeling of being less important, I started to ask myself “why would English be an ‘extra’”?

Hargreaves (2001) points out that teaching cannot be detached from emotions. Moreover, Nias (1989, 1993, 1996, 1999a apud Zembylas, 2003) writes that teaching is not solely technical but is connected to teachers’ personal lives. Educators pour themselves into their work, leading to a blending of their personal and professional lives. Therefore, much of these professionals’ self-esteem, sense of fulfillment and vulnerabilities come from their lives in the classroom. Personally, I can say that teaching occupies a significant part of my life, so I could not ignore what I was feeling or experiencing. The marginalization of English as merely an extra subject was progressively impacting me on a personal and professional level. It was in this context that I enrolled in a post-graduation course, seeking theoretical grounding to help me better navigate that reality. I was trying to improve the quality of my life at work.

During my second semester in the program, I took a module in which I was introduced to Exploratory Practice (EP), a form of research that encourages those involved in the learning process to investigate their own practices while engaging with the target language (Hanks, 2016). A central element of this methodological approach is the pursuit of understanding rather than finding solutions (Mateus; Miller; Cardoso; 2019). Some fellow teachers take courses, attend lectures and take part in workshops to find solutions to problems they cannot solve in their classrooms – they, somehow, want a one-size-fits-all recipe. Even though being in those contexts may better equip them with tools to deal with their demands, I wonder how likely it is for them to find solutions. I was not as naïve as to believe that I would encounter a resolution to what was bothering me. From the beginning I knew I was seeking understanding and a better understanding of quality of life both personally and professionally.

As the discipline advanced and I engaged with the texts, participated in class discussions, and explored in depth the foundations of Exploratory Practice, I visualized in it an opportunity to conduct an investigation and deepen my understandings of how English as a subject is perceived by my students. What could my students tell me about learning English and about why they learn English? Would they agree that English as a



subject is an extra? I felt it was very important for me to know how the subject I teach affects and impacts my learners, especially because we are the ones actively involved in building knowledge and in making sense of our local contexts. In order to better understand my puzzle, I incorporated Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) into my lessons. In doing so, the idea was to integrate the work for understanding with classroom practices and involve the members in the group.

This monograph emerged from the personal and professional effort to seek understanding of particular subjects in a particular context. Once aligned with the Exploratory Practice principles, I do not necessarily seek changes. In the pages that follow, the reader is welcome to engage with the work that I engaged in as teacher-researcher with my learners in the context of a private school in Nova Iguaçu, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

## **2. FOUNDATIONS: EMBRACING THE SHAPE OF MY NEW REALITY**

A change in working settings is, at times, much desired. What is oftentimes left second-handed are the hardships of embracing novelty. Not only did I hope for a change in my working context but I also made it come true. What I was familiar with suddenly made space for what was not. Working with mainstream education made me realize I had much to learn, so I invested in learning and enrolled at a post-graduation program at the Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, where I was introduced to a framework for practitioner research entitled Exploratory Practice.

Exploratory Practice originates in the early 1990s in the work of Dick Allwright in partnership with language teachers and teacher educators. Together they started to investigate ways of better understanding what was going on in their classrooms. In order to accomplish that, language points from the syllabus would not be pushed aside, but included as a way of researching issues related to language, pedagogy and social relations inside and outside the classroom (Hanks, 2016). It is safe to state that Exploratory Practice is an approach to doing research that integrates research and pedagogy, and stimulate both teachers and learners to better comprehend their surroundings.

Exploratory Practice is grounded in seven principles: focus on quality of life; work to understand quality of classroom life; involve everybody in this work for understanding; work to bring people together; also work for mutual development; minimize the burden by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice; and make all of this a continuous enterprise (Exploratory Practice Group, 2021). Ultimately, Exploratory Practice promotes a sustainable, inclusive, and collaborative approach to understanding and improving our understandings of classroom life, integrating reflection and development into everyday teaching practice through questioning.

Exploratory Practice foregrounds the value of inquiry, particularly the act of questioning, experiencing puzzlement, and engaging critically with one's own professional/educational context. In this area of research, the term 'puzzle' has been used to refer to the 'research problem' under examination. Allwright (2003) and Bryman (2007) (apud Dikilitaş & Bostancıoğlu, 2019) clarify that both terms are centered on identifying and examining the topic under investigation and its potential underlaying issues. Both are equally important in doing research. However, understanding this distinction helps practitioners and researchers determine the most appropriate course of action for their investigative objectives. Despite the similarities, these terms carry

different ideas. While a problem-oriented approach to research may convey a negative connotation by emphasizing a difficulty that needs to be fixed, within a puzzle-oriented approach practitioners adopt a more positive and engaging stance, focusing on exploration and understanding rather than solely seeking a fix. Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu (2019, p.32) state that

In terms of the processes involved, puzzles are continuous enterprises of exploration and one may move forward and backward during the exploration process as such the answers found to a puzzle can even initiate another puzzle process. However, research questions are more linear in the sense that a pre-determined research plan (generally rigid) is put into practice.

Even though solutions may be found, problem-solving lies beyond the scope of Exploratory Practice. It prioritizes understanding and agency over solutions. Moreover, its aim is not to arrive at definite answers or solutions. On the contrary, it seeks to promote deeper understandings of issues that are personally and professionally significant to practitioners (Hanks, 2016). On this matter, Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu (2019, p.32) write that “(...) puzzles are about one’s teaching/learning practices which make them very personal and subjective endeavors which require the individual to embrace a critical perspective and reflect on their own practice/learning”.

In order to explore their whys and puzzlements, practitioners pose questions that would allow them to gain more details about what has been under examination as well as have a broader perspective on topics of their interest. With a view to doing it, teachers and students may adapt regular coursebook activities so as to investigate their inquiries – which encapsulates one of the principles of Exploratory Practice: minimize the burden by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice. The outcome of these adaptations is known as Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) – which are closely connected to local intriguing inquiries. Regarding this issue, Miller, Cunha and Allwright (2020, p.5) observe that

Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities emerge out of the adaptation of regular activities to ensure opportunities for language learning and for simultaneous work for understanding, in an integrated way. Using traditional and different sorts of media, practitioners of learning and teaching are challenged to work with their everyday English language activities and, with slight adaptations, engage all practitioners (teachers and students) in reflecting upon their puzzles and questions.

This new reality I found myself in compelled me to better understand how English, as a subject, is perceived in the context of the private institution I am part of. I felt mostly inclined to investigate it because while growing up, I was told that being able to speak

English had the potential to transform my life. Not only has it come true but I also decided to impact people's lives through English teaching. My path to teaching was intentional – knowing English gave me new perspectives, purpose, broadened my horizons, and enabled me to exercise my agency. Education took me to unimaginable places, made it possible for me to live dreams. As I write and look around me now, from the ceramic on the floor to the lightbulb on the ceiling: education allowed me to pay for it all. In that stance, I could not bear hearing that the subject I teach is a mere 'extra'. It was a call for action! I saw in Exploratory Practice a valuable opportunity to both deepen my understanding about my working context and contribute to my professional growth. For me, the classroom is a space where dedication and responsibility go hand in hand. I could not turn a blind eye to my feelings. Teaching, from where I stand, is an act of giving, caring: it is a place where affect overflows.

## **2.1 ECHOES OF THE HEART: AFFECT IN TEACHING**

The classroom is a place where people from different walks of life meet. They feel and experiment their surroundings their own ways while interacting and exchanging among themselves. They have diverse perspectives, desires, expectations, and inclinations. It is only natural to expect that divergence be a key element in the classroom. Every now and then, dealing with differences can be quite daunting because responding to others is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is an emotional encounter

Affective dimensions shape how we listen, speak and choose to engage – or not – with the world around us. When a learner withdraws, a teacher raises their voice or even when silence occupies the classroom, there is affect at play. Joy, fear, frustration, hope, excitement – these feelings are behind every gesture. To teach, then, is to navigate this emotional sea with care. It is to notice the shaky voice of a student who is too shy to try, the lost eyes of someone who cannot follow the teacher's command, the aha moment when something eventually falls into place. Teaching is, then, more than just intellectual guidance – it is about emotional perceptions and presence. Learning is also an act of emotional courage: being vulnerable to make a mistake in front of others, being humble to start again. Affect, frequently overlooked, is not an accessory to learning or teaching: it is what keeps them going.

Michael Orey (2017) claims that the study of affect, feelings and emotions was once considered unimportant in research on education. However, this has shifted and

emotions in learning has become prevalent in multiples areas of research. The author states that

learning, scholars have come to see, is an affective and/or emotional experience whether the context is out of school or in school. In nonschool settings, affect is often more evident and arguably more welcomed than in the sometimes constrained context of academic classrooms. In both settings, there is little doubt that affect and emotion play a role in how youth and students make meaning. Indeed, nothing has much meaning without emotion. It is inseparable from coming to know and learn and, therefore, important to examine as it is dynamically enacted among people, objects, places, culture, and media (2017, p.2).

My efforts to understand my puzzle required me to tackle my emotions. Notedly, how I felt in the face of a new working context itself is the very origin of this monograph. As I reflected on my initial discomfort, uncertainty, and even moments of self-doubt, I realized these feelings were not just peripheral – they were central in my seeking for understanding. Through these emotional lenses I managed to start unpacking not only what was happening around me but also within me, framing my experiences as a meaningful source of puzzlement.

In *Emotional Geographies of Teaching*, Andy Hargreaves (2001, p.1056) describes “the patterns of closeness and distance in human interactions that shape the emotions we experience about relationships to ourselves, each other, and the world around”. The author, then, continues to argue that “teaching and learning are not only concerned with knowledge, cognition, and skill. They are also emotional practices”. It led me to link Exploratory Practice (the first principle “quality of life”) to Affect in teaching, as I am very close to what I am bothered by and how deep the topic is to me personally.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This monograph aims at better understanding the question: **How do my students perceive our English lessons? And why?** In order to deepen my comprehension of this topic, I decided to adopt Practitioner Research as a way of doing research, more specifically Exploratory Practice. According to Saima Pandhiani, Muhammad Chandio and Shumaila (2015, p.140) Exploratory Practice can be compared to “reflective practice (Farrell, 2007), Action Research (Wallace, 1997) or lesson study (Lesson Study UK, online)”. However, Exploratory Practice is mainly distinguished by its “deliberate exploitation of standard classroom language learning and teaching activities as the means to collecting data” (Allwright, 2001, p.120).

The development of Exploratory Practice is rooted in the work of Dick Allwright and worldwide collaborators. Together, they have explored and proposed this framework in a series of research papers, which have been regularly published in the Language Teaching Research journal as well as in other journal and books. The fundamental principles of Exploratory Practice have been revisited and refined since their initial formulation. In essence, Exploratory Practice was conceived to contribute to the professional development of teachers who were unable to allocate time to engage in formal classroom research. Since I work for a private institution, I could not put the school curriculum aside and do research. Thus, there was a clear need to integrate the work for understanding and teaching. Exploratory Practice, then, proved to be more aligned with the type of work I intended to do.

This research followed the four steps suggested by Dick Allwright (apud Pandhiani; Chandio; Shumaila, 2015): 1) The puzzle; 2) The method; 3) Reflection and interpretation; and 4) Implications. Each step is further developed in the next lines. 1) The puzzle: recognize a puzzle area. Refine your thinking about the puzzle area. Focus on a specific topic. As mentioned before, my puzzle emerged from the discomfort I felt at realizing that English was perceived as an ‘extra’ subject by my co-workers at the school where I had recently started working. Pinning it down, I chose to investigate this issue from my students’ perspective.

2) The method: find appropriate classroom procedures to explore the puzzle. Adapt the classroom procedure to the puzzle you want to investigate. Use the procedure in class. To better understand my students’ perspectives, I integrated language learning and teaching. At the school where I work, it is not expected that teachers start using a new book in the first week of classes after vacation, especially because some students are still

returning from their vacation destinations or have not bought the new books yet. Teachers are encouraged to review content. I took advantage of this context to recycle a topic from their previous book, which matched my investigative purpose perfectly. I devised a handout on the function of giving opinions. Since I felt there was space to ask students to engage in a Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity (PEPA) by exploring some of the topics they had brought to the floor. I devised a handout that would help us integrate the language function of ‘giving opinions’ with the reflexive question How could this school be a better place for me?

### 3) Reflection and interpretation: interpreting the outcomes.

The activities developed were integrated within the dynamics of my classes, which allowed me both to follow the school curriculum and carry out the work for understanding without adding any extra workload. They were of great help in bringing the awareness I needed to understand my puzzle. I was able to reflect on the findings, and I got to understand that, for my students, the subject I teach, English, is perceived as important and fundamental for most of them for varied reasons.

### 4) Implications: decide on implications and plan accordingly.

As mentioned earlier, the work for understanding was developed in a private school in Nova Iguaçu – a municipality in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro – in two distinct groups: 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

The 7<sup>th</sup> grade group is comprised of nine students: two girls and seven boys. They are teenagers between twelve and thirteen years old. They study in the afternoon from 1pm to 6pm. We meet twice a week and they have five lessons of English during the week: two lessons on Tuesdays, which last for one hour and thirty-three minutes, and three lessons on Thursdays, which last for two hours. The girls have great appreciation for the English classes. On the other hand, the boys do not. They are very much into soccer – it is all they talk about. In terms of English language level, the group is heterogenous and levels vary from A1 to A2.

The 8<sup>th</sup> grade group is composed of eight students: five girls and three boys. They are teenagers between thirteen and fourteen years old. They study in the morning from 7 am to 12 pm. We meet three times a week and they have five lessons of English during the week: two lessons on Mondays, which last for one hour and thirty-three minutes, two lessons on Tuesdays, which last for one hour and thirty-three minutes, and one lesson on Wednesdays – that lasts for forty minutes. In this group most of the students have a good

attitude towards English classes. In terms of English language level, the group is heterogenous and levels vary from A1 to A2+.

In 2022, the school adopted a Bilingual Program for which we use two books: one book that covers language/ grammar and vocabulary and one that is called CLIL – Content Language Integrated Learning –; it covers some subjects such as history, geography, science, mathematics and the like. According to the program, it allows students to experience these various topics in English.

From my perspective, understanding how my subject is perceived by my students is a way of understanding the nature of our classroom environment – or, in Exploratory Practice terms, to prioritize the understanding of the quality of life we experience in our classroom.

Thanks to their contributions, I was able to better plan subsequent lessons, focusing on those who perceived the subject as boring and/or difficult. Moreover, the findings led me to engage them in another PEPA (mentioned in topic2), which I presented to the school's coordination team, and some of their requests were acknowledged. It was truly fascinating to see them collaborating in the work for understanding and experiencing its outcomes.



#### 4. HOW DO MY STUDENTS PERCEIVE OUR ENGLISH LESSONS? AND WHY?

“As teachers and learners, we weave together our schoolwork lives with our personal lives”

Miller and Gieve (2006, p.19).

Understanding my students’ view on learning English has been, and continues to be, a central concern in my professional and personal life, as the two are closely interconnected. Knowing how my teaching impacts them serves as a guiding light in shaping both my professional practice and my overall wellbeing. Since I changed work environments, I have been puzzled about my role and identity as a teacher in this new context. Adopting an Exploratory Practice attitude was fundamental in my development as an English teacher and practitioner.

As I intended to integrate classroom language learning and teaching activities as a means to collecting data (Allwright, 2001, p.120), I devised some material that aimed at recycling a topic – giving opinions – students studied in the previous year. It was the beginning of the school year and, as usual, teachers are not encouraged to start using the new material right away. I took advantage of it to both review language and explore students’ views on English classes.

In the handout I proposed, students first worked on reading and comprehension<sup>2</sup> through a true-or-false activity (Figure 1). They were exposed to a forum post. I deliberately chose an authentic text – one that is not originally created for teaching purposes – so students could engage with real-world language. This was intended to help them realize that they are capable of reading and understanding authentic material.

In Task 2 (Figure 1), students were asked to identify what the author of the post is doing in the text. This activity served as a bridge to a follow-up task focused on adjectives used to express opinions, aiming to revise vocabulary they studied in the previous year. To add an element of fun and engagement, I proposed a word search activity (Figure 2). Then, students were asked to categorize the adjectives into positive and negative groups.

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<sup>2</sup> TEACHERHOOD. *What’s your opinion about your school and do you like going to your school?* Quora, [s.d.]. Available at: <https://teacherhood.quora.com/Whats-your-opinion-about-your-school-and-do-you-like-going-to-your-school>. Accessed on: 31 Jan. 2025.

1 – Read Ranveer's opinion about her school. Decide if the sentences are TRUE (T) or FALSE (F).

**Quora**

Answer Request Follow 2

2 Answers Sort Recommended

**Ranveer Yadav**  
Assistant Manager (Systems) at State Bank of India (SBI) (2021–present) · 3y

I always believed that school helps us grow personally and academically. May be academically you can grow better using other platforms but for a personality growth, school plays very important role. Now a days people are successful but don't know how to behave as a group, don't know about team bonding. Students are finding difficulties when they as to take decision for us(group as they are habitual to think about themselves). School is a place where you get you life long group and friends circle. There are many good things about school and I was bit aware of those to I prefer schooling over individual classes.

I liked going school and most of the time reason were my friends. I had a good bunch of friends and because of those even I was not much interested in studying sometime, I used to happily attend classes.

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2

a) ☐ The author thinks school helps us grow.  
b) ☐ The author believes school is only good for studying.  
c) ☐ The author says school helps us make friends.  
d) ☐ The author prefers individual classes over school.  
e) ☐ The author liked going to school because of their friends.  
f) ☐ The author always wanted to study.

2 – What is Ranveer doing in the text?

Figure 1: reading and comprehension task

3 – Find the words below. Then, put them in the correct box.

e	e	f	u	n	n	y	d	f	p	b	a	d	c	p	g	k	r
x	u	y	z	l	h	m	a	a	r	g	e	r	s	n	y	l	m
c	v	a	w	h	l	y	h	n	b	a	h	d	r	s	f	v	j
o	k	y	p	f	g	i	n	t	e	r	e	s	t	i	n	g	x
n	l	w	b	r	h	r	b	a	e	g	w	t	z	s	d	n	l
f	q	e	m	o	h	q	j	s	a	r	l	y	n	q	s	l	w
u	q	a	e	u	r	k	q	t	p	e	c	s	m	i	g	u	l
s	e	k	p	j	g	i	o	i	z	a	z	g	f	z	c	e	e
e	y	u	l	z	s	c	n	c	j	t	m	o	m	z	f	e	y
d	p	u	l	c	s	k	b	g	r	j	q	a	q	q	w	u	c
y	r	s	l	o	w	d	g	x	g	v	o	s	u	s	m	l	n
c	y	z	d	j	l	q	r	n	r	b	p	r	c	a	l	m	m

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE

**INTERESTING**  
**FANTASTIC**  
**CONFUSED**  
**BORING**  
**GREAT**  
**FUNNY**  
**NICE**  
**WEAK**  
**SLOW**  
**FUN**  
**BAD**

Figure 2: wordsearch and categorization task.

Finally, they were invited to give their own opinions on various topics (Figure 3). Due to clear Exploratory objectives, and because students were at the beginning of the school year, all the selected topics were school-related. These included: school in general, returning to school, seeing classmates again, studying in a bilingual program, and learning English.

4 – Give your opinions on the topics below. Justify your answers. There is an example for you.

0 – School starting time  
 I think **school starting time** is good because I don't like studying in the morning.

a – School in general

---

b – Going back to school

---

c – Seeing your classmates again

---

d – Studying at a school with a bilingual program

---


e – Learning English

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Figure 3: giving opinions task

Dick Allwright and Judith Hanks (2001, p.1) suggest that understanding “is a way of feeling on top of things, rather than being overwhelmed by them”. For some time, not knowing was a burden, I felt in the dark and uncertain. However, as I started analyzing what students wrote this feeling began to dissipate. What they wrote shed light on interesting findings.

I noticed that when writing about their feelings towards ‘school in general’ and ‘going back to school’ (Figures 4 and 5), they tend to have negative opinions about them. When considering and writing about ‘seeing my friends again’ (Figure 6), the majority of the responses were positive. When giving their opinions about ‘studying at a school with a bilingual program’ (Figure 7), 8 out of 9 students were positive about it. Interestingly, when they shared answers on ‘learning English’ (Figure 8), 4 out of 9 demonstrated a negative attitude. I interpreted that they, somehow, fancy the idea of studying at a school that gives them the chance to develop their English skills. However, they do not enjoy its process. Is there anything I could do to make it more enjoyable for them? I questioned myself.

 Analysing the results

Edify

What do you think of ...

... school in general?

St 1: I think school in general is bad because it's very boring.  
 St 2: It's not worth it because it's very bad.  
 St 3: I think school is boring because it's bad.  
 St 4: I think school in general is very bad.  
 St 5: I don't like school.  
 St 6: I think school in general is bad because it's boring.  
 St 7: I think school in general is great because I love studying.  
 St: 8 -  
 St 9: It's nice because you can discover new things.

How many students have a positive/negative attitude towards school in general?  
 6 out of 9 have a negative attitude towards school in general.

Figure 4: analyzing the results

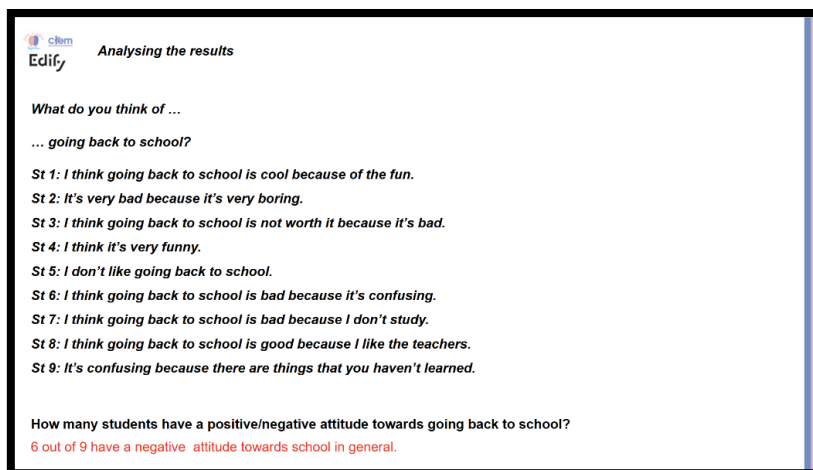


Figure 4: analyzing the results

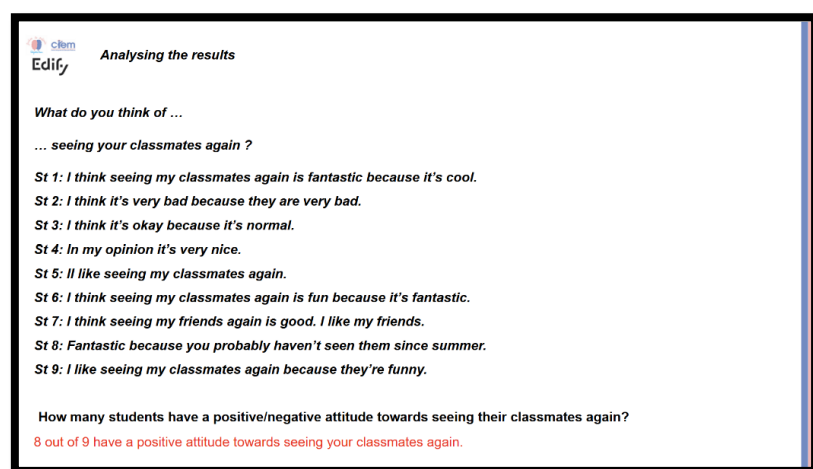


Image 6: analyzing the results

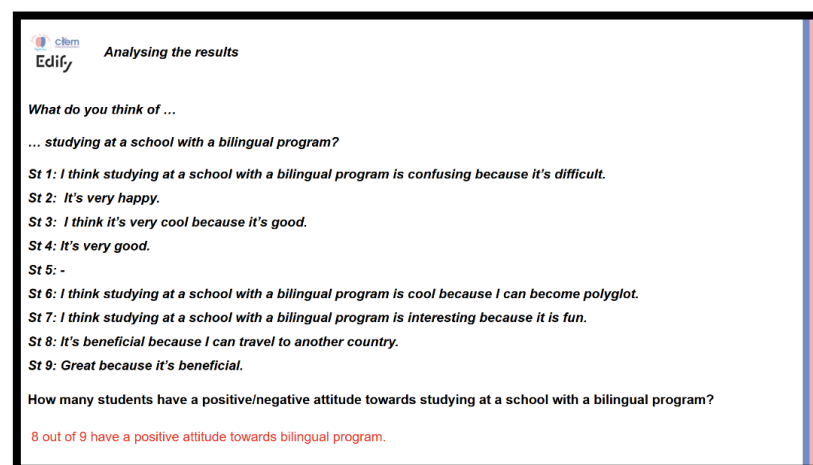


Image 7: analyzing the results

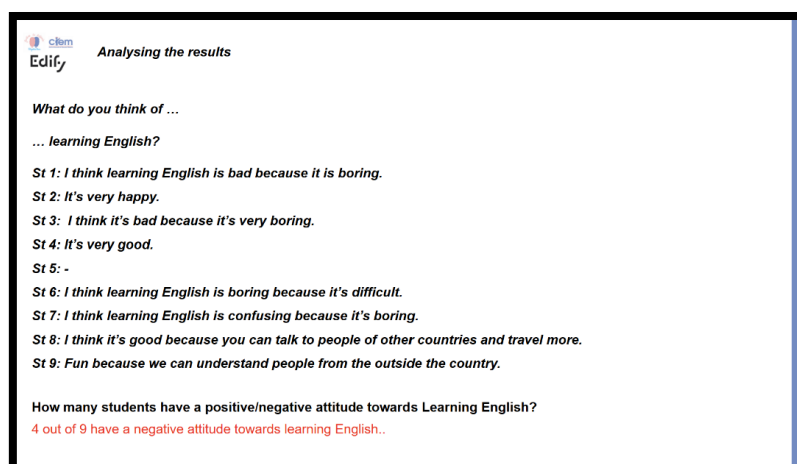


Figure 8: analyzing the results

One of the principles in Exploratory Practice reads ‘involve everybody as practitioners developing their own understandings’ (Allwright; Hanks, 2009, apud Miller; Cunha, 2019) and after reading students’ answers, it felt right to analyze their answers with them. I was able, again, to integrate Exploratory Practice with the book content. This time, I organized students’ answers, as they wrote them, according to the topics they commented on, but I did not identify students because the idea was to provide them with language feedback on their language mistakes. Also, I had given them their handouts back so as we went through correction, they could fix the errors they had made on their handout. Moreover, we recycled the language structure ‘X out of Y ...’ commonly used when collecting data and describing results, a topic they had already studied on the CLIL book.

Having this moment with students was absolutely enriching because they could also come to their own conclusions and consider what could be done to make the school a better place for them – which also became another Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity (better detailed in topic 1.2: How could the school be a better place for you?).

Another principle of Exploratory Practice states: “make it a continuous enterprise” (Allwright; Hanks, 2009, apud Miller; Cunha, 2019). Although my primary concern was to understand students’ perspectives on learning English, I was negatively surprised by the views they expressed about the school itself. To many teachers, this institution is considered a dream workplace: classrooms are not overcrowded, the infrastructure is solid, teachers’ ideas, projects are welcomed, the pay is satisfactory and, most importantly, there is space to focus on students’ individual needs.

It is also important to note that ‘Fundamental Anos Finais’ has not traditionally been the school’s primary area of investment. For thirty-three years, the school focused

on ‘*Educação Infantil*’<sup>3</sup> and ‘*Fundamental Anos Iniciais*’<sup>4</sup>. It is now in its fourth year working with ‘*Fundamental Anos Finais*’, during which it has faced challenges such as students drop-out and difficulties attracting new students. In light of these findings, I decided to share what we learned from our classroom exploration with the school’s coordination team. I shared with the coordinators the work I had been developing, and they listened attentively. They found the findings highly informative and asked me whether I could replicate the activity with 8th-grade students. What began as a professional and personal puzzle and an effort towards understanding had now, in some way, become a potential source of insight to inform the school’s future marketing strategies.

I proposed the same activity to 8<sup>th</sup> graders and their answers were highly valuable. Now, I had two groups of students generating information to help me understand my puzzle; In principle, I could have a better understanding on my inquiries. I followed the same procedure I did with 7<sup>th</sup> graders. Despite the existing difference between both groups, their answers sounded highly similar. 8<sup>th</sup> graders also showed a negative attitude towards the topics ‘school in general’ and ‘going back to school’. However, when it came down to ‘seeing my friends again’ and ‘studying at a school with a bilingual program’, 6 out of 6 showed a positive attitude. When giving their opinions on ‘learning English’, 5 out of 6 demonstrated a positive attitude. Find below the slides/images which were used with learners from 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

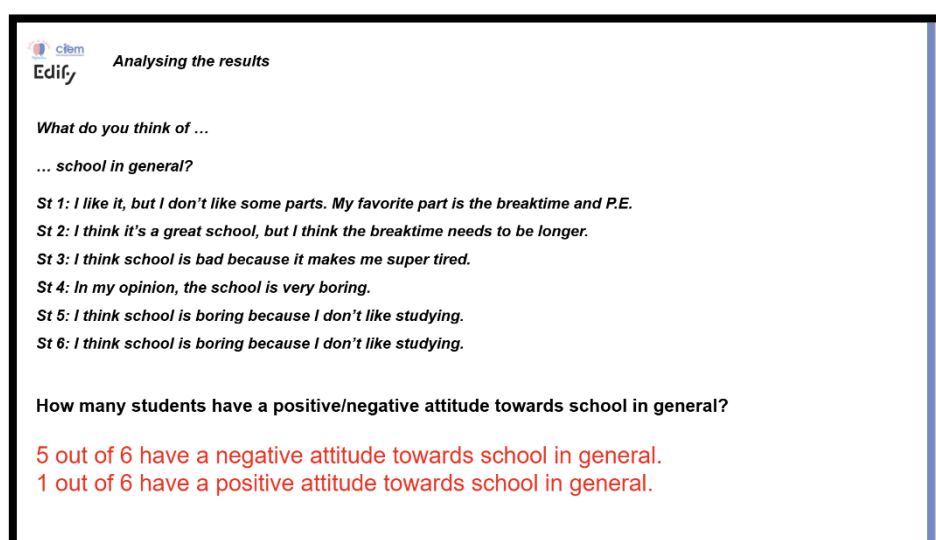


Figure 9: analyzing the results

<sup>3</sup> *Educação Infantil* refers to early childhood education in Brazil (preschool, usually for children ages 0–5).

<sup>4</sup> *Ensino Fundamental Anos Iniciais* refers to the first five years of Brazil’s compulsory basic education (grades 1–5, usually ages 6–10).

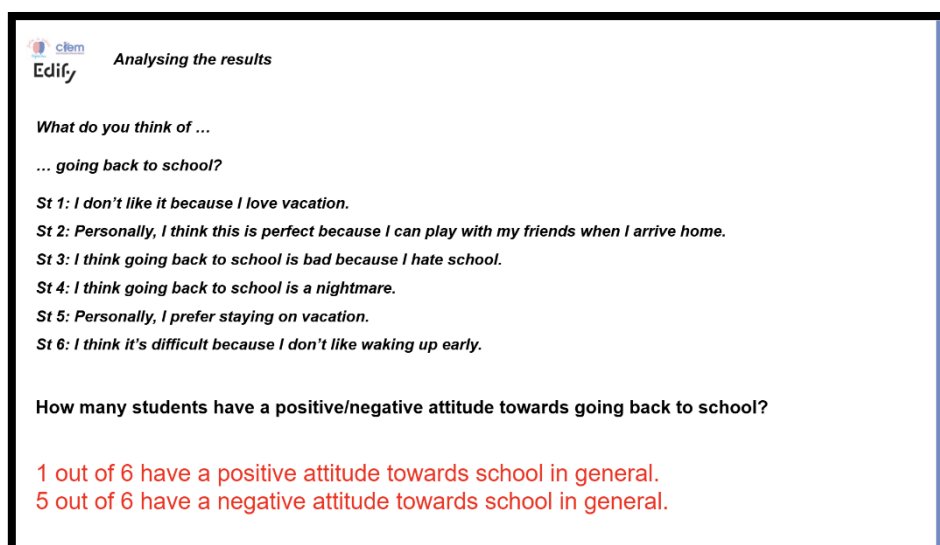


Figure 10: analyzing the results

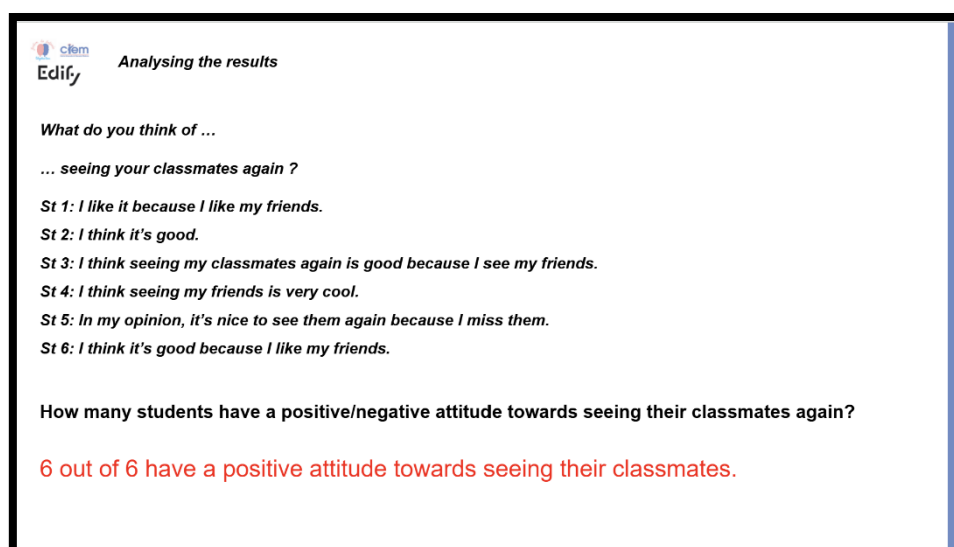


Figure 12: analyzing the results

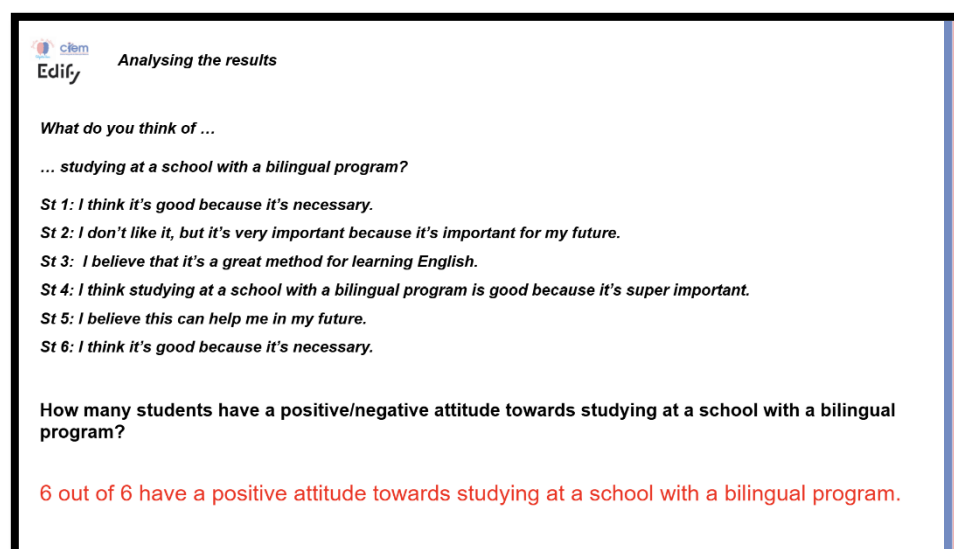


Figure 11: analyzing the results

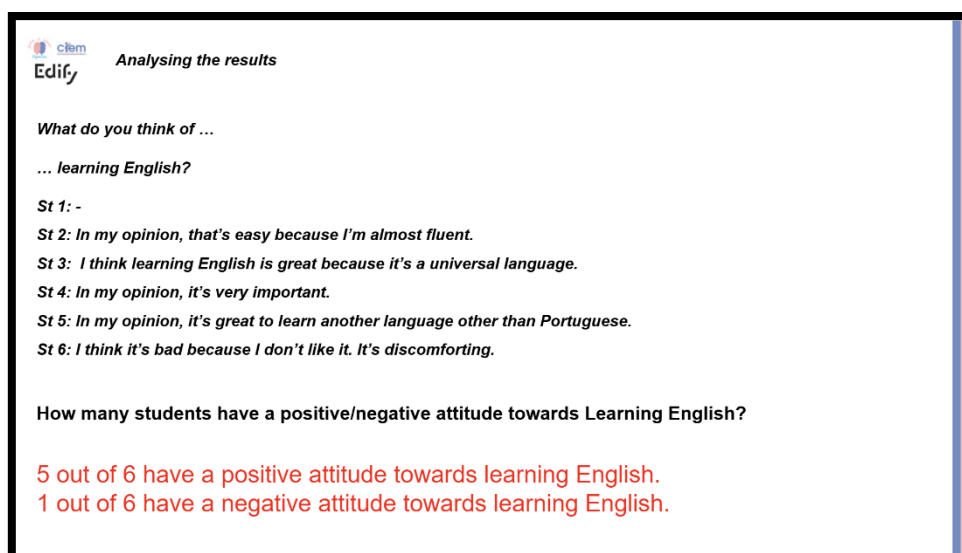


Figure 13: analysing the results

After analyzing the responses from both groups, I decided to engage the students in another Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity. Exploratory Practice, as a contribution to classroom methodology, offers the promise of increased job satisfaction for both teachers and learners. As Allwright and Hanks (2001) stated, “you can better help people by trying to help them enjoy their work, rather than by trying to give them solutions to work-related problems.” With this in mind, I aimed to create a learning environment where exploration and enjoyment lead naturally to deeper understandings and growth for everyone involved. Next, I share another attempt in this direction.

#### 4.1 HOW COULD THIS SCHOOL BE A BETTER PLACE FOR YOU?

In an effort to help students better understand why they perceive the school as a negative environment; we carried out an activity in which they responded to the question: "How could this school be a better place for me?" To encourage them to express their thoughts freely, they were allowed to write in either English or Portuguese. Their responses are shown in images 14 and 15, from the 7th and 8th grade classes, respectively.



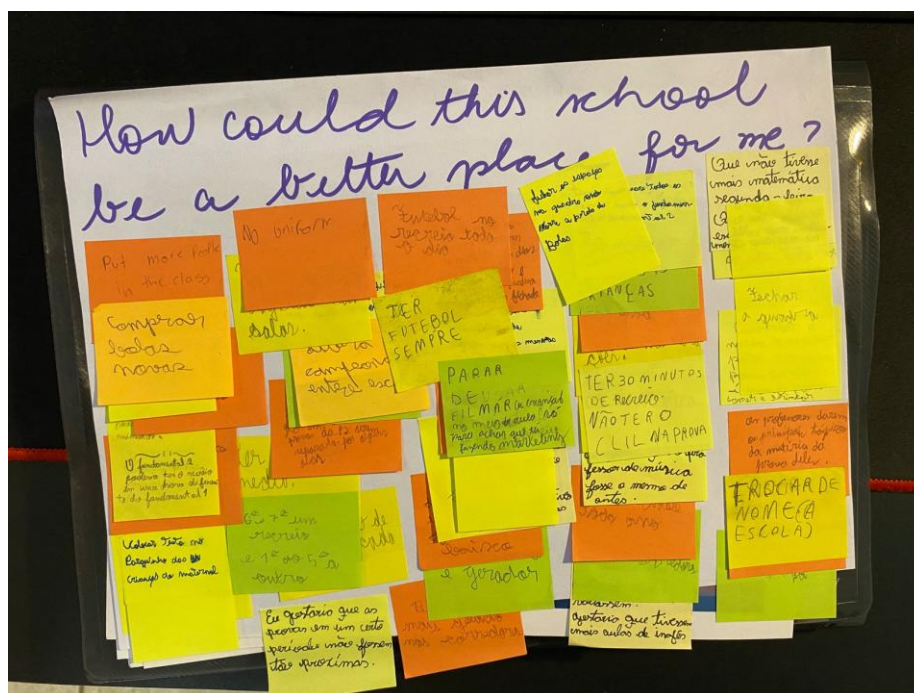


Figure 14: 7th grader's responses

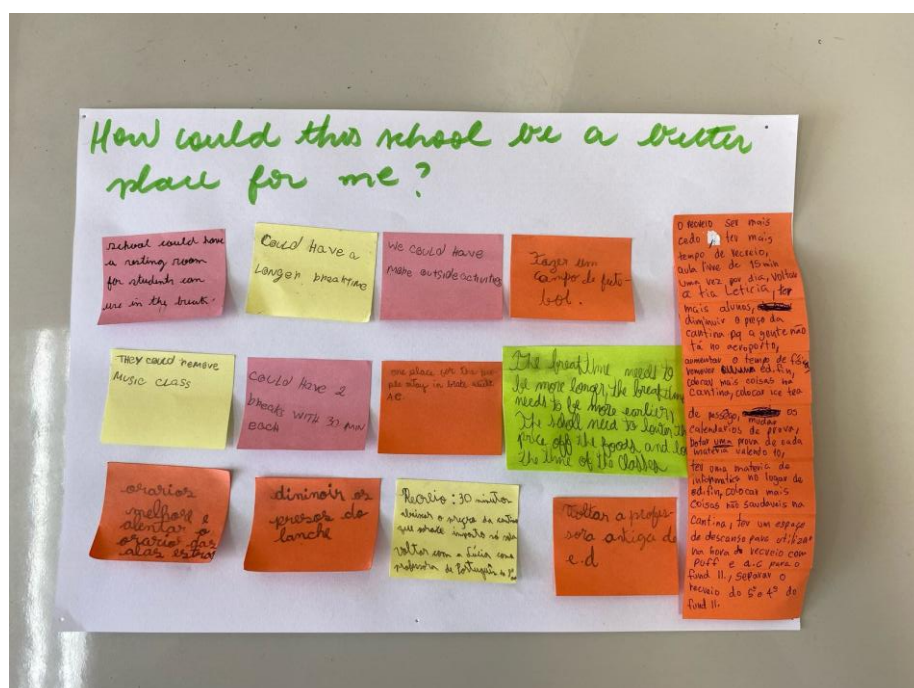
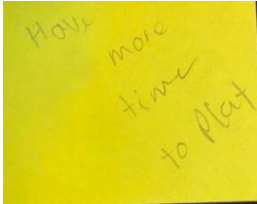
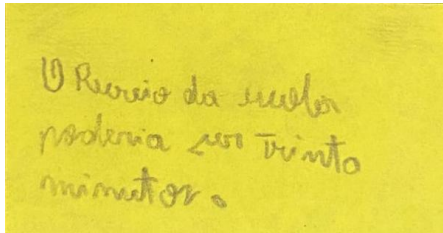


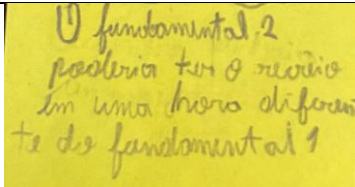
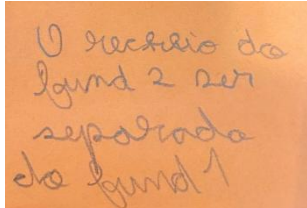
Figure 15: 8th graders' responses

When we look at the answers more closely, we are able to notice that some of them are quite relevant for both students and the school itself. In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, for instance, 9 out of 9 students believe the breaktime could be longer. In the 8<sup>th</sup> grade this topic is also mentioned by three students. However, when I read their contributions to the whole group, more students said that a longer breaktime could increase their quality of life while at school, so they could better manage their time to eat and play. Considering students'

schedule, they start at 7 a.m. and finish at 12:00 or 12:40, a twenty-minute break sound short indeed.

	<p>Have more time to play</p>
	<p>O recreio da escola poderia ser trinta minutos.<sup>5</sup></p>

Students also find it upsetting that their break time coincides with that of the *Fundamental Anos Iniciais* group. They believe the breaks should be separated, so they can have more autonomy during playtime without having to worry about the younger children. I believe this also reflects their desire to experience a sense of growing up, especially since many of them have studied at the same school since kindergarten. To me, it sounds like they want to feel that they are entering a new stage in their lives.

	<p>O fundamental 2 poderia ter o recreio em uma hora diferente do fundamental 1.<sup>6</sup></p>
	<p>O recreio do fund 2 ser separado do fund 1<sup>7</sup></p>

Another topic many students mentioned in their responses was the price of items at the school canteen. According to them, the prices are very high.

<sup>5</sup> “School recess could last for thirty minutes”

<sup>6</sup> “Middle school could have recess at a different time from elementary school.”

<sup>7</sup> “Having separate recess times for middle school and elementary school.”

	<p>The scholl<sup>8</sup> need to lower the price off the foods.</p>
	<p>Diminuir o preço da cantina pq a gente não tá no aeroporto.<sup>9</sup></p>

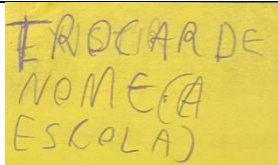
A few students wrote that they wish they had more English classes. This was particularly interesting because they were free to write about anything, and yet they chose to express a desire for more exposure to the subject. This suggests a genuine interest in learning English and perhaps a recognition of its importance in their lives.

	<p>Have more English classes.</p>
	<p>Gostaria que tivessem mais aulas de Inglês.</p>

One student mentioned something particularly interesting: the name of the school. I prefer to not mention the institution's name, but I am comfortable to share part of it. It reads: *Jardim de Infância...* When I read this comment aloud to the whole group, all of the 7th-grade students agreed. Unfortunately, there is no written record of this discussion, but during the conversation, students expressed that the school's name sounds too childish to them, and some even said they feel ashamed to say they study there. I believe this sentiment aligns with their desire to grow and be taken by their peers – maybe from other schools.

<sup>8</sup> Spelling and grammar reproduced as in the original.

<sup>9</sup> “Lower the cafeteria prices because we’re not at the airport.”

	Trocar de nome (a escola). <sup>10</sup>
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Students genuinely enjoyed sharing their ideas, and, of course, some of the suggestions they made were unrealistic. However, many of them made a lot of sense considering the moment the school is currently going through. I personally found it very interesting that my efforts toward understanding coincided with a delicate period the school is facing with the *Fundamental Anos Finais* group. This work not only helped me understand how English lessons are perceived by my students but also served as a tool to inform the school's next steps.

All the students' contributions were shared with the school coordination team so they could better understand what our students think about the school we're building together. Later, I also presented their input at a meeting organized by the school principals with the teaching staff. The goal of this meeting was to gather ideas and suggestions from teachers on how to strengthen *Fundamental Anos Finais*, based on our experiences in other schools. I had the privilege of opening the meeting, and I spoke not only from my own perspective but also on behalf of the students, sharing the insights they had given me.

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<sup>10</sup> "Change the school's name"

## 5. A FEW FINAL WORDS

The first time I encountered the concept of *Exploratory Practice* was during my undergraduate studies, in a course entitled *Métodos e Abordagens do Ensino de Língua Inglesa*<sup>11</sup>. At the time, I engaged with the topic only superficially, reading briefly about it alongside another approach named Action Research. I completed some assignments and passed exams, but I had not fully grasped its potential – or what I could do with it (or even what it could do to me).

Two years later, to my surprise, I came across the concept again – this time as a subject in my postgraduate program. Throughout the course, we were exposed to its theoretical foundations and practical applications. That was when I had my first experience with Exploratory Practice. At the time, I worked with a 7th-grade group on the following puzzle: **Why are my 7th-grade students so concerned with high marks?** During one of the stages, a student looked at me and said, “Mr. Castro, you really care about us, don’t you?” This student reminded me of my purpose as a teacher. She was affected, and affected me back. This is what keeps me going as a teacher: the affect.

Knowing that life is a complex, ongoing construct – and convinced that there are no shortcuts when dealing with its intricacies – I was never after a solution, but rather deeper understandings. I needed to figure out what was going on (Allwright & Miller, 2012). What truly mattered to me was developing a way of thinking that could help me navigate the unknown. This perspective stems from my belief that personal and professional life are inseparable, as they continuously shape and inform one another. The change in my work setting exposed me to an unfamiliar environment, which ultimately motivated me to seek professional development.

Within Exploratory Practice, we prioritize understanding over problem-solving (Hanks, 2016). However, engaging in this kind of research may also lead to practical outcomes. Even though it was not my initial intention, I was able to witness some results. On both a professional and personal level, I came to better understand how learners perceive English classes. Most of them see value in learning the language – and this insight nurtures me as a teacher.

Some of the students’ responses led me to rethink my teaching practice and incorporate elements of fun to make lessons more enjoyable. After each class, I often use artificial intelligence to create quizzes based on the content covered. I organize the

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<sup>11</sup> Methods and Approaches in English Language Teaching

students into two teams – typically boys versus girls – and we use the quiz in a spirit of healthy competition. I noticed a clear increase in their engagement during lessons. On days when I am unable to prepare a quiz, they usually express their disappointment, which shows how much they value the activity.

The coordination team seemed to understand and support the students' concerns regarding the lack of a dedicated break time for the *Fundamental Anos Finais* segment. Although providing a new break slot is currently unfeasible due to space and scheduling constraints, we were able to extend their Wednesday break by ten minutes. While this may seem like a small change, the students truly appreciated it. It is even amusing to hear them complain and then immediately add, "Well, at least today we have ten more minutes."

As for the prices at the school canteen, those remain unchanged for now. However, the principal agreed to explore options for increasing the variety of available food items. I am not sure whether students have noticed any actual changes yet, but I know their concerns were heard through me.

Lastly, regarding the school's name, no official change has been made. However, recent promotional materials and billboards have dropped the reference to *Jardim de Infância*<sup>12</sup>, now referring to the institution simply as *Colégio*<sup>13</sup>.... This symbolic shift, though subtle, feels significant, and even exciting, to both me and my students.

As I conclude this monograph and look back into my journey, I realize that working for understanding is a crucial first step before attempting to take action toward solving problems, if solving them is even possible. My students and I learned that changes may take place, but they should be properly based on prior work for understanding. Through the path I pursued with the support of Exploratory Practice, I came to understand that "people attempting to generate the understandings are themselves the direct beneficiaries of any understandings they do in fact develop" (ALLWRIGHT, 2001, p. 128).

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<sup>12</sup> *Jardim de Infância* (Kindergarten/Preschool) refers to early childhood education in Brazil, usually for children aged 3–5, prior to compulsory elementary education.

<sup>13</sup> *Colégio* refers to a school in Brazil, often a private institution that may cover elementary and/or secondary education.



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