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Language and culture in real-time Brazil and the United States: Icone Project

Língua e cultura em tempo real no Brasil e nos Estados Unidos: Projeto Icone

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RESUMO

Aprender uma língua estrangeira é muito mais do que aprender palavras e estrutura. A consciência cultural que cresce a partir de processos intra e interculturais é obrigatória caso alguém deseje ser proficiente. Fazer uso de *affordances* faz parte desse processo. Com o objetivo de envolver os alunos nas práticas de comunicação da vida real, bem como na conscientização sobre os outros e sobre a cultura adequada, três professores de duas partes diferentes do mundo iniciaram o Projeto ICONE há alguns anos. Este texto explica brevemente a história do projeto, ancorando-o em visões teóricas atuais, como aprendizagem inter e intracultural, abordagem ecológica e a compreensão dinâmica da motivação. Os resultados mostram que os objetivos do projeto foram plenamente atendidos com alunos americanos e brasileiros aprendendo com seus colegas de várias maneiras diferentes. Em uma breve avaliação realizada por ambos os professores, os alunos apontaram que não apenas aprenderam muito sobre a cultura dos outros alunos, mas também passaram a apreciar sua própria cultura. Eles também mencionaram que poder escolher os temas das conversas os motivou a continuar conversando, mesmo após o término das sessões do ICONE.

ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language is much more than learning words and structure. Cultural awareness that grows from intra and intercultural processes is mandatory if one wishes to be proficient. Making use of *affordances* is part of this process. Aiming at involving students in real life communication practices as well as in awareness about others and proper culture, three professors from two different parts of the world started ICONE Project a few years ago. This text briefly explains the history of the project, anchoring it on present day theoretical views such as inter and intracultural learning, ecological approach, and a dynamic understanding of motivation. Results show that the goals of the project were thoroughly met with American and Brazilian students learning from their peers in many different ways. In a brief evaluation conducted by both professors, students pointed out that they not only learned a great deal about the other students' culture, but also came to appreciate their own culture. They also mentioned that being able to choose the topics of the conversations motivated them to keep on talking, even after ICONE sessions were over..

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Aprendizado de idiomas estrangeiros; pedagogia crítica; aprendizado inter e intracultural; abordagem ecológica; motivação.

KEYWORDS:

Foreign language learning; critical pedagogy; inter and intracultural learning; ecological approach; motivation.



1. INTRODUCTION

The pedagogical history of second or foreign language acquisition throughout the 20th century has struggled with several teaching methodologies, which spread along a continuum from the absolutely structural to the most communicative ones. In the process, a consensus was reached in considering using the language for real important purposes. Nowadays, the old experience of pen pals is reinvested in real time communication provided by updated technology to an extent that had never been possible before. Although inappropriate use and over inflated claims need to be taken into consideration, no one can deny the advantages new technologies can bring to the classroom. Besides, recent studies have proved that “well rounded communicative proficiency depends to large extent on the learner’s efforts to use and learn the language beyond the walls of the classroom” (BENSON; REINDERS, 2011, p. 2). Using technological possibilities within and out of the classes not only expands students’ horizons but also teaches them how to look for practice opportunities.

In this text a project, which relies heavily on technology, but that, also feeds on cultural and humanistic values, is highlighted. At the same time that it brings together learners of two languages in two different countries, it downplays the exclusion and oppression that often permeates this kind of exchanges.

The title ICONE has a double meaning in Portuguese; the first and most obvious one is the icon of a link on a computer and the second is an acronym for *Intercâmbio Cultural Online* that is Cultural Exchange Online. This project is designed for the teaching of a second or foreign language. It is based on the knowledge of intracultural and intercultural symbolism across nations.

The key foundation of this project enables participants, students and instructors, to reflect on non-native cultural symbolisms and to reconstruct new ones, a crucial basis that goes side by side with the acquisition of a language in higher education. As stated by Phipps and Guilherme (2004, p. 1-2), the adult learner challenges common sense assumptions, hegemonic structures and any uncritical belief in the *status quo*. The critical pedagogy of a second or foreign language in higher education is as important as the ultimate goal of becoming culturally and verbally proficient. Ignoring the first one may produce individuals fluent in the language but oblivious of the very reason that created or reshaped that language, in other words, its culture.

This article addresses specifically the learning of English in Brazil and Portuguese in the United States. In order to promote the inseparable dual “Language-Culture” the authors



used technology to join the U.S. and Brazil through live online conversations during class time, connecting two languages and two cultures. The empirical nature of those hours spent in conversation with a foreign friend thousands of miles away has demonstrated phenomenal results as can be verified by the data shown in this text.

In order to situate the reader in the context, in Brazil, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is almost synonymous with foreign language learning. This is a consequence of American dominance of world affairs, among many other factors. Michael Byram (2008, p. 14) claims that “The role of English thus often dominates the development of language education policies and the teaching of English has been a major influence on the methods of teaching all foreign languages...”. While Brazilians learn English to become strong versatile professionals in national and international markets, Americans expect the world to communicate in English, therefore the reason to learn a foreign language must be different. Even with these differences in mind, putting these two college level populations in contact had strong effects on their learning.

2. BACKGROUD ON THE CREATION OF PROJECT ICONE

Project ICONE was conceived almost spontaneously and organically. It came from the simple pleasure of teaching a foreign language and culture. We were fully aware of its potential to become a vital linguistic and cultural tool, contingent on several factors. We elected to keep things simple and developed an unassuming pilot plan. This plan assessed potential obstacles such as internet connectivity issues and questionable Skype access. To offset the difficulties, Silva and Costa brought decades of classroom experience and a drive for innovation and challenges.

The project started out in 2013 by Magda Silva (referred as Silva in this article), an instructor of Portuguese as a foreign language at Duke University and Cintia Costa, an instructor of English as a foreign language at the Federal University of Pará, Brazil. Silva holds a doctoral degree in Literature and Pedagogy of Foreign Languages, Costa holds a master’s degree in Applied Linguistics. Both instructors are interested in technology, cultural aspects and language learning.

Silva, still in the planning phase, had an unknown intention behind the creation of this project. She has been the director of the Duke in Brazil Summer Abroad (DiB) for the last 13 years, and 2013 turned out to be a particularly challenging year for the program. Some of the



reasons were: the restructuring of the whole program curriculum moving from Rio-Salvador to Rio-Belém; new students needed to be recruited to try this new version of the summer abroad, the Duke in Brazil Summer Program is very costly and discourages students and parents; and new strategies in the Portuguese Program attracting students with a diverse set of interests. Due to this last reason, the client base of American students was no longer comprised merely of students majoring in Latin American Studies and eager to learn about Brazil. At that point, a great variety of students was attracted and most of them barely knew where Brazil was located. This overinflating of the class resulted in a struggle to deal with uninterested and unmotivated students who were taking Portuguese just to fulfill their foreign language requirement.

Silva imagined that the situation could be mitigated by teaming up with an instructor as experienced and accomplished as Costa. Both had worked together in the past and Silva knew that she was as enthusiastic, passionate and committed as she is. Costa is an ESL instructor at a prestigious university in Belém do Pará, Brazil. This appeared to be the perfect partnership for the challenges of this endeavor. Being Brazilians, both knew they could also rely heavily on a very familiar cultural trait: openly friendly and welcoming people and warm level of hospitality. As this may sound as a cliché, its importance will become clear later in the text. Hope was that American students would embrace the culture as soon as they were exposed to other young Brazilian college students, who share the same interests, despite cultural differences.

One of the first points considered when creating Project ICONE, was how to rouse students' curiosity regarding the Brazilian Amazon region and, as such, help recruit students for the Duke in Brazil program. Brazil's most popular touristic spot, the city of Rio de Janeiro, is an attraction by itself, but the Amazon represented a challenge. The plan to attract students to spend two weeks in the Amazon (of which three days would be without internet) was constructed using a pedagogical foundation that instigates both their curiosity and their intellect. Students on both ends were carefully guided in order to accomplish the primary goals:

- a) Practice English and Portuguese in all sessions.
- b) Entice students' curiosity about the local residents, the rainforest, and the culture.
- c) Inspire socialization.
- d) Provide easy, simple, pleasant conversations.
- e) Question preconceived bias.



- f) Deal with stereotypes.
- g) Beware of unilateral thinking.
- h) Avoid judgmental attitude.

Keeping these challenges in mind, it was time to invest in field work. With Costa's leave for a period of work and studies in Canada, Walkyria Silva (referred as W. Silva), an applied linguistics professor at UFPA, with a doctoral degree in Language Sciences, took charge of the program in Brazil, with the help of two student assistants. W. Silva's research interests include motivation and she promptly showed an academic commitment to the project incorporating it to the menu of activities offered by the self access center she coordinates at the Brazilian university.

3. THEORETICAL ASPECTS

This section contains a brief exposure of the main theoretical aspects that guided Project ICONE. First, some of the elements in cultural studies are treated, like collectivist versus individualistic cultures, the notion of power culture, and inter as well as intra cultural consciousness. Secondly, motivation comes into play when using language for real purposes stresses the importance of experiments like ICONE. Finally, an explanation of an ecological approach to language learning serves the purpose of clarifying the roles of teachers, student assistants and students in perceiving the affordances created by the project.

A study of individualism and collectivism cultural aspects reveal the most significant differences between societies. While there are a myriad of cultural differences, this one seems to be important both historically and cross-culturally. Triandis and Hue (1986, p. 225) provide a very straightforward definition on this issue:

Collectivism can be defined as (1) concern by a person about the effects of actions or decisions on others, (2) sharing of material benefits, (3) sharing of nonmaterial resources, (4) willingness of the person to accept the opinions and views of others, (5) concern about self-presentation and loss of face, (6) belief in the correspondence of own outcomes with the outcomes of others, and (7) feeling of involvement in and contribution to the lives of others. Individualists show less concern, sharing, and so on than collectivists.

The U.S. is categorized as an individualist society, easily echoing the characteristics discussed in the quotation above. On the other hand, Brazilian culture, and most of all, Northern Brazilian culture is situated more on the collectivist side of the continuum.



A second aspect, which deals with cultural differences that will be worth taking into consideration, is power-distance. Collectivist societies tend to accept hierarchies and the unequal distribution of power in a society. As Helen FitzGerald (2002, p. 24) notes, “it is acceptable for people in higher positions to openly assert their power” in professional, gender, age, and social spheres. Therefore, Brazilians are very sensitive to hierarchy and tend to, at least initially, react to the dichotomist submissive-authoritarian mode. This could cause an immediate cultural misunderstanding during the virtual meetings. American society, being more individualistic, has a low power distance as can be observed in more egalitarian professional, gender, age, and social relationships.

The situation becomes more complex in country-to-country relationships. American world hegemony triggers a different intercultural paradigm: one that is less egalitarian than their intracultural low power distance. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the fact is that the initial connection suffers from English dominance, and participants occupy assigned symbolic hierarchical seats. While planning ICONE project, the authors were aware of this fact, which could hinder success.

The study of languages develops critical thinking skills in university students. Critical thinking is vital to ‘thinking’ at any level within a higher education setting. Critical thinking can be instigated even at the most elementary levels of foreign language acquisition. The vast array of relevant critical topics seems overwhelming and impossible to cover in one semester. Nevertheless, these issues will surface at different moments and at different levels of intensity, as participants become familiar with each other and with the program. These critical topics can be carefully addressed as they emerge to help students be as successful as possible while they navigate both cultures with an open-mind.

Critical Pedagogy helps students to openly perceive this pattern and discuss it in a productive manner in order to alleviate possible cultural clashes. It is the instructor’s job to undertake and facilitate this issue in a constructive manner and to help reduce the possibility of students leaving the program because of uncomfortable feelings.

Teachers worried with the clashing cultural aspects in the classroom tend to rely on updated literature in order to use these issues as a booster instead of a downplay in their courses. This includes observance of inter as well as intra cultural consciousness. Besides, it is important to let students reflect upon which cultural traits should be valued and preserved and which ones should be discarded.



Intercultural learning is learning about a foreign culture, acknowledged by the Modern Language Association (MLA) as a key component of education for democratic citizenship. In 2007, the MLA report recognized the importance of developing intercultural competence in the post 9/11 geopolitical mindset: “our whole culture must become less ethnocentric, less patronizing, and less ignorant of others, less Manichean in judging other cultures, and more at home with the rest of the world”. The result of this recognition was a strong incentive to the teaching of foreign languages in higher education. In this context, Portuguese, along with several other less spoken languages in America, gained its own space and relevance.

Intracultural learning is learning about one’s own culture and developing the ability to reflect on the origin of one’s own beliefs and behaviors. This awareness of one’s own values triggers a conscious interpretation of the factors that shape our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors toward other cultures.

After both educational processes are underway, one is capable of selecting which cultural traits to change and which ones to reinforce. Not taking short cuts to resolve important issues is the basis of the study in Humanities. Understanding the depth of political, social and cultural factors infiltrated in our minds is the pathway to understanding what shapes our thoughts and actions. This intellectual exercise avoids misinterpretation of symbolism and social cues across cultures, time, social and educational levels, and, finally, across political and religious beliefs. Desirably, participants of such practices will achieve an in-depth understanding of what a hegemonic culture is and the human factor placed in this context. By sharing interests, idealizations contribute to the building of an actual representation of both cultures.

As motivation is concerned, it is widely known that one of the most encouraging processes in foreign language learning is being able to use it as a means to an end, in this case, communicating with students in another country. As Ushioda (2011) mentions, when students reveal other identities besides the one they have as learners, they really use the language. Therefore, students find their counterparts who are interested in the same themes they are and build a spontaneous conversation with them. Learning colloquial language is an aspect that is difficult to reproduce in class and having this opportunity reinforces intrinsic motivation.

If care is given to the sociocultural aspects mentioned previously in this text, going from the conventional meaning of isolated words to their meaning in socio-cultural context is necessary in ICONE. Considering that native speakers have competences that systematically



vary during their lifetime, conversation with native speakers of different languages is highly facilitated when they are of the same age bracket, have a similar level of maturity, are college students, and share similar life and professional expectations.

Van Lier (2004) proposes an ecological approach to language learning. Seeing context as part of the process of learning and not only as a background, he believes learning is taking place all the time and everywhere. The point is that something that is available in the context must be perceived as a possibility for reflection and action. Using this triad: perception, reflection and action, Van Lier argues that one of the teachers' roles is to try to make affordances more evident to students in general. In ICONE, the possibility of using technology was always there, there are hundreds of sites that provide communication opportunities to young people to meet and talk. However, what is not evident is the perception that this can be used as a means to meet distant people and learn from them. The reflection triggered by the cultural aspects made them act upon this opportunity transforming it into real affordances to learn either Portuguese or English.

Being part of students' context, cultural aspects permeate the motivational interchange between the two college groups, at the same time embracing and being part of this experiment.

4. CONTEXT AND LOGISTICS

The live conversations are always based on well-planned instructions that provide clear guidelines with regard to grammar practice and cultural factors. The course of the conversation will sequentially converge to a blend of teacher's instructions and students' cultural views, personal opinions, personal experiences, and random topics. During this process, it is very important that the instructor redirects the students back to the objective of the meeting if they should stray from the topic. The teacher or student assistant can be an occasional partner in every conversation, remarking on current topics, and creating a link between the unintended topics of conversation and the topics at hand.

When topics arise that are intrinsically part of one country's narrative but not innate to the other, the structure of the project allows for civil discussion. Considering that the limited duration of the sessions may lead to a summarized assessment of the topics, which in turn will lead to oversimplification or total avoidance, the instructor should include the topic in the next



regular class discussions or even outside ICONE time¹, so that participants can obtain full clarification, form opinions, or, perhaps most importantly, use that information to instigate thought. Participants' understanding that a careful analysis of cultural characteristics will provide the groundwork for questioning the status quo is key to this project. It will also instill the passionate nature of intellectual curiosity. Some examples of themes included in the discussion can be seen in Appendix 1.

At Duke University the sessions were conducted during class time in a regular classroom where students had Portuguese Language and Brazilian Studies with Silva. The encounters accounted for about 20 per cent of class time. Students used their own computers to connect via skype.

In Belém, Brazil, students in the fourth semester of English, complying roughly to A2 level in the European Common Framework, were contacted and invited to participate. They gathered after class in the computer lab of the School of Modern Foreign Languages to connect with their American counterparts.

Conversations start in English for the first 20 minutes and then the next 20 minutes switch to Portuguese. The final 10 minutes are off camera when students and instructors on each end wrap up with class comments of that session. These comments usually incorporate talk about words they have learned and taught, cultural traits they have shared, and most importantly, a comparison of what they thought of a specific topic before the session and their first reaction right after the session. Special attention is given if they have modified their thoughts about the topic right after the session.

The practice of both languages: English and Portuguese in all sessions is mandatory. Students were instructed to prepare ahead and use the specific language allotted to the established time limits. Assessment includes a small written report on thoughts they have after the encounters. This also serves as a start up for the next meeting or to see if any ends need to be wrapped up. Instruction to this activity always include a stress on cultural aspects and how their beliefs were modified by the exchange whenever this happens.

5. RESULTS

¹ Many students kept talking to their partners from home or during their free time long after the class project was over.



In this section we will comment on some of the results of this experiment so far, trying to highlight its contribution not only to the learning of the language but also to the awareness that a language does not speak for itself; it is its speakers that convey meaning which is important for them. This experiment evidences understanding among speakers of different languages and cultures, valuing the interplay of the two groups.

Some of the struggles they share are expectations of being fluent enough to communicate in a foreign language, the need to overcome the fear of facing a mental blockage during the conversation, and the fear of being judged for the linguistic production. Besides, there is the fact that introvert students have a natural tendency to avoid small talk and this has to be dealt by the teachers who encouraged each learner to speak with his or her partner. The fact that both were basic learners of the language helped mitigate this problem.

As expected both parties experienced success on different levels, but students and teachers were unanimous in affirming that everyone came out of the experiment with a better command in the foreign language and, most important of all, with a better understanding of the other's culture.

Positive results included the surprising pleasure of understanding a native speaker and the rewarding pleasure of being understood in a foreign language. Both these two findings attest Ushioda's claim that using the language is highly motivating to learners (2011).

Visible improvement of their language skills could be attested during each session and, more important, there was a crescendo in production as the sessions progressed in the term.

The invariable learning of a foreign culture: the differences, the similarities, and the novelties were deeply explored as well as the deconstruction of beliefs, the reconstruction of one's own opinions, and the construction of new perceptions on life.

The dual language-culture concept of Project ICONE produces a natural balance that enables learners on both ends to observe their counterparts experiencing the same emotions, struggles and successes. They realize that they are all in the same status of studentship. Hence the political notion behind this practice: to provide an egalitarian global relationship.

Social skills are differently enabled in each country. In Brazil it is more intense and culturally intrinsic in nature and themes they touch. Americans socialize in more complex and delicate ways. Due to cultural, social, political and economical factors that interfere directly in the conversation between the students, they act positively or negatively in their speeches.



Americans don't want to offend Brazilians by asking personal questions. However, for Brazilians it is very natural to ask about relationships even if the other person is a new friend. It is common for Brazilians to start a conversation asking if the other is in a steady relationship or not while for Americans this would be a very invasive question. Brazilians see no harm in asking personal questions about age, family relations and such whereas Americans tend to keep the private information to themselves and would talk about more neutral themes like the weather and music, for example.

In ICONE, young students of both universities could act freely in the Brazilian rules and used to ask friendly questions about personal items once the teachers previously lectured them on these aspects. American students understood ice breakers in the beginning of conversations which frequently included personal questions and this may have been one of the explanations for the success of the experiment.

In a small survey conducted by W. Silva for the purposes of a report, students on the Brazilian side commented that:

- (1) ICONE project was an enormous learning source for me. Having the chance of talking online with students from Duke University made me **improve my conversation levels** in English a lot. It's interesting to see that technology, which is nowadays at our reach, **can serve as a great source for achieving fluency** in the target language. Differently from what happens in the classrooms, ICONE project allows us to get out of the traditional ways and **explore new worlds, new cultures with people from other places.**
- (2) What I liked about ICONE project was the freedom of choice in the themes to be discussed, which made the activity more pleasurable. I had the feeling that **I was not only learning, but also teaching.**
- (3) The biggest advantage of ICONE project was the opportunity of **talking to a native speaker.** The language we used was very informal, **different from the one we use in the classroom.** We used a lot of slang and other daily phrases we hear on the internet.

It is clearly shown in (1) and (3) that the chance to use everyday language has added confidence to these Brazilian students. This avoids the learning that, taking place only in classrooms, builds what is known as "classroom dialogues," never heard elsewhere.



In comment (2) above, there is the proof that ICONE was successful in balancing the two cultures, eliminating the power culture and hierarchical structure when the student says she taught and learned at the same time.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Live online conversation is not possible everywhere in the world, not even everywhere in developed countries. The impediments are endless; financial, technological, logistic, identifying appropriate partners and professors, matching interests, to mention a few. It is no easy task, but it is worth every effort when you observe students communicating in a new language and experiencing a foreign culture.

Silva first created this project to make her students interested in going on the Duke in Brazil program. That was her main intention during the pilot season in 2013. Then the project grew in importance as a real pedagogical tool. Not only she recruits students using this project, but also, it makes her classes extremely efficient for learning language and culture within her own teaching philosophy, which is based on Critical Pedagogy. In Brazil ICONE was an opportunity to learn language and culture beyond the walls of the classroom.

Critical pedagogy provides us with some pedagogical processes: reflection, dissent, difference, dialogue, empowerment, action and hope (Guilherme, 2002)

Project ICONE turned out to be quite intricate and effective tool for recruiting students for the summer abroad program in Brazil. It did not take long to realize that ICONE had taken on a life of its own and that being used as a tool for recruiting students was only one of its many magnificent side effects. Project ICONE is now a part of the Duke Portuguese Program curriculum. In Belém, students hear about the project and keep asking W. Silva when it will be their turn to participate.

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APPENDIX 1 - NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST OF THEMES DISCUSSED IN THE SESSIONS

1. The so-called “first world countries”. White hegemonic power in the relationship of developing vs developed countries. The assumptions that have shaped Brazilian view of America.--- watch for patronizing and colonizing discourse when the players are seen as inferior/superior -- The discourse of Western culture and Eastern cultures. Is it possible to step out our own cultural sphere and comprehend “the other”? Lucia Sá, Professor of Brazilian Literature in the University of Manchester, believes this is possible. She works with Brazilian indigenous narratives. In her book *Rainforest Literatures: Amazonian Texts and Latin American Culture*, she analyses how indigenous narratives deal with the same human problems, virtually the same subject of the literature of all cultures. In one of the chapters, she recounts indigenous narratives resolving problems of marriage in a sophisticated way. She uses “sophisticated” in the same sense of the word that I do: efficient, concise, worldly-wise and beautiful within that particular culture.
2. English as a supreme language and dominant culture --- how do we promote an egalitarian conversation?
3. Social stratification within a nation as well as between nations.
4. Patriarchal power and male dominated societies
5. Moral progress in feminism and gender issues in the last decades of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century.
6. Subliminal messages
7. Influence of media, the rise of a “culture industry” produced by the internet boom and the fall of TV for Millennials.

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Dr. Magda Silva holds a doctoral degree in Brazilian Studies and Portuguese language from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the Coordinator of the Portuguese Language Program at Duke University and director of the Duke in Brazil Summer Program. Her interdisciplinary interest has reached a variety of fields including Environmental Studies, Latin American Studies, Law, and Business. Her current research focus on Critical Pedagogy, and Intercultural/Intracultural learning. She applies these two pillars to all teaching material and projects she creates as an educator of second language acquisition. Dr. Silva's research is the foundation of her pedagogical material, one that provides full clarification of cultural, linguistic, and global political issues.

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Dr. Walkyria Magno e Silva holds a bachelor's degree in Portuguese and German from the Universidade Federal do Paraná (1976), a bachelor's degree in English from the Universidade Federal do Pará (1987), a master's degree in Linguistics from Universidade Estadual de Campinas (1980) and doctorate in Language Sciences from the Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès (Toulouse II le Mirail), France (2002). She has experience in Linguistics, focusing on Applied Linguistics, more specifically on autonomy, additional languages teaching and learning, language learning advising, language learning as a complex adaptive system. She acts as a reviewer for national journals. From 2008 to 2010, she chaired the Modern Foreign Languages School at UFPA. Presently, she directs the Institute of Letters and Communication at UFPA.

