REFLECTING ON THE ENGLISH(ES) TAUGHT IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this paper is to present a reflection on the nature of the English taught in Brazil as perceived by two teachers working in different institutions and contexts. With that aim, the paper opens with a panoramic view of English taught in different countries revising current issues in language policy concerning the status of English as a global language. In reflecting about the status of English in Brazil we suggest possible answers to Jordão’s (2004) three questions of 1) why we are teaching English in Brazil, 2) what the goals of private and public schools for English might be and, 3) whether we should teach cultures in language classes and if so, which ones. Suggestions of how this new status of English may or may not be relevant to the present scenario in Brazil are made and the paper concludes with the suggestion that the answer to most of the questions raised by Jordão lies in critical action and reflection.

Keywords: reflection, global English, Brazil

RESUMO: O objetivo deste trabalho é apresentar uma reflexão de duas professoras de inglês trabalhando em diferentes instituições e contextos no Brasil sobre a natureza do inglês ensinado no Brasil. Para tanto, o artigo inicia com uma visão panorâmica do inglês ensinado em diferentes países revisando temas atuais nos parâmetros do ensino de línguas em relação ao ensino de inglês como língua internacional. Ao refletir sobre o status do inglês ensinado no Brasil nós sugerimos possíveis respostas para as três perguntas de Jordão (2004), quais sejam, 1) por que ensinamos inglês no Brasil, 2) quais são os objetivos das escolas públicas e privadas para o ensino do inglês, 3) se devemos ensinar cultura na aula de língua estrangeira e no caso afirmativo, quais. Sugestões sobre como o novo status do inglês pode ou não ser relevante para o contexto brasileiro atual são apresentadas e o artigo conclui com a sugestão de que a resposta para as perguntas de Jordão pode ser a ação crítica e a reflexão.

Palavras-chave: reflexão, inglês internacional, Brasil

Introduction

According to Schön (1983, 1987), reflection is an essential element in the professional development of teachers. So as to trigger the reflection of other English teachers, we, two English teachers working in different regions in Brazil, invite you, the reader, to embark on this journey with us, reflecting on the possible implications of

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expanding our perception of the English we teach or should teach. With that aim we start this paper by presenting a brief review of the issues involved in the terminologies used for the English taught in the world in general, and finish with a reflection on what this terminology may imply for the Brazilian situation in particular.

Before moving any further, we would like to invite the reader to answer a question which may seem like a very straightforward one and that is probably answered by English teachers all the time during the course of their professional lives, namely, what kind of English do you teach, is it EFL, ESL, or ELF\(^1\)? If you could not answer this question right away, we hope this paper will help you in the process. Most of you working in Brazil probably discarded the option ESL since the native language in Brazil is Portuguese; however, it was probably more difficult for you to decide between the EFL – ELF terminology. If that is the case, you are not alone and the confusion created by this terminology, coupled with the embarrassment of not knowing how to answer that simple question right away, motivated us to write this paper reflecting on the type of English we teach (or should teach) in Brazil.

Although we do not want to add to the confusion, there is one more question we want to ask you, English teacher, before we proceed. Let us admit for a minute that you answered the aforementioned question with a quick and sure “EFL”. Congratulations on your assertiveness, but which kind of English do you teach exactly? Is it American English, British English, Australian English, Brazilian English, Hindish, Cinglish or something else? Again, if you answered, for instance, that you teach American English - which is what we suspect most teachers in Brazil would answer- then how are your students getting linguistic input? Only from you? If so, then, how can you say that your English is American? As you can see, the more we think about the type of English we teach, the more questions we have and the more complex the answer to that simple question becomes.

We certainly do not want to scare you away with so many questions but we will ask you one more before we attempt to answer some of them ourselves. In case you never thought about these issues and simply took it for granted that your students wanted to learn American English, then how can you tell that what you think you are teaching them, is in

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1 English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or International English
fact, what they are learning? As you can see, the issue of what you teach is complex enough without adding the issue of what our students are actually learning in Brazil; therefore, we will limit our discussion in this paper to what we, English teachers do or think we are doing in Brazil.

**International English**

In case you answered our first question with a straightforward ELF, then this section may be of no importance to you since you probably know why you answered that; nevertheless, if you are still wondering, read on. Different terminologies have been used to refer to English as an International Language, some of which include Global English, English as a Lingua Franca, Multinational English (Leffa, 2002) and Englishes. Common to all these terminologies is the view that English is the most spoken language in the world today, especially because of the number of non-native speakers (henceforth NNSs) who are using it to communicate in a globalized world. According to statistics, 75% of all publications are in English (Leffa, 2002) and native speakers (NSs) are outnumbered by NNSs by two or three to one (personal communication, Globeng Conference, Italy, 2008). Another characteristic of Global English is the fact that unlike other languages which are spoken in a certain country (like Mandarin in China or Brazilian Portuguese in Brazil), Global English has no geographical limits.

As a language spoken mostly by people whose first language (L1) is other than English, International English is bound to suffer influences of other languages, that is, it is open to linguistic borrowing. According to Young (1997 as cited in Leffa, 2002), International English easily absorbs words and phrases from other languages. These borrowings are not restricted to vocabulary but may also extend to pronunciation, intonation and pragmatics. Because of this characteristic and the lack of geographical limits, International English is said to suffer from a lack of cultural identity (Leffa, 2003) insomuch as the association between a language and a culture is only valid for languages geographically comprised in a country. As a multinational language, English runs the risk of losing its cultural identity. In order to be a multinational language, English must also be a multicultural language.

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2 We will be using these terms interchangeably in this paper.
Leaving aside the puzzling problem of which (if any) culture to teach, another dilemma challenges English teachers, namely, that of the ideological and political implications of what we teach. According to Pennycook (1994), we teachers have to acknowledge the fact that our choice of methods and contents reflects an ideology. This ideology is, in turn, subserved by different policies concerning linguistic variations. One step in that direction would be to recognize in our classes that there are many Englishes and that the one we choose to teach is but one of them. A second step would be to critically think about why we have chosen a certain type of English.

According to Cox and Assis-Peterson (2001), language teachers are sometimes alienated in the sense that they do not think about the implications of what they teach. If we want to fight the label of “colonized and colonizers” we have to be able to justify our choices. We take sides with Cox and Assis-Peterson in that we believe English teachers have to think about what they teach and why they teach.

Regarding the situation of English teaching in Brazil and according to Jordão (2004), we should attempt to answer three main questions, namely: 1) Why are we teaching English in Brazil? 2) In case we have different goals for teaching English in Brazil, do they coincide in different contexts of private language institutes, public schools and universities? Finally, 3) If we are to teach culture in language classes, which cultures should be privileged in the English language classes?

You probably figured by now that this paper is going to offer more questions than answers. The questions are usually more interesting than the answers for they trigger reflection, which is our ultimate goal for this paper. So as to provide you with some input for further questioning, we turn now to a brief overview of how these issues are addressed in the world and how they may be addressed in Brazil.

**English in the world**

In pinpointing issues of current interest for the English teaching and learning community, Brown (2000) names the intrinsic motivation of learners to learn English as a form of empowerment; sociopolitical issues related to English as an international language and curricula development which, in turn, is reflected in the development of methods. Of interest to our present discussion is the second topic which concerns the growing
importance of language policy so as to account for the many varieties and nuances of English taught and learned around the world today.

Kachru (1998) uses the term Englishes to refer to the varieties of English used in circles outside the Inner Circle of native speakers (henceforth, NSs), such as in the Outer Circle of countries like India, where English is neither a second nor a foreign language but the official language, and in the Expanding Circle where English is taught as a foreign language, such as in Brazil and China. The staggering growth of the English language use in both the Outer and Expanding Circles (Kachru, 1998) poses numerous challenges for English teachers and curricula development officials today.

In a world where English is used by a majority of non-native speakers (NNSs) according to latest statistics, one problem that teachers face is what kind of communicative competence to develop in learners who are more often than not learning English to interact with other NNSs rather than with NSs. The problem of whom our learners will interact with in English is especially pressing in countries in the outer and expanding circles. In the case of Brazil, our geographical position (surrounded by Spanish speaking countries) may be irrelevant after the advent of globalization and internet, if we consider the language of international business and communication, which is most of the time, English.

Teaching a foreign or second language in a Communicative Approach is a tricky matter, since language teachers have to teach the language through the language. That is, teachers have to teach the what through the how. Before the advent of globalization, this was usually achieved by teaching culture (usually American or British) through language (English) using authentic materials (those originated in communications with NSs). Nevertheless, this is no longer possible, at least when the foreign language at hand is English with its newly acquired status of international language. We can no longer dress the content (NS culture) in linguistic attires (NSs norm). If we recognize that English is learned perhaps to interact with other NNSs, then we teachers can no longer associate English with either the American or the British culture. In fact, we have to teach a culture-less language (if that is possible), a language that recognizes different cultures without adopting any. Now, we English teachers were not trained to teach language without culture, and maybe we do not have to, after all. Maybe we have to expand our horizon in terms of the culture(s) we can teach. Just as we learned to teach English using authentic materials, now we may have to learn to teach English with authentic materials that are
produced by different NNSs, with various different cultures! The task at hand is certainly a daunting one! Learning one culture is hard enough let alone many, or none!

Some authors have gone as far as to suggest that one of the appeals of English as an international language is that it is easy to learn it badly. Even if we teachers want to refute this claim, how can we do so? On what grounds? Let us consider the possibility that English teachers acknowledge the status of English as a lingua franca, accepting (and learning) it through different cultures with different varieties of English. That poses another Herculean task for the teacher, namely, where do we draw the line on what is allowed and not allowed in these new varieties of Englishes? If the gate is not kept by NSs anymore, then who is keeping it? Non-native speakers? Which ones? If the norm is not dictated by NSs, then who can tell us what is right and what is wrong? Moreover, can we teachers do that? Should we do that? For there must be a norm or a yardstick against which we teachers can compare and correct linguistic deviations or else, what is our function in class? What is our function at all? Even if we accept the move from prescription to description, whose description is it? These are some of the issues permeating the apparently naïve change in terminology from EFL to ELF which were addressed at the Globeng (Conference of English as a Global Language) Conference in Italy this year (2008). Many questions were raised, few if any were answered, but, as previously suggested, the questions are more important than the answers.

**English in Brazil**

English is taught in Brazil mainly as a foreign language and usually based on inner circle models of English (American or British). However, with the phenomenon of globalization, some issues should be considered before taking for granted that our students want and need to learn either American or British English. Globalization led to a shortening of distance and time among people (Kumaravadivelu, 2005). The advent of the Internet has contributed to the fact that people of different nationalities communicate with one another very easily, and this communication has been accomplished, most of the time, through the English language. Such language has become a multinational one for reasons given in this paper, among which are (1) the fact that it is the most-widely taught language in the world, (2) it is spoken by more non-native speakers than native speakers; i.e., it does not belong to the Inner Circle exclusively anymore; (3) it is present in 75% of
publications throughout the world; (4) it is the official language in many companies in the world; (5) there are no geographical boundaries; i.e., it is not spoken in one country only, as in the case of Chinese, which is only spoken in China.

This new status of English as a means of globalized communication may answer Jordão’s first question, namely, why we are teaching English in Brazil. Brazil is the only country in Latin America where Portuguese is spoken. Since Brazil is surrounded by Spanish speaking countries, the obvious choice of a foreign language should be Spanish. But, not so fast, as we suggested in the previous paragraph, Spanish is not the international language, English is, and so perhaps that is why English should have priority in foreign language curricula. That is not to say that we should not teach Spanish or other languages, but simply to emphasize that those languages should be taught as foreign languages whereas English should be taught and have the status of the international language.

As we hope became evident by now, we have a different scenario for English language teaching today which can no longer be ignored or circumvented. English teachers need to face this new reality and attempt to answer some of the many questions it poses. We may not be able to answer all of these questions but we can certainly reflect on them, which is the main aim of this paper. Let us then suggest one possible answer to Jordão’s (2004) first question: Why are we teaching English in Brazil? We share Jordão’s ideas that by being in contact with a foreign language, our students have the opportunity to become familiarized with the different, that is, a different linguistic system, different values and cultures as well as different identities. In addition to that, in learning a foreign language, we may better understand our own culture and language. Moreover, in so doing we may learn that there is no such a thing as one culture being better than the other. We can learn (and in that Brazilians have a lot to teach) that the different can add richness rather than threaten our identities. It is true, however, that this can be accomplished through the teaching of any foreign language, not only English. Nevertheless, we believe that knowing a foreign language is a means of empowering our students, and, nowadays, this empowerment is mainly achieved through English. As Leffa (2003, p. 233) suggests, not knowing English today will “not only restrict access to information received, but also limit the space in which message is transmitted” (our own translation).

Jordão (2004) invites us to think about whether we have different goals for teaching English in Brazil, and if so, whether these goals coincide in different contexts of
private language institutes, public schools and private schools. We understand that there is a difference between private language institutes and regular schools, whether they are public or private.

Regarding private language institutes, the first thing we need to consider is that in Brazil the population in these schools is different from the one in regular schools, mainly in what concerns their age, economic situation and motivation to learn a foreign language. Adults who attend English classes in language institutes do so because they are motivated to learn a foreign language, usually for work or travel. Since most public schools have large groups and focus mainly on reading skills, many parents (those who can afford), pay for their children to go to private language institutes where, they believe, they will learn how to actually speak the language. Since the attendance in these institutes is not mandatory, it can be assumed that students are there either because they are motivated to learn or because they want to please their parents.

Based on learners’ motivation (be it intrinsic or extrinsic as in the case of children who are made by their parents), we can say that the goals for teaching English in private language institutes in Brazil can and should be determined by students’ specific needs and goals, which usually involve preparing students to travel or work.

As for regular schools in Brazil, the goals for teaching a foreign language are determined by the analysis of three central issues prescribed by the National Curricula Parameters (NCP), namely: (1) citizenship, insomuch as students are able to perform their roles as citizens in a globalized world; (2) critical awareness in relation to the language; that is, teachers as well as students need to teach/learn a language critically, and (3) the sociopolitical aspects of learning a foreign language, which can be understood as the need for both teachers and students to be aware that no language is apolitical (as claimed by Pennycook, 1994); since language is charged with ideological meaning.

The NCP also state that among the four skills, reading should be the main focus of the teaching/learning process. In relation to this prescription in our national parameters for teaching foreign languages in Brazil, it could be argued that if we want our students to perform their roles as empowered citizens in a globalized world we should teach productive skills as well. We agree with Leffa (2002, p. 41) in that teaching receptive

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3 Parâmetros curriculares nacionais: terceiro e quarto ciclos do ensino fundamental: língua estrangeira.
skills only “reinforces the idea that information should flow unilaterally from central to peripheral countries, disseminating art, culture and science in only one direction”. We hope this is not our aim in Brazil.

Finally, Jordão (2004) also asks us to think about which cultures should be privileged in the foreign language class, given the multinational nature of International English. This, again, is a thorny issue. By choosing to teach one culture only, teachers might be conveying the message that a particular culture is better than others, especially if the teacher chooses one which belongs to Kachru’s Inner Circle. However, it is impossible to teach all the cultures represented by the English language.

One solution to the aforementioned dilemma would be to teach our local culture, but in so doing, we would be preventing our students from being in contact with the so called different in other cultures. We thus suggest that the ideal scenario for foreign language classes is one in which there is a balance between foreign cultures and the local one. We want our students to be able to transmit their cultural values to the world, but we also want them to enrich their identities with the knowledge of other cultures.

To conclude, we would like to suggest that the solution to most of the problems raised in this paper is critical thinking, which, in turn, cannot be achieved without reflection (Schön, 1983, 1987; Freeman, 1992) which entails an acceptance of conflicts and uncertainties along with the systematic analysis of and on action as a basis for decision making. We hope to have contributed to the reflection on possible implications of teaching different Englishes (and other languages for that matter) critically. Though acting critically is not always easy, the rewards are worth the effort.

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