

Campers' Views on the Effects of English Immersion Camp Initiatives for Aural/Oral Skills Development of Pre- and In-Service EFL Teachers

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of three English language immersion camps on the participants. Capitalizing on Participatory Action Research, and informed by Experiential Learning and Social Constructivism, these camps constitute an attempt by a Brazilian Amazonian university to mitigate the lack of fluency and proficiency in English among EFL initial teacher education students and state school teachers of English in the region. Data gathered through interviews and participant observation notes were analyzed following a thematic analysis approach. Results suggest expansion of the participants' English vocabulary and knowledge of the American culture, and development of listening and speaking skills. Additionally, a comparison of discourse themes emerging from this study with those from other similar investigations indicates high resonance between them, suggesting that these programs may be a reliable alternative mode of instruction for additional language education, and reinforcing the theory that massive target language comprehensible input and output generate language learning.

Keywords: English Immersion Camp Program, pre- and in-service teachers, government-funded schools, aural/oral skills development, motivation.

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1. Introduction

It is well-documented in the literature that becoming a teacher well-equipped to cope with the challenges of the classroom implies acquiring a variety of skills most of which are not directly related to the contents one is required to teach. This, however, cannot be taken as a permission to downplay the need to master content when studying for a teaching qualification. Ultimately, all the skills teachers may have acquired in their preparation either at university or at any other educational institution will not be of much use in the classroom if they fail to develop expertise in the subject matter they choose to teach. It is highly unprofessional, unethical and unfair (as far as the students are concerned) to enter a classroom and call oneself a teacher of, say, mathematics, if the knowledge of this subject that one has is not enough to help the students further their knowledge of it. By extension, this also applies to the area of foreign language teaching, which is somehow problematic in the state sector in Brazil (Cavalcanti, Mudo, Oliveira, Silva, & Evangelista, 2020).

In this country, one of the various hurdles in this area, especially in government-funded schools, is teachers' lack of fluency and proficiency² in the target language. In the teaching of English, for instance, even after being acknowledged a long time ago by mainstream Brazilian scholars, this deficiency still affects EFL³ classrooms throughout the country (Almeida Filho, 1993; Cox & Assis-Peterson, 2008; Leffa, 2011).

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² While *fluency* is being used in this paper to refer to the speed and smoothness with which learners of an additional language use it either in speaking, listening (language processing), reading or writing, *proficiency* refers to their overall ability to use the target language accurately and adequately.

³ English as a Foreign Language.

The *fuel* that keeps this *big wheel* running seems to be the inability of many Brazilian universities to deal with this problem in their EFL initial teacher education (EFLITE) programs (Santos & Oliveira, 2009). It seems thus that Brazilian universities need to rethink their EFL initial and continuing teacher education strategies so that pre- and in-service teachers can be better equipped to exploit content knowledge effectively in the classroom. To this end, a university in western Pará (henceforth Amazonian University) is already experimenting with alternative approaches, particularly those capitalizing on Experiential Learning (Dewey, 1938, 2007; Keeton & Tate, 1978; Kolb, 2015) and Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Beck & Kosnik, 2006). One such is the engagement of EFLITE students and state school EFL teachers in English language immersion camps (ELICs) aiming particularly to maximize opportunities for the enhancement of interpersonal communication skills in English, cultural education, cultural awareness and motivation to study the language.

2. Background to the study and research questions

The rationale behind the immersion camps promoted by the Amazonian University is twofold. On the one hand, there is the problem of considerable lack of understanding and speaking skills in English, especially but not exclusively, among first-year students attending the university's EFL initial teacher education program. The pervasiveness of this problem is such that more often than not some of those nearing graduation – which means a license to teach at upper primary and secondary school levels in Brazil⁴ – are found equally still struggling to understand and speak the language they will be teaching in government-funded schools not long after their graduation day. On the other hand, there is another problem that seems to feed into this one, inasmuch as the English proficiency levels of the majority of the EFL teachers working in state schools in western Pará appear to range roughly from low to very low. This is an inference based on the English proficiency levels of the EFL teachers from state schools who registered for three editions of a continuing professional development (CPD) course on EFL learning and teaching strategies offered by the Amazonian University.

In the first edition of the CPD course, forty-seven EFL teachers working in government-funded school enrolled for it. The results of a placement test administered to the candidates as part of the enrolment process indicated that forty of them were at A1 level of proficiency in English⁵ and seven were at B2 level when they started taking the course. In the following edition, forty-nine teachers started the course, eighteen of whom were at A1 level, another eighteen at A2 level, eight were at B1 and five were at B2 level. In the third edition, the number of teachers taking the course dropped to twenty-one. Eleven of them began the course at A1 level, nine at A2 and one at B1. It is worth noting that most of these teachers were at A1 level of English proficiency when they started taking the CPD course, which is hardly surprising if the results of English proficiency tests administered in Brazil by Education First are indeed representative of the level of English proficiency in this country (Education First, 2019).

In 2018, Education First administered English proficiency tests to 2.3 million adults from 100 countries. With a score in the low-proficiency band (50.10), Brazil ranked 59th from the total of countries surveyed, and 12th in Latin America, behind countries like Honduras and Bolivia, which have a GDP per capita equivalent to less than half of that of Brazil (International Monetary Fund, 2019). When the scores of the test takers in Brazil are compared by state, the English proficiency level in Pará falls in the very-low band (46.00). This seems to corroborate the results of the placement tests administered to candidates for the three editions of the CPD course, and thus the inference about the level of English proficiency of state school EFL teachers in western Pará.

The awareness of the *snowball effect* caused by having non-proficient teachers attempting to teach English in state schools was decisive for starting the immersion camp program at the Amazonian University. Here is how this destructive snowball effect works in some parts of Brazil: teachers who cannot speak English are in the EFL classroom teaching *everything* but English; consequently, their students are, too, learning *everything* but the target language that they should be learning. To make things worse, when these students finish secondary school, some of them enroll in an EFLITE program. Needless to say, except for those whose parents can afford to pay for English lessons in private language schools, their level of proficiency in this language is still exceptionally low at that stage. The context of western Pará is no exception to this bleak scenario that can become even worse if the university does not help these students to advance to at least a B2 level of English proficiency: They will obtain their teaching qualification and will go back to state schools; this time, as teachers of English who, like their former EFL schoolteachers, will not be proficient enough to help their students learn the target language.

⁴ In Brazil, one can apply for a teaching position in government-funded schools upon finishing a 3,200-hour initial teacher education program, which is offered at undergraduate level by universities across the country (Brasil, 2020).

⁵ The placement tests were based on the criteria of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

That is the pernicious snowball effect, or the big wheel, if you like, that ought to be stopped if one takes English language public education seriously in this country.

One cannot stress enough the fact that the majority of the Brazilian parents cannot afford to send their children to a private language school, which means that they depend almost entirely on government-funded schools to help their children learn English. This does not exclude the possibility that some students will never learn English in state schools even if they have highly proficient EFL teachers to support them because the lack of an appropriate proficiency level on the part of the teacher is just *one* of many issues that can be an obstacle to learning English in those environments. The numerous factors that can prevent upper primary and secondary school students from achieving high levels of English proficiency in state schools in Brazil may be better represented with another metaphor, namely the *unwanted-millennialtree*, whose *roots* will only be glimpsed at here for the sake of economy (Figure 1).

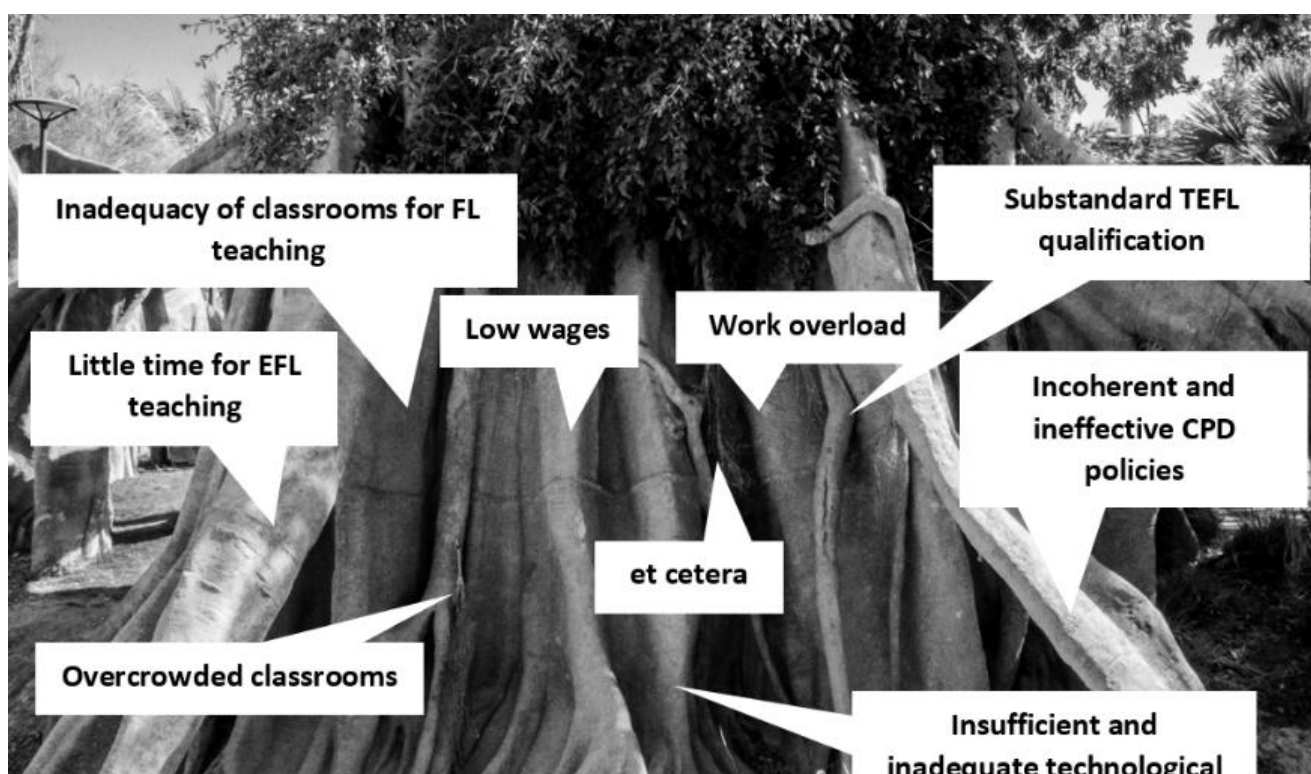


Figure 1. Obstacles to Achieving a High Level of English Proficiency in State Schools⁶

There are so many deep-rooted problems in the educational system of western Pará that the solution to them must emerge from collaborative work involving all possible stakeholders. Accordingly, teachers, head teachers, pedagogic advisers, the students themselves, their parents, local and national policy makers, politicians, and teachers' unions, all must be involved in the process of making room for real English learning at state schools. Knowing that synergic effort is required from all stakeholders to *unroot* this unwanted millennial tree, a professor from the Amazonian University challenged his colleagues to plan and implement the English language immersion camp program for EFLITE students and for teachers of English working in state schools in western Pará. Basically, through these camps, the Amazonian University wants to: (i) strengthen partnership with state schools in the region; (ii) foster the use and development of the participants' creativity; (iii) help participants to be familiarized and have a dialogue with Anglophone cultures aiming at cultural awareness; (iv) incentivize social networking and English learning; and particularly (v) foster the development of participants' listening and speaking skills in the target language.

The study reported here focus on the assessment of objectives (iii) to (v) considering the discourse often found in the literature that short-term language immersion programs also play a significant role in additional language education (Supriyono, Saputra, & Dewi, 2020).

⁶ This photograph is a contribution of White@leakingh to Unsplash – photo to everyone on February 21, 2020. Retrieved from <https://unsplash.com/photos/I0CJEeguKXc>

Thus, two research questions were posed: a central question – (a) How did the three editions of the ELICs program affect the schoolteachers and undergraduate students who joined them regarding interpersonal communicative skills development, cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and motivation to study the target language? – and a sub-question – (b) How does the answer to the central question compare to those resulting from similar studies found in online publications? The Amazonian University has conducted five immersion camps so far. But, for the sake of economy, only the first three of them will be discussed in this paper.

3. Experiential Learning and Social Constructivism

John Dewey, an American philosopher and educational reformer, who lived between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of last century, saw the connection between experience and education as *sine qua non* in any educational arena (Dewey, 1938, 2007). And, standing on his shoulders, Kolb (2015) also underscores the important role of experience in the educative process. He defines learning as a process of knowledge creation that is materialized as a result of the transformation of experience. But before him, Keeton and Tate (1978) had already drawn attention to the first-hand nature of experiential learning. According to this theory, the direct engagement with the object of study and the possibility of change constitute two important factors in the learning process.

But Dewey (1938) calls our attention to a fundamental challenge for those who want to capitalize on experience as a pedagogic tool. The challenge is to have the ability to bring to the learning environment those experiences that can be at the basis of new experiences in productive and imaginative ways. So, for instance, when teaching children geometry, it seems it is to their advantage if the teacher introduces the notion of shape by helping them notice that the things they have at home, the things they play with and the things in their own classroom, all have shapes. After the students understand the notion of shape, they can then embark on new experiences involving geometric patterns ‘fruitfully and creatively’, to put it in Dewey’s (1938, p. 28) terms.

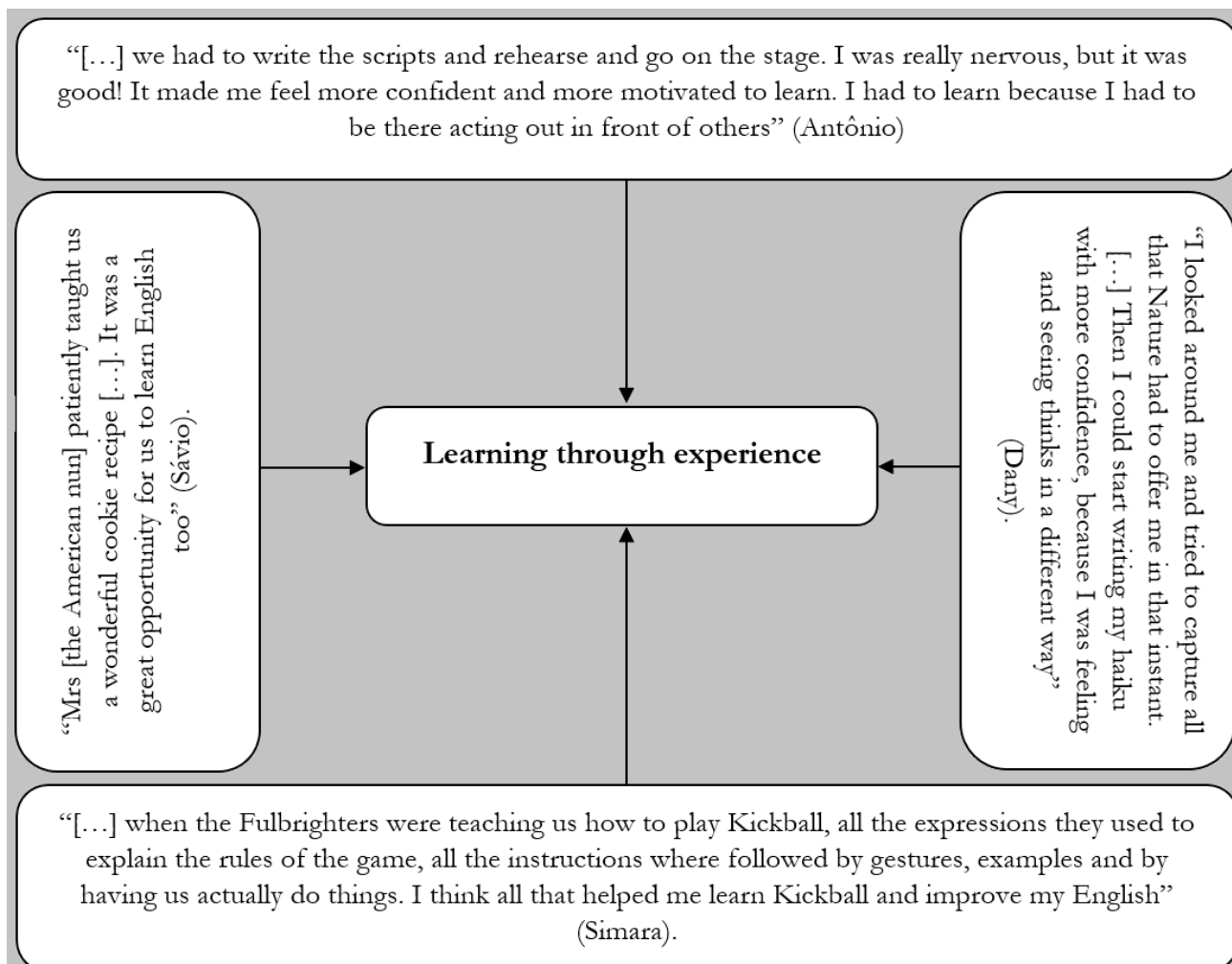


Figure 2. Campers’ Attitudes toward the ELICs Supporting Experiential Learning

Social Constructivism, on the other hand, helps us understand learning as a construction of knowledge that results from the individual’s interaction with physical and social contexts. One does not need to side with the extreme social constructivist views that *all* ‘reality is socially constructed’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 13) to accept educative processes as constructions, as Dewey (2007, p. 33) points out: ‘[...] education is not an affair of “telling” and being told, but an active and constructive process’. This assertion suggests an intrinsic connection between Experiential Learning and Social Constructivism. The evidence of this link is further stressed by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and social constructivist who lived in the time span of John Dewey’s life. Vygotsky (1978) argues that the fine-tuning between speech and practical activity is responsible for the highest peaks of intellectual development. But, to maximize the learning process, a social constructivist approach to education resorts to different types of experiences emerging from life in society, inasmuch as attitudes, emotions, values and actions also play a pivotal role in the construction of knowledge (Beck & Kosnik (2006). This implies that both the things *without* and those *within* the individual can be instrumental in the knowledge construction enterprise.

The possibility of harnessing the diversity of human experience to the process of knowledge construction reiterates the organic relationship between Experiential Learning and Social Constructivism, and this makes these theoretical perspectives sit comfortably within the ELICs program and the study described in this paper. One example of this is the discourses of some of the ELICs participants (henceforth campers) that are part of the data gathered through interviews for the study⁷ reported in this paper. Figure 2, for instance, shows campers’ belief in the idea that through experience the process of learning is facilitated, which is in line with the experiential learning perspective. Likewise, the selection of comments made by campers shown in Figure 3 is supportive of the view that a social constructivism approach to education can yield positive results in terms of motivation and learning. Admittedly, these comments, some of which underscoring the overwhelming power of massive exposure to English, also lend credence to the existence of a symbiotic relationship between Experiential Learning and Social Constructivism, which implies that ultimately any successful social interaction will demand an effective interplay of the interlocutors’ accumulated experience; and that the interactive process itself will generate learning.

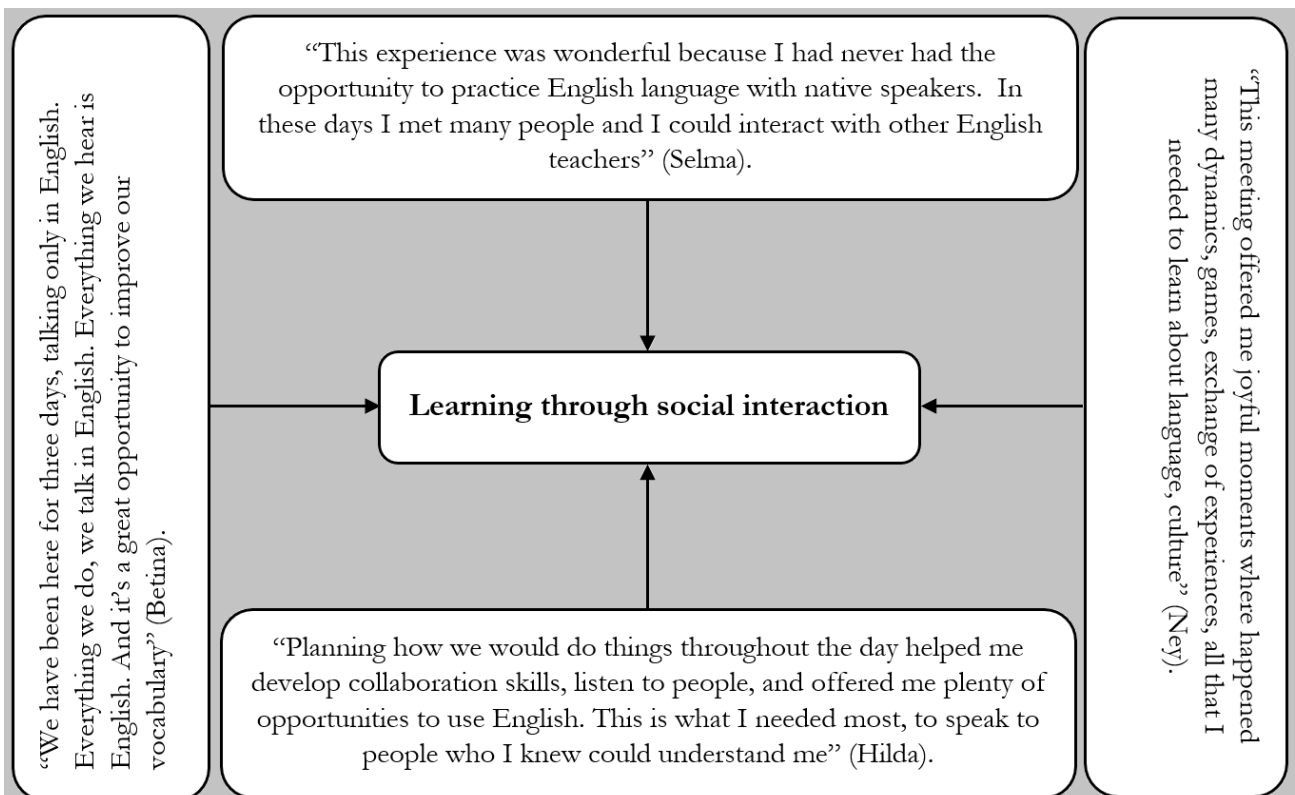


Figure 3. Campers’ Attitudes toward the ELICs Supporting Social Constructivism⁸

⁷ Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of ELICs stakeholders (e.g. students, schoolteachers, professors and members of the events’ organizing team) whose words are quoted in this paper.

⁸ A part of the comments at the top and the bottom of Figure 2 seems to suggest a high level of confidence in the native speaker as a more trustworthy source when it comes to foreign language learning. Despite resonating with language learners from different parts of the world, this view has been criticized by several professionals in the area of English Language

4. Discourse themes supporting language immersion camp programs

The notion that language immersion programs are catalysts of improvement in different dimensions of language education is not a novelty. Since the inauguration of the first program to meet the demand for more adequate French as a second language teaching methods existing among the Canadian Anglophone community in the 1960s (Genesee, 1985), this mode of instruction has been capitalized on by educational institutions in different parts of the world as a means to help students become proficient speakers of additional languages, develop cultural awareness and succeed academically (Fortune & Tedick, 2003). Benefits such as these have been supported by several studies on language immersion programs, including those implemented at campsites in countries where the target language is not the national language.

Following the six phases of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a systematic analysis of 32 works published less than two decades ago and available online has revealed several discourse themes expressing beneficial effects of language immersion camp programs in contexts where the mother tongue of the nationals differs from the one under study. For the sake of economy, however, only the eight most recurring themes are presented here. One such is the idea that these programs can help lower language anxiety⁹ (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Trottier, 2006; Han & Lee, 2008; Feuer, 2009; Seong, 2012; Ahn, 2016; Shiratori, 2017; Banwell & Sasaki, 2017; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Noguchi, 2019; Syahidah, Umasugi, & Buamona, 2019; Zakaria, Mohamad, & Idris, 2019). Arguably, the informal learning environment and the playfulness of the activities typical of immersion camps are conducive to significant decrease in language learning anxiety insofar as they are (or attempt to be), to put it in Schumann's (1975, p. 227) words, '[...] natural factors which will induce ego flexibility and lower inhibitions [...]'. All this appears to favor campers' positive attitude toward learning and using the target language for communication, which constitute another discourse theme emanating from the data, labelled here as motivation to study and communicate in the target language (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Han & Lee, 2008; Ismail & Tahir, 2011; Clementi, 2012; Seong, 2012; Shinohara, 2013; Asmara, Anwar, & Muhammad, 2016; You-Jin & Mun-Koo, 2016; Aswad, 2017; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Shiratori, 2017; Wheeler, 2017; Noguchi, 2019; Zakaria, Mohamad, & Idris, 2019; Ketamon, Sudinpreda, Watcharajinda, Phayap, & Chanchayanon, 2020).

Development of aural and oral skills in the target language is also a theme that often emerges in these publications (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Chang & Seong, 2010; Seong, 2012; Clementi, 2012; Chang & Seong, 2015; Dolosic, Brantmeier, Strube, & Hogrebe, 2016; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Wheeler, 2017; Tragant, Serrano, & Llanes, 2017; Manan, 2018; Mustakim & Ismail, 2018; Shin & Chun, 2018). Considering that exposition to comprehensible input and communicative use of the target language are essential conditions for language learning (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2015), the escalation of these conditions can potentially enhance listening comprehension and speaking fluency more expeditiously (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004). In one of the studies analyzed, involving 24 teenagers attending a French as a second language summer camp, and using a storytelling task (Llanes & Muñoz, 2009), the researchers have identified significant increase of longest fluent run rate and words spoken per minute (an increase of 29.9 and 22.6 words on average respectively) in the oral production of all the participants (Dolosic et al., 2016).

Unsurprisingly, other discourse themes recurrently found in the data are broadening of cultural knowledge and cultural awareness (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Feuer, 2009; Rugasken & Harris, 2009; Pieski, 2011; Clementi, 2012; Dahl, Sethre-Hofstad, & Salomon, 2013; Shinohara, 2013; Chang & Seong, 2015; Richardson & Kelderhouse, 2016; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Shiratori, 2017), i.e. the ability to perceive differences and similarities between other people's and one's own culture¹⁰ through a process that involves questioning and searching for answers (Bakhtin, 1986).

The plausibility of these themes appears to rest on the indissociability between language and culture since the former constitutes an intrinsic dimension of the latter (Margolis, 2009; Mickan, 2013; Smith, 2013). Apparently,

Teaching (Medgyes, 2017; Canagarajah, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Holliday, 2005; Bayyurt & Akcan, 2015). Oda (2017, p. 99), for instance, discusses an English language program implemented by a Japanese university as an attempt '[...] to overcome the negative influence of "native-speakerism"'. The author also shares his views on how such belief gains momentum amongst the "general public" – to put it in his words. As important as it is, however, further discussion on this topic would constitute a greater digression from the purpose of this paper. It may yet be the object of another study based on this research corpora though.

⁹ Language anxiety is used in this paper in the sense proposed by Piechurska-Kuciel (2011, p. 201): '[...] the unique feelings of tension and apprehension experienced in the [second language acquisition] process in the classroom context, arising from the necessity to learn and use a [foreign language] that has not been fully mastered'.

¹⁰ The notion of culture adopted in this paper is broad. As suggested by Hitotuzi (2016, p. 2695), it is '[...] an umbrella term that encompasses all man-created things, be them tangible, as a house, or intangible, as a concept'.

the translation of this relationship into cultural awareness can be achieved even with a small number of campers during a short period of time as is demonstrated by Pieski (2011) in an assessment of the process of intercultural sensitivity development of six teaching assistants in a four-week English language immersion camp in Poland. Using an assessment measure known as Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), she identified a slight increase in the level of intercultural sensitivity of the participants.

Yet other recurring themes include vocabulary development (Asmara, Anwar, & Muhammad, 2016; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Tragant, Serrano, & Llanes, 2017; Manan, 2018; Shin & Chun, 2018; Syahidah, Umasugi, & Buamona, 2019), confidence in using the target language (Rugasken & Harris, 2009; Park, 2009; Chang & Seong, 2010; Ismail & Tahir, 2011; Clementi, 2012; Seong, 2012; Banwell & Sasaki, 2017; Shiratori, 2017; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Manan, 2018; Noguchi, 2019; Ketamon, et al., 2020) and broadening of social network (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Clementi, 2012; Richardson & Kelderhouse, 2016; Ahn, 2016; Aswad, 2017; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017). It appears that the necessity of verbal interaction created by the dynamics of living together and the informal ambience in the campsite favors frequent experimentation with the target language in several dimensions, including the lexical one. Additionally, as long as they develop a sense of belonging (Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, Newman, 2015), campers may interact with their peers with a certain degree of confidence, which may increase as more positive feedback on their sense of belonging is provided. It appears that this will happen faster or more consistently when there is clear demonstration of acceptance, and when they manage to make more friends within the group of campers. Having said that, beneath all the layers of attractiveness of language immersion camps, it is possible that integrative and intrinsic motivations constitute the driving force influencing participants' achievements in these types of program (Onmotivation and language learning, see Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016). This presents itself as an interesting topic for another study involving language immersion camps.

Summarizing, these are the eight most recurrent discourse themes identified through the systematic analysis of discourses expressing beneficial effects of language immersion camp programs in the selected publications: (a) *decrease in language anxiety*; (b) *motivation to study and communicate in the target language*; (c) *development of aural and oral skills in the target language*; (d) *broadening of cultural knowledge*; (e) *cultural awareness*; (f) *vocabulary development*; (g) *confidence in using the target language*; and (h) *broadening of social network*.

5. Methodology

5.1 Context, participants, instruments, and procedure

The three ELICs which are object of the study described in this paper, received financial support from the Brazilian Ministry of Education through two programs that incentivize continuing and initial teacher education across the country: *Novos Talentos* and *Pibid*,¹¹ respectively. The camps involved thirty EFLITE undergraduates, eleven in-service EFL teachers from government-funded schools, seven faculty members from the Amazonian University, thirteen Fulbright scholarship holders working as EFL teaching assistants at Brazilian universities in different parts of the country (twelve from the United States and one from Argentina) and five Brazilian, one Russian and three North American collaborators. Each one of the ELICs was held on a different property in the countryside and varied in length of time from four days in the first edition to five and three days in the second and third editions. Following McIntyre (2008), a participatory action research methodology was used to guide the ELICs program. As the investigation aimed primarily at understanding the effects of the program on the campers it was decided that data should be gathered through individual open-ended question interviews with twenty campers and four professors from the EFLITE program at the Amazonian University, a focus group interview with campers, and observation notes made by members of the organizing team for subsequent triangulation. Prior to each ELIC, the participants were required to sign a consent statement which included information about the use of their images and voices in research for educational purposes. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze and interpret the individual and focus group interviews with campers (eleven men and nine women), the interviews with the professors (one man and three women) and the observations notes. From the analysis, emerged some discourse themes, which were subsequently compared with those previously identified through the systematic analysis of 32 publications on short-term domestic language immersion camps.

5.2 The ELICs activities

¹¹ Both *Novos Talentos* and *Pibid* (the Institutional Grant Program for Teaching Initiation) are administered by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), a foundation within the Brazilian Ministry of Education concerned with the quality of research and education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the country.

In terms of the strategies for the planning and implementation of the ELICs activities, there was a substantial change from the first two (Table 1) to the last edition (Table 2). In the former, the activities were planned and led by the groups of Fulbright teaching assistants, and in these two camps almost all the activities were done outdoors. In the latter, the organizers decided that all the main activities should be carried out indoors and in the form of workshops and talks. This measure was an attempt to prevent the level of camper distraction from the main activities that the organizers had witnessed in the two previous editions of the program.

Table 1. Main Activities in the First Two ELICs

Activity	Description
A version of The Mall Game	Clockwise, people telling their names and the name of an animal after having repeated the previous people's names plus the names of the animals associated with them
American culture	Learning about American sports, folk dances and cuisine (making banana nut bread)
Artwork on the beach	Campers creating works of art on the beach
Blind Man's Bluff	Playing the Blind Man's Bluff in a swimming pool
Bonfire storytelling	Campers sitting beside a bonfire and listening to other campers tell them spooky stories
Complete the sentence	Campers starting a sentence and other campers being challenged to complete it
Disco	Dancing
Drama time	Designing and acting out short skits
Forehead detective	Campers asking questions to other campers to find out the names on a slip of paper stuck to their foreheads
Karaoke	Singing contest
Lit hour	Haiku writing based on campers' perceptions of things around the property Poem reading
Sport	Football, volleyball, kickball, frisbee, swimming, water polo
Treasure hunt	Finding hidden things around the property by following some clues

It is important to point out that in all three editions of the ELICs program, participants were served five meals per day: breakfast at 7.00 a.m., snack at 9.00 a.m., lunch at noon, another snack at 3 p.m. and dinner at 7.30 p.m. Lights were out at 10:30 p.m. Many an interesting conversation about a variety of topics would occur during these meals and right after lights were out. Therefore, these occasions constituted important additional time of exposure to and practice of the target language.

Table 2. Main Activities in the Third ELIC

Activity	Description
Contests	Spelling Bee Karaoke singing
Games	Getting to know each other My secret mission Call my bluff
Interactive talks	Until all have arrived A brief history of Santarém Challenges in initial teacher education 'I speak English, but I am still me' – English language encounters in Alter do Chão, Brazil Improving English reading A direct approach to learning English

Sport	Volleyball
Video watching	Educational video
Workshops	Nonviolent communication Basics of English pronunciation How to enjoy learning English Classroom dynamics Japanese abacus in a nutshell

6. Discourses of campers and EFLITE professors

A conservative estimate indicates that the participants of the three editions of the ELICs had at least 180 hours of exposure to the English language interposed with ample opportunities to generate their own output. Considering that only 29 per cent of the total number of participants attended all three ELICs and that 40 per cent of them attended two editions, on average, then, those who attended only one of the events (31 per cent) had 60 hours of exposure to the target language. Because not all participants attended all three editions of the immersion program, the analysis of the data was carried out separately per event before the results of the study could be determined.

From the systematic analysis of the individual interviews and focus group interviews emerged some discourse themes that indicate positive effects of the ELICs on the campers in terms of aural-oral skills development in English, motivation to study the language and broadening of their knowledge about the American culture. Some of these effects are summarized in Figure 4 and exemplified in Figure 5 as the results of a self-assessment made by the interviewed campers on how much the ELICs helped them to improve their listening comprehension and speaking skills in English.

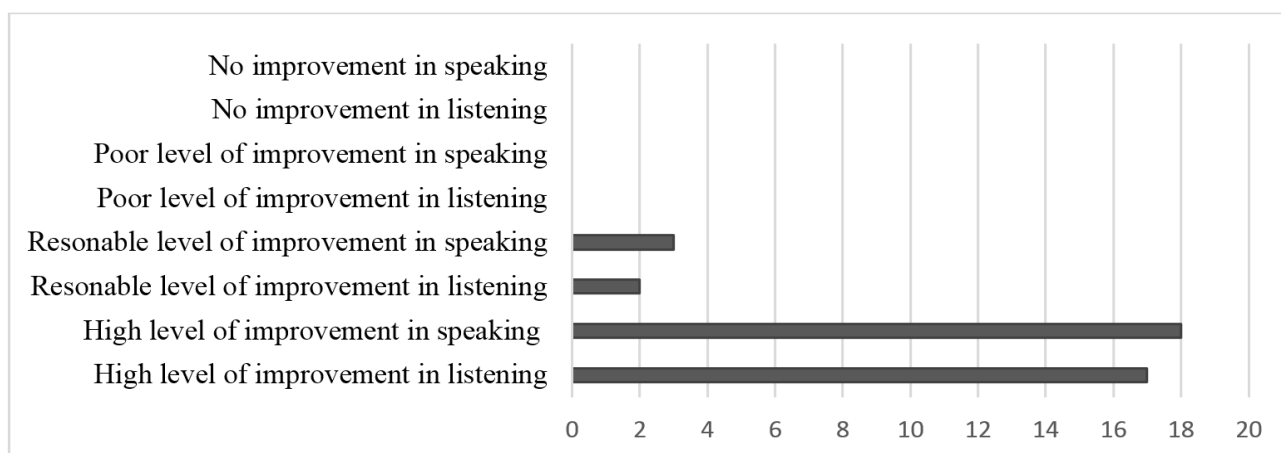


Figure 4. Self-assessment of ELICs Impact on Campers’ Listening Comprehension and Speaking Skills

Discourse theme	Excerpt from corpus
High level of improvement in oral performance	<p>“My English communication ability improved a lot, especially during stressful situations when L2 speakers may have difficulties keeping a consistent and correct grammar and sometimes word may escape from their minds, I've found that, when these things happened to me, I was able to respond much more effectively” (Carmen).</p> <p>“The effective use of the English language became easier during classes, especially in the oral presentations they needed to make” (Professor Alcântara).</p>
High level of improvement in listening comprehension	<p>“Right after the activities, I was motivated because other people could understand me, and I could understand them. This encouraged me to seek individual conversations with native speakers” (Ricardo).</p> <p>“At the very moment I left the camp, I could notice the change the immersion camp made in my communication. I could hear clearly what native speakers were saying” (Lúcio).</p>

Figure 5. Discourse Themes about the ELICs Impact on Campers’ Aural/Oral Skills

Because most of the campers in the sample made a highly positive self-evaluation of the contribution of the ELICs to their oral/aural skills in English, their performance was double-checked. While complementary data on the EFLITE undergraduates were obtained through observations made by their professors on their attitudes toward the target language in the classroom at the Amazonian University after the events, the observation notes made by members of the ELICs organizing team were used as an attempt to understand how the in-service EFL teachers coped with the communicative demands of the immersion camps. As shown in Figure 6, the discourse themes abstracted from the interviews with two¹² of their professors from the EFLITE program at the Amazonian University appear to lend credence to the campers' claims about the benefits of the ELICs to their listening comprehension and oral performance in English. The observations made by the professors indicate that, after each ELIC edition, the impact of the immersion on the students was felt immediately in the classroom across all subjects that were taught in English. Besides showing higher levels of comprehension of oral input, they appeared to be more motivated to use the language to communicate their ideas in the sessions and in other events and spaces at the university. Moreover, the professors also noticed some gains in terms of the students' knowledge of the American culture and expansion of their English lexical repertoire.

Discourse theme	Excerpt from corpus
Vocabulary & cultural knowledge expansion	<p>“In addition to the ease with which they started interacting with one another in English, I noticed how much they expanded their vocabulary and cultural knowledge” (Professor Alcântara).</p> <p>“The quality of the interactions was evident in their choice of words. You can only choose words in a face-to-face conversation if you have them in your mind. And some of them showed they had them to talk about different things, including elements of the US culture” (Professor Siqueira).</p>
Improvement in oral performance	<p>“The effective use of the English language became easier during classes, especially in the oral presentations they needed to make” (Professor Alcântara).</p> <p>“Maybe this is a kind of honeymoon effect, I don't know... maybe they are still in love with the immersion. But the truth is that they are indeed speaking more and with less hesitation. It seems they are getting rid of their fear of making mistakes” (Professor Siqueira).</p>
Motivation to use the target language	<p>“The experience was so intense that the students wanted to continue speaking in English all the time on their return to the classroom” (Professor Alcântara).</p> <p>“Some of the participants are scholarship holders, and they meet almost every day in PIBID's room. I see them there almost every day and they are using English to communicate with one another and the coordinators more often now. And I think this is because they are still in the rhythm of the immersion. Will it last? I have no idea” (Professor Siqueira).</p>
Improvement in listening comprehension	<p>“In addition, those students who participated in the experiment started to understand more documentaries in English that served as support for the debates in the classroom” (Professor Alcântara).</p> <p>“No doubt the immersions have helped them to understand what they hear in English. My lessons are almost always a 100% in English. They are a kind of 180-minute-per-week immersion program. So, they have helped the students to improve their listening comprehension skills too. But obviously the university's official English immersion program has played its part too” (Professor Siqueira).</p>

Figure 6. EFLITE Professors' Observations about ELICs After-Effects on their Students

¹² One of the four professors from the EFLITE program who were interviewed, Professor Pereira, argued that she would not comment on the immediate effects of the ELICs on her students who had joined these events because she had joined an edition of the program herself, and thus she felt she might offer a biased view of their performance in English in connection with the immersion camps. Another professor, Professor Sales, chose to focus her comments of the long-term effects of immersion camps on EFLITE undergraduate students (See Box 2 in this paper).

Figure 7 summarizes the EFLITE undergraduates' answers when they were asked why they thought that they were resorting to English more often in their interactions in the classroom and elsewhere after the immersion camps. In light of the themes that have emerged from this section of the interviews, a longitudinal study would possibly clarify how long the *sense of continuity*, the *easiness of speaking* and the *impregnation with the target language* would last, and their long-term effects on the campers' fluency and proficiency in English. All that can be offered at this time is a glimpse of what might emerge from interviews with former ELICs attendees that have become EFL schoolteachers.

Discourse theme	Excerpt from corpus
Sense of continuity	“All I know is that I feel like talking in English with my mates and you. It’s spontaneous, and it’s like I’m still there [at the campsite] playing, and running, and doing all those funny things” (Tiago).
Easiness of utterance of English words	“I’m not anxious anymore, and I’m not worried about the mistakes I make. I focus on what I want to say. I think that makes me relax. [...] I feel words come easier now, and that makes me comfortable and relaxed” (Luzenira). “It’s not so painful anymore. I’m starting to enjoy it. Yes, it’s easier now. I don’t feel I’m dragging a super heavy iron ball when I’m speaking English anymore. [...] Not perfect, but OK now” (Antônio).
Impregnation with the target language	“In a sense it was almost like brainwashing. After being exposed to and using English for several days for about 17 hours a day... I had never done this before... it was like I was wired. [...] Now my brain still thinks I’m in the immersion” (Breno).

Figure 7. EFLITE Undergraduates' Explanations on their Attitude toward English after the ELICs

Box 1 shows the perceptions of an EFL in-service teacher about two of the three editions of the ELICs program that she attended in her capacity as an EFLITE student. Expressing her desire to share with her students what she has learned, the teacher recognizes the value of the experience to improve her English skills and to broaden her knowledge of the culture of the native speakers who took part in the events. Incidentally, one can hardly miss in her choice of words a streak of nostalgia and extreme gratitude for having joined the program. Nevertheless, not all the views of the interviewees about the long-term effects of the ELICs on the campers' fluency and proficiency in English may be as positive as Mara's.

“To speak of the ‘English Immersion Camps’ for me is to remember very valuable moments of a lot of linguistic and cultural learning. Being literally immersed in the language contributes a lot to improve orality, learn new expressions and unfamiliar words, get to know a little bit about the experience of English speakers from Anglophone countries and also exchange experiences with people who, like me, are constantly learning the language. With each edition, everything was very new and different for me, I had never been so immersed in the English language as in that environment that was organized in such a way that we were completely stimulated to practice the language. The games, the meals, the moments of leisure, everything was in English. I tried to make the most of every moment during the camping days, but at times I felt insecure about my orality, I was always afraid of not being understood. However, now as an English teacher, I see how much I learned in those days, they were wonderful experiences that today I can share with my students. Everything I learned, whether it be related to the language or the culture of the native speakers who were with us, I keep as a treasure of great value” (Mara).

Box 1. Perceptions of an EFL School teacher on the Impacts of the ELICs Program

A glimpse of the other side of the spectrum is offered by a professor that is part of the EFLITE program of the Amazonian University (Box 2). Besides cautioning against accepting grandiose claims about positive impacts of short-term language immersion camp programs, these different perspectives underscore the need for a longitudinal study to investigate the long-term impacts of this type of programs on participants' communicative abilities in and attitudes toward the target language.

“[...] the undergraduates who already had a good level of English and who were always dedicated to their study, who were proactive and who always tried to use the English language as a means of communication in the classroom, continued with the same attitude. The others, despite being quite satisfied with the opportunity to participate in the immersion, did not show, in the long run, to have been influenced by the camp days, because their posture in classes, at the level of dedication to language learning, remained little or not changed at all. I believe that this is because immersions alone do not have the strength to cause major changes in the undergraduate students. There are only a few days of language immersion. In order to have broader and longer-lasting effects, teacher educators and undergraduates need to use the language more frequently during classes, during the course, not in a few subjects or in the classes of just one professor” (Professor Sales).

Box 2. Perceptions of an EFLITE Professor on the Long-term Impacts of the ELICs Program on EFLITE Undergraduates

Resuming the perceptions of the immediate effects of the ELICs on campers, it appears that they were also felt by the in-service teachers who joined the program. Figure 8 shows excerpts of comments made by some of the teachers, and three discourse themes that emerged: (1) social network broadening, (3) high and rapid level of English improvement and (3) confidence when speaking English.

Discourse theme	Excerpt from corpus
Social network broadening	<p>“[The immersion] was amazing. I would say that it was the best experience that I’ve had involving English language because I could... I could practice the language; I could make new friends. And the main thing for me was that I could improve my English ten times, you know. It was very... it was like a boost in my English. I could improve very fast because I was... like compelled, I was compelled to use the language all the time. I was compelled to think in English. And my first dream in English was in the immersion camp” (Zildo).</p> <p>“From that moment, I started to think more about traveling to another country and learn more English and sometimes when I talked with you and [Fulbrighter] I really thought that I was able to do it. [...] For real. It was my first real test because [...] I [had] to think in English in order to understand and interact with people. It was the hardest part, but it was worth it” (Selma).</p>
High and rapid level of English improvement	
Confidence when speaking English	<p>“[...] and regarding listening, I think the immersions have helped me a lot, mainly because the Americans talked to us, kept interacting with us all the time [...]. The games, the singing, the dramas... stories... all that helped me speak more... [...] Now, I feel I’m a lot more confident than before” (Breno).</p> <p>“It was a wonderful experience to me, because I had to force my brain to remember of words that I studied in the classroom. I confess it was a big challenge to me. In spite of that I realized how important it is to speak another language mainly when you intend to follow an academic career. I made friends there. [...] talked to other English teachers. [...] My English is better now, I think. Listening, speaking... much better. At least, I’m more confident when I use English now” (Gilma).</p>

Figure 8. School Teachers’ Self-assessment of the Impacts of the ELICs

All the campers who volunteered for interview were also asked to describe in a few words what the ELICs represented to them. From the twenty answers that were gathered, the prevailing discourse theme that emerged was a depiction of the ELICs as an anxiety-free space where they could experiment spontaneously with the target language and be immersed in it for a reasonably long period of time (Figure 9).

Discourse theme	Excerpt from corpus
<p>An anxiety-free space to practice the target language and be exposed to it over a considerable stretch of time</p>	<p>“It was an environment created by the professors and organizers full of activities developed by the volunteers that helped the participants to ‘unwrap’ themselves, as well as stop being shy and worrying about making mistakes. [...] it was [my] first [experience] which mixed native speakers with Brazilian speakers for more than 44 hours of practice, mainly speaking and listening. Believe me or not, although I had some good experience in English speaking practice before the event, there I could [...] communicate in English from the first hours in the morning till late at night” (Valdo).</p> <p>“They were events that provided me with a direct contact for many hours with a foreign language, since with each new activity of the day, my speaking would become much better; where I was able to use all communicative skills: speaking, listening, understanding, writing, body language all the time, a real dive into the detachment from my mother tongue in bucolic locations through casual interactions” (Nelson).</p> <p>“A place that was fundamental to my learning, simply because the activities we did there had the power to integrate all of the participants. From these activities the relationship between everyone began to flow. So, we were led to enjoy the English language in all its aspects for a period of time that most of us hadn’t experienced before” (Ricardo).</p> <p>“The Immersion Camp is certainly one of the few but important attempts to promote English communication for the students from the western side of Pará; [...] we were in an environment where we would hear only English and speak only in English, using authentic material and listening to real English-speaking people who managed everything really well. And we all managed to speak more freely and loosely because of the constant exposure” (Álvaro).</p>

Figure 9. An ELIC *in a nutshell* for many of the Campers

For a few campers, however, neither the integrating “power” of the activities as reported by Ricardo, nor the “bucolic locations” of the camps and the “casual interactions” as described by Nelson were enough to immediately undo possibly years of monitoring all sorts of target language mistakes and treating them as foes. This is clearly seen in an excerpt of Mara’s account of her experience as a participant of the ELICs program: “I tried to make the most of every moment during the camping days, but at times I felt insecure about my orality, I was always afraid of not being understood” (Box 1).

The observation notes made by members of the organizing team were also important for understanding how the three editions of the ELICs program impacted the campers. The discourse themes abstracted from them support the views of most interviewees mostly in terms of learning about the American culture, exploiting opportunities to practice the target language and their state of mind in doing so, as shown in Figure 10.

Finally, it is worth noting that all the excerpts from the observation notes and transcriptions of the interviews with campers shared in this paper constitute an endorsement to the organicity of the relationship between Experiential Learning and Social Constructivism, and to the value of these theoretical perspectives in the educative process. Notwithstanding the fact that the results presented here have emerged from a single and local study, and thus are only supportive of the positive effects of the three ELICs on the pre- and in-service EFL teachers who joined them, their contribution to expanding the frontiers of knowledge in the area of additional language learning seems plausible for, as it will be demonstrated in the following section, researchers around the world are still investigating the impacts of language immersion camp programs on the development of learners’ communicative competence and performance at different levels of language education. So, if, on the one hand, we have to “[...] learn to satisfy ourselves with only local sense making” when doing research, as suggested by Sfarid (2008, p. 44), on the other hand, for the “deeper understanding” they can provide (Creswell, 2015, p. 44), a multitude of local cases have the potential to help researchers make sense of phenomena in a global scale.

Discourse theme	Excerpt from corpus
Social networking	“Since they set foot on the campsite until they got off the bus when they went back to the city, they were eating, sleeping and breathing English. They were loud. And you could see they were having a great time, free from the pressure of the classroom, not afraid of making mistakes, making friends, learning about the American culture. I noticed that some of them would enjoy talking more with the Americans than with their peers. But others would talk just with anyone around them. [...] having to write haiku and short play scripts seems to be helping them develop cultural awareness and learn new words too. [...] [name of a student] started shy [...] I think she’s getting into the swing of things [...] she seems more confident(talkative?) now” (Lyn).
Anxiety-free practice of the target language	“In the immersion that took place at [campsite name], it was interesting to see how the participants, often shy at first, let themselves get involved and interact with their mates, meet new people and participate in the proposed activities using English. Each one within the limits of their capability, some with more and others with less resourcefulness, but relaxed and committed to “improve”, develop the ability to speak, listen, read and reflect when participating in the proposed activities” (Professor Pereira).
Commitment to developing language skills	
Broadening of cultural knowledge	“[...] I think just being here is awesome because everyone I’ve interacted with is speaking English. [...] I think everyone that’s participating is definitely learning. I think the good thing about having these activities is that you not only talk about English, but you also learn the culture of the United States. Certain sayings, and the way of life” (Brian).
Vocabulary and aural-oral skills improvement	“They developed activities which some of the participants were experiencing for the first time. And they practiced English as they went through the daily routine in the camp, not as they study it at school. Listening and speaking skills were the most practiced, and I could notice myself that as you use only the target language for communication, your brain becomes conditioned and that’s when the immersion phenomenon kicks in. [...] we were also immersed in the culture by participating in events such as Halloween and roasting marshmallows around the campfire in a conversation circle always using the target language casually” (Heitor).

Figure 10. Insights into Campers’ Attitudes toward the Target Language at the Campsites

7. Resonance with voices from other immersion programs

The study reported in this paper sought to answer a central and a sub-question, namely:

- (a) *How did the three editions of the ELICs program affect the schoolteachers and undergraduate students who joined them regarding interpersonal communicative skills development, cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and motivation to study the target language?*
- (b) *How does the answer to the central question compare to those resulting from similar studies found in online publications?*

The answer to the central question was obtained from the perceptions of the stakeholders involved, i.e. campers, members of the ELICs organizing team and professors from the Amazonian University that promoted the events. The systematic analysis of their perceptions has produced eighteen most frequent discourse themes expressing benefits from participating in the immersion camps. Due to certain commonalities among these initial themes, some of them were condensed, and the final number was reduced to seven discourse themes as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Synthesis of most Frequent Discourse Themes

Initial themes	Final themes
Motivation to use the target language Commitment to developing language skills	Motivation to study and use the target language
A sense of continuity	A sense of continuity
Impregnation with the target language	Impregnation with the target language
Anxiety-free space to practice and be exposed to the target language over a considerable stretch of time Anxiety-free practice of the target language	Anxiety-free practice of the target language
Cultural knowledge expansion Broadening of cultural knowledge	Broadening of cultural knowledge
Vocabulary expansion Improvement of oral performance Improvement of listening comprehension Easiness of utterance of English words High and rapid level of English improvement Confidence when speaking English Vocabulary improvement Aural-oral skills improvement	Vocabulary and aural-oral skills improvement
Broadening of social network Social networking	Broadening of social network

The answer to the sub-question was obtained by comparing the final discourse themes in Table 3 with the eight most recurrent ones obtained from the examination of 32 publications on short-term language immersion camp programs implemented in countries where the target language is not the national language. The discourses that have emerged from the analysis of the perceptions of stakeholders in the study described here resonate with those of both participants and researchers in the publications examined. This is better demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of Main Discourse Themes in Studies on Language Immersion Camp Programs

Themes in previous publications	Themes in current study
Motivation to study and communicate in the target language (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Han & Lee, 2008; Ismail & Tahir, 2011; Clementi, 2012; Seong, 2012; Shinohara, 2013; Asmara, Anwar, & Muhammad, 2016; You-Jin & Mun-Koo, 2016; Aswad, 2017; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Shiratori, 2017; Wheeler, 2017; Noguchi, 2019; Zakaria, Mohamad, & Idris, 2019; Ketamon, et al., 2020)	Motivation to study and use the target language
	A sense of continuity
	Impregnation with the target language
Decrease in language anxiety (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Trottier, 2006; Han & Lee, 2008; Feuer, 2009; Seong, 2012; Ahn, 2016; Banwell & Sasaki, 2017; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Shiratori,	Anxiety-free practice of the target language

2017; Noguchi, 2019; Syahidah, Umasugi, & Buamona, 2019; Zakaria, Mohamad, & Idris, 2019)	
Broadening of cultural knowledge (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Feuer, 2009; Rugasken & Harris, 2009; Pieski, 2011; Clementi, 2012; Shinohara, 2013; Dahl, Sethre-Hofstad, & Salomon, 2013; Chang & Seong, 2015; Richardson & Kelderhouse, 2016; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Shiratori, 2017)	Broadening of cultural knowledge
Cultural awareness (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Feuer, 2009; Rugasken & Harris, 2009; Pieski, 2011; Clementi, 2012; Shinohara, 2013; Dahl, Sethre-Hofstad, & Salomon, 2013; Chang & Seong, 2015; Richardson & Kelderhouse, 2016; Liu, Han, & Peng, 2017; Shiratori, 2017)	
Development of aural and oral skills in the target language (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Chang & Seong, 2010; Clementi, 2012; Seong, 2012; Chang & Seong, 2015; Dolosic et al., 2016; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Tragant, Serrano, & Llanes, 2017; Wheeler, 2017; Manan, 2018; Mustakim & Ismail, 2018; Shin & Chun, 2018)	
Vocabulary development (Asmara, Anwar, & Muhammad, 2016; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Tragant, Serrano, & Llanes, 2017; Manan, 2018; Shin & Chun, 2018; Syahidah, Umasugi, & Buamona, 2019)	Vocabulary and aural-oral skills improvement
Confidence in using the target language (Park, 2009; Rugasken & Harris, 2009; Chang & Seong, 2010; Ismail & Tahir, 2011; Clementi, 2012; Seong, 2012; Banwell & Sasaki, 2017; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017; Manan, 2018; Noguchi, 2019; Ketamon, et al., 2020)	
Broadening of social network (Wighting, Nisbet, & Tindall, 2005; Clementi, 2012; Ahn, 2016; Richardson & Kelderhouse, 2016; Liu, Hu, & Peng, 2017)	Broadening of social network

There are two gaps in the left column and one in the right column of Table 4 because the discourse themes *a sense of continuity* and *impregnation with the target language* were not found in the literature reviewed, and *cultural awareness* was not among the discourse themes abstracted from the speeches of the stakeholders in the current study. The absence of the two themes in the literature might be explained by the type of questions asked of the participants in the studies examined. In the current study, they were asked a specific question that elicited their perceptions of the immediate effects of the immersion camps on their interlanguage: *How did you perceive your English communication ability immediately after the immersion camp(s)?* Were this question asked of the participants in the studies reviewed, similar discourse themes might have emerged. To account for the gap in the right column of the table, one might hypothesize that, concerning the question of culture, the perception of the participants in the current study was limited to the accumulation of knowledge about the culture associated with the language in which they were immersed. A more plausible hypothesis might be that they simply did not have the language to express ideas that could be thematized as *cultural awareness* – the lack of adequate language to express one's understanding of reality is a well-documented phenomenon (Dreyfus, 1999; Thomas, 2006; Stinson, Bidwell, Powell, & Thurman, 2008).

Irrespective of the gaps in Table 4, one can say that there is a high degree of resonance between the discourse themes found in the publications reviewed and those identified in this study. It is assumed, therefore, that such resonances can be taken as consistent face-valid evidence of the positive effects of this type of program on participants; and that, by extension, these results reinforce the long-standing notion that language

immersion programs are effective ways of providing additional language education (Fortune & Tedick, 2003). Accordingly, they may constitute a genuine alternative mode of instruction to be considered when planning a pedagogic intervention aiming to improve students' fluency and proficiency in a given target language, to help them broaden their knowledge of the culture associated with it and to become culturally conscientious citizens of the world.

8. Final remarks

Essentially, from the standpoint of the stakeholders, these camps have shown the power of experiential learning and social constructivism to help the campers develop skills in the target language, to expand their lexical repertoire, to exchange cultural knowledge and to broaden their social network. They have also shown that learning is an unescapable outcome when the learner takes the center stage. Another important conclusion is that the Amazonian University promoting the ELICs appears to be in the right track toward helping stop the *big wheel* that contributes to *facts* and *beliefs* about the *unteachability* and *unlearnability* of English in state schools in many parts of Brazil. Finally, the comparison of discourse themes emerging from this study with those from other studies on short-term language immersion camp programs in similar settings has demonstrated a high degree of resonance between them, which seems to reiterate the potential of these programs for effective additional language education. These similarities in discourse also endorse the theory that intensive target language comprehensible input and oral production can promote language learning.

Having said that, it is important to point out that, for some, short-term language immersion camps may not have a significant impact in their attitudes toward and abilities in the target language as suggested by Professor Sales (Box 2). Additionally, despite the positive appreciations on the part of most ELICs stakeholders, the results of this study are not sufficiently robust. More reliable results could be obtained by means of adequately pre- and post-testing the campers in all the aspects that could conclusively provide an answer to the central research question.

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