

Tipo: Artículo original
Sección: Artículos varios

Desarrollo de un enfoque integrado y temático para la enseñanza de inglés en el contexto de la escuela secundaria técnica en el Instituto Federal de Pará (IFPA)

Developing an Integrated Theme-Based Approach for English Teaching in the Technical High School Context at the Federal Institute of Pará (IFPA)¹

Mauro Marinho da Silva

*Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina,
Florianópolis – Brasil.*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8925-1663>

e-mail de contacto autoral: mauro.marinho.silva@hotmail.com

Rosane Silveira

*Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina,
Florianópolis – Brasil.*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0329-0376>

Recibido: 19/1/2026
Aprobado: 2/8/2026

RESUMEN

El sistema educativo público brasileño ha priorizado históricamente las habilidades de lectura en la enseñanza de idiomas, una respuesta pragmática a limitaciones previas. Sin embargo, este enfoque ha sido criticado por descuidar otras habilidades lingüísticas esenciales, lo que puede llevar a la frustración y disminución de la motivación de los estudiantes. Este estudio aborda esta brecha al presentar un trabajo en curso enfocado en desarrollar y evaluar un enfoque integrado y temático para la enseñanza de inglés en el contexto de la escuela secundaria técnica integrada en el Instituto Federal de Pará (IFPA), Brasil. El objetivo es proponer una aproximación de habilidades integradas que combine contenido técnico con las cuatro habilidades lingüísticas (lectura, escritura, escucha y habla), buscando una experiencia de aprendizaje holística que prepare a los estudiantes tanto para la comunicación cotidiana como para el éxito académico y profesional. Metodología: La investigación adopta la metodología de Investigación de Diseño Educativo (EDR), procediendo en ciclos iterativos: Diagnóstico/Análisis de Necesidades, Diseño Colaborativo, Implementación y Evaluación, y Refinamiento. El objetivo general es desarrollar y evaluar un enfoque temático integrado que responda eficazmente a las necesidades curriculares, institucionales y de los alumnos de la educación secundaria técnica en el IFPA. La recolección de datos incluirá un cuestionario exhaustivo para profesores de inglés, análisis documental de políticas federales (e.g., Ley nº 13.415/2017, BNCC) e institucionales, revisión de materiales existentes, diarios de implementación de profesores, y cuestionarios de evaluación para profesores, coordinadores y estudiantes. El análisis de datos empleará métodos cualitativos (análisis temático de diarios de profesores, notas de campo y

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the VI Conpla conference under the name General and Technical English Didactic sequences for High School Education at a Federal Institute. However, after project refinement, this was the name adopted for the final version.

Conflictos de Interés: ninguno que declarar

Fuente de financiamiento: sin fuente de financiamiento.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47133/NEMITYRA20260202c-A4>

BIBLID: 2707-1642, 8, 2, pp. 37-46

Editor responsables: Valentina Canese (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1584-7322>).

respuestas abiertas de cuestionarios; y análisis de contenido para documentos) y cuantitativos descriptivos (frecuencias, porcentajes, medias y desviaciones estándar para ítems de escala Likert), con triangulación para aumentar la validez. El proyecto se adhiere rigurosamente a las directrices éticas brasileñas, garantizando el consentimiento informado, la confidencialidad y la seguridad de los datos. Conclusiones (Provisionales): Aunque las fases empíricas completas aún no han comenzado, el trabajo conceptual y preparatorio inicial ha permitido el diseño de prototipos para cuatro secuencias didácticas distintas. Se anticipa que el análisis de necesidades formal (Fase 1) validará o refinará estos prototipos. Se espera que este proyecto demuestre que un enfoque temático integrado y desarrollado localmente puede responder eficazmente a las complejas necesidades del IFPA, mejorando la proficiencia en inglés y el compromiso con el contenido técnico. La refinación iterativa conducirá a una intervención educativa teóricamente fundamentada y empíricamente probada. Discusión: Este trabajo representa un paso crucial para optimizar la educación en inglés en los Institutos Federales de Brasil, prometiendo aportar valiosos conocimientos pedagógicos que resuenen más allá del IFPA y sirvan de modelo para contextos educativos similares a nivel global. Se espera que el enfoque desarrollado fomente no solo una mejor competencia lingüística en las cuatro habilidades, sino también una mayor implicación con el contenido técnico, el pensamiento crítico y los objetivos más amplios de la formación humana integral, contribuyendo a un marco validado para el desarrollo de materiales y la práctica pedagógica.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de inglés; enfoque temático; habilidades integradas; inglés como lingua franca (ELF); escuela secundaria técnica; Instituto Federal de Pará (IFPA); investigación de diseño educativo.

ABSTRACT

The Brazilian public education system has historically prioritized reading skills in language instruction, a pragmatic response to previous limitations. However, this approach has been criticized for neglecting other essential linguistic skills, potentially leading to student frustration and decreased motivation. This study addresses this gap by presenting a work in progress focused on developing and evaluating an integrated, theme-based approach to English language teaching within the context of integrated technical high school at the Federal Institute of Pará (IFPA), Brazil. The objective is to propose an integrated skills approach that combines technical content with the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), seeking a holistic learning experience that prepares students for both everyday communication and academic and professional success. Methodology: The research adopts the Educational Design Research (EDR) methodology, proceeding through iterative cycles: Diagnosis/Needs Analysis, Collaborative Design, Implementation and Evaluation, and Refinement. The general objective is to develop and evaluate an integrated theme-based approach that effectively responds to the curricular, institutional, and learner needs of technical high school education at IFPA. Data collection will include an exhaustive questionnaire for English teachers, documentary analysis of federal (e.g., Lei nº 13.415/2017, BNCC) and institutional policies, review of existing materials, teachers' implementation journals, and appraisal questionnaires for teachers, coordinators, and students. Data analysis will employ qualitative methods (thematic analysis of teacher journals, field notes, and open-ended questionnaire responses; and content analysis for documents) and descriptive quantitative methods (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for Likert-scale items), with triangulation to enhance validity. The project rigorously adheres to Brazilian ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and data security. Results and Conclusions (Provisional): Although the full empirical phases have not yet commenced, the initial conceptual and preparatory work has allowed for the design of prototypes for four distinct didactic sequences. It is anticipated that the formal needs analysis (Phase 1) will validate or refine these prototypes. This project is expected to demonstrate that a locally developed, integrated theme-based approach can effectively respond to the complex needs of IFPA, improving English proficiency and engagement with technical content. The iterative refinement will lead to a theoretically grounded and empirically tested educational intervention. Discussion: This work represents a crucial step toward optimizing English education in Brazil's Federal Institutes, promising to provide valuable pedagogical insights that resonate beyond IFPA and serve as a model for similar educational contexts globally. The developed approach is expected to foster not only improved linguistic competence across the four skills but also greater engagement with technical content, critical thinking, and the broader goals of holistic human formation, contributing to a validated framework for materials development and pedagogical practice.

Keywords: English teaching; theme-based approach; integrated skills; English as a Lingua Franca (ELF); technical high school; Federal Institute of Pará (IFPA); educational design research.

Introduction

Federal Institutes of Education, Science, and Technology in Brazil form a vital network of institutions dedicated to professional and technological education, with a strong emphasis on science, technology, and pedagogy. This network comprises 42 institutions, including 38 Federal Institutes, 2 Federal Centers for Technological Education, and Colégio Pedro II, structured across multiple campuses nationwide. They offer courses at various levels – basic, technical, undergraduate, and postgraduate – focusing on practical training and addressing regional needs. Their core objectives include promoting teaching, research, extension activities, and innovation, all aimed at fostering social inclusion and economic development.

Within this context, the Brazilian public education system has long prioritized reading skills in language instruction, a pragmatic response to historical limitations. However, this focus has been criticized for neglecting other essential language skills, potentially leading to student frustration and decreased motivation (Day; Savedra, 2015; Martins, 2022). A balanced approach to language teaching, as emphasized by Nation (2013), is crucial, particularly one that offers comprehensive and authentic learning experiences (Brown, 2001). This paper presents a work in progress aimed at developing and evaluating such an approach within the unique context of technical integrated high school programs in Brazil, specifically addressing the persistent need to integrate technical content with language skills at the Federal Institute of Pará (IFPA), Santarém Campus.

This educational design research (EDR) study seeks to answer a general research question: How can a theme-based integrated approach to English language teaching be designed and refined to respond effectively to the curricular, institutional and learner needs of technical high school education at the Federal Institute of Pará? To achieve this, the study will investigate several specific questions, including: What are the current needs and challenges of English language instruction in integrated high school programs at IFPA, and to what extent do federal and institutional documents align with its principles? What design principles and procedural features emerge in the development of a context-responsive theme-based integrated approach, and how does it contribute to effectively meeting the needs of technical high school education at IFPA? Furthermore, how do IFPA teachers and students perceive the feasibility and effectiveness of the didactic sequences developed, and what are their experiences, including strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for improvement? This overarching inquiry and these specific questions guide our proposal of an integrated-skills approach that merges technical content with the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), aiming for a holistic learning experience that prepares students for both everyday communication and academic/professional success.

A significant research gap exists in the development of instructional materials that effectively integrate general English skills with specific technical content, especially within Integrated High School programs at Federal Institutes. While technical content can be shared across diverse fields, existing materials often fall short in meeting program constraints and aims. This study intends to address this gap by designing context-specific materials that align with Tomlinson's (2011) view of teachers as material developers. The research will map current local resources, synthesize literature on ESP and materials development, and analyze current material limitations.

The research will involve a situational analysis, design and construction of the approach, and evaluation and reflection with the participants to generate a theoretically grounded and empirically tested proposal.

Literature review

This section presents key concepts and principles relevant to the teaching of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in Brazilian high schools, especially within the Federal Institutes, and positions the proposed theme-based integrated approach within this theoretical landscape.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), The “New” High School and The BNCC

The National Common Curricular Core (BNCC) emphasizes English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), prioritizing intelligibility and individual expression over native-like ideals. This is particularly relevant in technical high schools, preparing students for globalized workplaces (Figueiredo; Siqueira, 2021). Law 13.415/2017 mandates English, but this often leads to practical constraints and curriculum shifts, necessitating efficient pedagogical approaches (Procópio; Rezende, 2021). An ELF-oriented approach offers a democratic, inclusive response within these constraints, redefining language ownership from native speakers to its diverse users (Widdowson, 1994). While ELF aims to expand linguistic and cultural repertoires through theme-based instruction, its implications for assessment and potential challenges in simplifying the core sound system are acknowledged (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Seidlhofer, 2001).

The Integrated High School in the Federal Institutes

Law nº 11.892/2008 established the Federal Network of Professional, Scientific, and Technological Education in Brazil, including the Federal Institutes like IFPA. These institutions offer integrated high school programs that combine academic and professional training, focusing on developing both professional competencies and critical human formation (Frigotto, Ciavatta; Ramos, 2005; Saviani, 2019). The pedagogical project of Integrated Education seeks to overcome the traditional dualism between “manual” and “intellectual” labor. Within this framework, English teaching is crucial not just for employability but for students’ broader political, cultural, and social formation as citizens, aligning with the omnilateral education philosophy.

Theme-Based Approach Integrated with the Four Language Skills

Effective language instruction balances content and methodology (Brown, 2001). Theme-based teaching organizes language instruction around relevant topics, integrating language skills and content holistically. While Brown (2001) provides a foundation, contemporary frameworks like Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) further emphasize subject matter learning with second language acquisition (Brinton; Snow; Wesche, 2017; Coyle; Hood; Marsh, 2010). This approach bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, particularly beneficial in resource-limited contexts like Brazilian public high schools.

The proposed “theme-based integrated” approach broadens the principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), retaining disciplinary relevance while explicitly incorporating integrated-skills pedagogy. It aligns with the humanistic dimensions of the Federal Institutes’ mission of integrated human formation. A “theme” is defined as an interdisciplinary topic, combining technical/disciplinary subjects with broader socio-technical issues (e.g., “Renewable Energy” and “Sustainability”), fostering critical thinking and civic engagement. This framework supports the development of multifaceted communicative competence in authentic and relevant contexts.

Material Development in Theme-Based Language Instruction: The Critical Role of Needs Analysis

Effective material development in theme-based learning is predicated on a systematic understanding of learners' needs (Wang, 2024). Needs analysis (NA) is crucial for selecting and contextualizing materials, enhancing applicability and motivation (Long, 2005). In Federal Institutes, traditional "off-the-shelf" materials often fail to meet the diverse academic, professional, and social needs of students. NA in this context identifies tripartite needs—academic, professional, and developmental—which can sometimes pull in different directions, requiring careful interpretation.

NA informs thematic content, genres, and language functions pertinent to learners (Hyland, 2013). This iterative process involves initial assessments, piloting, and continuous refinement based on feedback (Brown, 1995; Nunan, 1999). It also considers learners' preferences for engaging with content (Wang, 2024). Aligning materials with needs identified through NA promotes motivation and retention (Ellis, 2003; Swan, 2005), using frameworks like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to translate insights into pedagogical materials. This ensures an engaging and efficient learning process, bridging classroom language use with real-world communication.

Methodology

This study employs an Educational Design Research (EDR) methodology (McKenney; Reeves, 2012) to develop and evaluate a theme-based integrated approach to English language teaching within the technical high school context at IFPA. The research will proceed through iterative cycles: Diagnosis/Needs Analysis, Collaborative Design, Implementation and Evaluation, and Refinement.

Setting, Overview, and Purpose

The study will be strategically conducted at two selected IFPA campuses, allowing for intensive engagement and data collection. The primary objective is to improve English language instruction by integrating language learning with technical content and fostering critical thinking, aligning with IFPA's mission of integrated human formation.

Participants

A convenience sampling method (Dörnyei, 2007) will be used, in different phases. In the Diagnosis/Needs Analysis phase, approximately 100 English teachers from 18 IFPA campuses (survey) and 4-6 course coordinators will be invited to participate. Then, the Collaborative Design phase will have a core team of 4-6 English teachers (2-3 from each selected campus). In the next phase, Pilot/Implementation & Evaluation, the same 4-6 teachers will implement the didactic sequence, and approximately 40-60 students (10-15 per participating teacher) will complete surveys.

Instruments and Data Collection procedures

Data collection will be intricately linked to the EDR cycles, spanning an 8-10 month period. All instruments employed will strictly adhere to Dörnyei's (2007) recommendations for validity and reliability, ensuring the robustness of the findings. During Phase 1, the "Diagnosis/Needs Analysis" (Months 1-2), data will be gathered primarily through a comprehensive survey questionnaire administered to English teachers across all 18 campuses. This will investigate their current teaching materials, adaptation strategies, and the integration

of technical content within their curricula. Simultaneously, a document analysis protocol will be utilized for a qualitative content analysis of relevant federal (e.g., Lei nº 13.415/2017, BNCC) and institutional documents (e.g., course syllabi) to effectively map existing policies and practices related to English language teaching. This phase will also involve a thorough review of existing English language teaching materials to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and any pertinent gaps.

Phase 2, the “Collaborative Design” (Months 3-4), will involve a series of structured meetings focused on developing a new didactic sequence. This will commence with an initial broad consultation, a hybrid meeting engaging teachers from all 18 campuses, designed to gather diverse perspectives and inform the foundational framework. Following this, 4-6 subsequent core teacher design team meetings will collaboratively craft one didactic sequence, estimated to cover approximately 20 credit hours for one bimester. This co-design process will strategically build upon existing prototypes and integrate the crucial findings from the preceding needs analysis. Detailed field notes will be consistently maintained to document the entire collaborative design journey.

The subsequent Phase 3, “Implementation and Evaluation” (Months 5-8), will involve piloting the co-designed sequence. The 4-6 participating teachers will implement this sequence in their respective classes. To monitor and understand the practical application, teachers will regularly record their observations, student engagement, challenges encountered, and personal reflections in Teachers’ Implementation Journals. Post-implementation, a Teachers’ Appraisal Questionnaire will be administered, assessing the feasibility and effectiveness of the sequence through both Likert scales and open-ended questions. Furthermore, a Coordinators’ Appraisal Questionnaire will gather perceptions from coordinators regarding the alignment of the didactic sequence with the technical curriculum. To capture the student perspective, a Students’ Appraisal Questionnaire will be used to collect their perceptions on feasibility and effectiveness, also employing Likert scales and open-ended questions. Importantly, parental consent and student assent will be obtained for all minor participants before data collection commences.

Finally, Phase 4, “Refinement” (Months 9-10), will involve a comprehensive synthesis and interpretation of all collected data. The insights gained will then be discussed in a final design team meeting, where the team will collaboratively refine the didactic sequence based on the thorough evaluation results and collective understanding.

Data Analysis

A comprehensive data analysis approach, integrating both qualitative and descriptive quantitative methods, will be employed throughout the study, with a strong emphasis on triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings. Thematic analysis will be meticulously applied to qualitative data sources such as teacher implementation journals, field notes from design team meetings, and the open-ended responses from all questionnaires. This will allow for the identification of recurring patterns, emergent themes, diverse experiences, and key challenges encountered throughout the EDR cycles (Dörnyei, 2007). Concurrently, a focused content analysis will be conducted on federal and institutional documents, delving into their underlying meanings, pedagogical orientations, and implications for English language teaching policies and practices. For the quantitative data, specifically the Likert-scale items gathered from both teacher and student appraisal questionnaires, descriptive statistics (including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) will be used to summarize perceptions of feasibility and effectiveness.

Crucially, triangulation will be systematically applied by cross-referencing findings from these diverse qualitative and quantitative data sets. This multi-faceted approach will provide a comprehensive and robust understanding of the didactic sequence's development, implementation, and impact. Finally, the refined instructional material resulting from the EDR process will undergo expert validation by external specialists to ensure its quality and pedagogical soundness.

Ethical Procedures

This study will adhere rigorously to the ethical guidelines stipulated by the National Research Ethics Committee (CONEP) and Brazilian Resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016. Prior to any data collection, ethical approval will be sought and obtained from both the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) and the Federal Institute of Pará (IFPA) Ethics Committees. Informed consent will be procured from all adult participants, while for minor participants, informed parental consent (Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido – TCLE) and student assent (Termo de Assentimento Livre e Esclarecido – TALE) will be secured. Throughout the research, paramount importance will be placed on ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity. Voluntary participation will be strictly upheld, allowing individuals to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Robust measures for data security will be implemented to protect all collected information, and continuous efforts will be made to minimize any potential risks to participants. The entire research process will be guided by principles of transparency, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing ethical reflection.

Prospective findings / Discussion

While the full empirical phases of this Educational Design Research (EDR) project have not yet commenced, the initial conceptual and preparatory work has already yielded significant preliminary insights and concrete outcomes. Based on a thorough review of the literature, and in anticipation of the needs analysis, prototypes for four distinct didactic sequences have been initially designed. These prototypes serve as foundational conceptual models, reflecting an early integration of the theme-based approach with integrated language skills, tailored for the technical high school context at IFPA. It is anticipated that the formal Diagnosis/Needs Analysis (Phase 1) will either validate the core tenets underpinning these initial prototypes or, more likely, provide critical data that will necessitate their iterative refinement and adaptation. The findings from the teacher surveys, document analyses, and material reviews are expected to illuminate current pedagogical gaps and highlight specific areas where the theme-based, integrated approach can offer the most impactful solutions. The subsequent Collaborative Design (Phase 2) with the core teacher team will then leverage these prototypes, along with the needs analysis findings, to co-create the final didactic sequence for implementation.

The overarching aim is for this EDR project to demonstrate that a locally developed, theme-based integrated approach can indeed respond effectively to the complex curricular, institutional, and learner needs inherent in technical high school education at IFPA. We anticipate that teachers and students will perceive the developed didactic sequences as highly feasible and effective, given their contextual relevance and the collaborative design process. Specific findings are expected to reveal how this approach fosters not only enhanced English language proficiency across all four skills but also deeper engagement with technical content, critical thinking, and the broader goals of integrated human formation. We foresee that the iterative refinement process, driven by both qualitative and quantitative data, will lead to a theoretically grounded and empirically tested educational intervention that can serve as a model for similar institutions striving to reconcile language education with specialized vocational

training. The ultimate contribution is expected to be a validated framework for materials development and pedagogical practice that addresses the unique intersection of English as a Lingua Franca, technical education, and the Brazilian public high school context.

Conclusion

This Educational Design Research project outlines a robust and methodologically sound framework for developing and evaluating a theme-based integrated approach to English language teaching within the technical high school context at IFPA. By systematically addressing the identified research gaps and leveraging an ELF-oriented, integrated-skills pedagogy rooted in a thorough needs analysis, this study aims to create contextually relevant and effective instructional materials. The project's iterative EDR cycles, from diagnosis and collaborative design to implementation, are meticulously structured. These cycles, combined with a comprehensive data analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data and stringent ethical procedures, are designed to ensure the development of a theoretically grounded and empirically tested proposal. This proposal is anticipated to significantly support both enhanced English language proficiency and the holistic human formation of students. Ultimately, this work represents a significant step toward optimizing English language education in Brazilian Federal Institutes, promising to contribute valuable pedagogical insights that resonate beyond IFPA and inform similar educational contexts globally.

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