

# Conceptualizations of English in the discourses of Brazilian language teachers: Issues of mobility, empowerment and international ownership

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An analysis of ideologies of English in Brazilian ELT

## Introduction

The present study is an investigation of how English has been conceptualized in the discourses of ten Brazilian English language teachers with diverse language teaching experiences. Discourses of major agents in Brazilian English language teaching (ELT) – mainly the media, language schools, and the Ministry of Education through its national guidelines – usually associate English with notions of mobility, empowerment, and international ownership. The understanding of how English language educators conceptualize the language thus provides a valuable perspective on how these discourses may be taken on and reproduced by teachers. Such understanding is also relevant because educators have firsthand experience in what actually goes on inside schools, thus being able to provide important accounts that are based on real life examples of their practices.

In view of such factors, the study was driven by the following research questions:

- 1) How is English conceptualized in the discourses of the participants?
- 2) What sociocultural and linguistic ideologies are revealed through such conceptualizations?
- 3) How do theories of globalization and/or the global spread of English apply to this particular case?

As will be discussed later in the article, the analysis of semi-structured interviews with the

participants shows a more complex picture than that presented by other types of discourse (i.e., of language institutes and of governmental guidelines). In the scenario that the teachers describe, mobility and empowerment are not enhanced through English but actually predetermine the possibility of learning it. Moreover, the language is still associated with native speaker ideologies, and policy and practice are in constant conflict with one another. My hope is that this examination can help advance understandings of ideologies of English in Brazil, which may also be of importance to scholars and practitioners in other contexts.



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## Background to the study

A key factor for the understanding of ELT in Brazil is the knowledge that foreign language education as a whole in *regular schools* (the equivalent to K-12 in the US, for instance) lost ground in the country from the 1960s to the 1990s, especially during the years of military dictatorship (Bohn, 2003). Such a scenario only began to change in the mid-1990s, when the federal government approved the Bill of Directions and Foundations of Education [*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação*, in Portuguese], which reinstated foreign language teaching in the national curriculum.

The establishment of this policy was followed by the creation of the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* [National Curricular Guidelines], which are orientations for curricular changes in the subjects taught at regular schools. In the case of foreign language education, two documents were published initially: one for grades 5-8 in 1998, and another for higher grades in 2000. Although these texts do not have regulatory status, they have been the basis for foreign language teaching at the national level (see Moita Lopes, 2003), although there are current discussions for the establishment of new guidelines.

In spite of such measures, foreign language teaching in many regular schools throughout the country (both public and private) is still considered inefficient by many scholars, teachers, students and parents. Meanwhile, as Bohn (2003: 165) points out, the elite understanding of the importance of English has 'created a powerful national language teaching business that spread franchised schools all over the country.' In the past two decades alone, the number of registered franchise language schools in Brazil has increased from 20 companies with around 2,600 units in 1997 (Friedrich, 2001) to 36 companies comprising over 5,000 units, according to the Brazilian Association of Franchising (ABF in Portuguese). Moreover, recent data collected by the ABF show that the language school sector earnings grew about 16% from 2012 to 2013 alone – and such high growth rates have continued in the past few years. In other words, while the very right to study English had been denied in regular schooling, members of the higher socioeconomic classes have continuously invested in learning the language.

In the current context of Brazilian ELT, therefore, there are at least two major types of discourses, produced and disseminated by major agents in the area. First, there are governmental

guidelines that emphasize the role of English as the language of business, pop culture, the media, and cyberspace, and highlight the need to understand its local and global manifestations, as well as the importance of forming global citizens. In this type of discourse, we also find a portrayal of English as a language of power in opposition to other languages, and an emphasis on the necessity of raising students' critical consciousness about this issue. As stated in one such document, 'it makes no sense nowadays to understand [English] as a language of one country alone. People make use of this foreign language for their own benefit, appropriating it in a critical way' (Secretaria de Educação Fundamental, 1998). The same document goes on to state that access to the language represents possibilities of transforming oneself and being connected to the global community.

As well as these discourses, we can also identify a second set of discourses. These are associated with language schools, and center on the importance of English for mobility, be it physical or social. In these messages, we find possibilities of traveling, getting better work positions, and establishing international connections that can change one's life, as implied in many TV commercials for these institutions. These ideas are constructed through statements that claim that success is achieved through English, and that through knowledge of the language, the world can 'belong' to a person.

As previously stated, these discourses may reflect upon language teachers' conceptualizations of English, and have implications for their practices. The present study is an attempt to understand such conceptualizations by ten English language educators with different types of language teaching practice. In what follows, I present the method used for the study, the results that were found, and a discussion of how these results may be important for the understanding of English conceptualizations in Brazil.

## Method

Interviews with ten Brazilian teachers of English as a foreign language were conducted with the aim of understanding how they felt about messages conveyed by private language institutions through TV commercials, as well as national curricular guidelines and their implementation in the English classroom in regular schools. The teachers' ages ranged from 23 to 52 years old at the time of the interviews, and their time of experience

teaching English (in different types of institutions, such as regular schools, language schools, and universities) ranged from 4.5 to 28 years. Five of them were male and the other five female. Nine participants either had an undergraduate degree in *Letras – Inglês* [English] or were in the process of getting one. The other subject was majoring in mathematics at the time of the study. This subject was chosen to participate because it is common in Brazil to have teachers of English who do not have a degree in this particular discipline.

I chose to use semistructured interviews, since this balances consistency in the form of a set of pre-prepared guiding questions with an ‘open ended’ format in which ‘the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issue raised in an exploratory manner’ (Dörnyei, 2007: 136). Thus, my hope was that such choice could lead to open conversations about the topic of the research, in a way that both the researcher and the participants had the possibility of engaging with some of the topics they found most important, without being unduly restricted to a specific set of questions. The interviews were cued by a video showing a specific language school commercial, and by an excerpt taken from one of the curricular guideline documents. The main questions asked the interviewees how they felt about the particular commercial and excerpt being presented, what message(s) they conveyed, and how these messages positioned teachers and students.

All teachers were interviewed individually. I approached potential participants through personal contacts (either I knew them personally, or was introduced to them by people who knew them). I met with each one of them once for the interview, which lasted around 40 minutes overall. The subjects chose whether to be interviewed in English or Portuguese – seven of them chose English, and three chose Portuguese (the latter interviews were later translated into English). The interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed with the interviewees’ permission.

An important note needs to be made in relation to the issue of transcription. Dörnyei (2007: 247) states that ‘if we are interested in the content rather than the form of the verbal data,’ which was the case in the analysis of the interviews, ‘we can decide to edit out any linguistic surface phenomena.’ This procedure was used in the present study, in order to make the participants’ accounts easier to read. Dörnyei (2007: 247) also states that ‘in order to create the ‘feel’ of the oral communication in writing, we need to apply certain writing strategies ... that will facilitate the intended

kind of reading.’ These strategies include using punctuation marks and dividing speech into sentences. This procedure was also used in the transcriptions of the interviews. The meanings of each comment were not affected.

Responses to the questions were grouped based on themes that were common in participants’ accounts. Although the interviews led to discussions about a number of different themes, in the present study I report only on those that related directly to the messages conveyed by language schools and official governmental guidelines. This decision was motivated by the intent of understanding whether and how teachers’ conceptualizations of English reflected the discourses of those key agents of ELT in Brazil.

## Results and discussion

Three main themes were found in the participants’ accounts: a) the contradictions of mobility and empowerment; b) the questioning of the international ownership of English; and c) the treatment of English as a subject in regular schools. Each one is explained below.

### The contradictions of mobility and empowerment

Eight participants highlighted the perceived role that English has as a language of mobility, both physical and social. This connotation is illustrated below.

*Comment 1: ‘I think that many people in Brazil don’t learn English because they like the culture and everything, they learn it because they need it for work.’ (Participant 3)*

*Comment 2: ‘There are some students ... who are moving to Norway ... Norway, can you imagine that? And who can speak Norwegian in Brazil? And they don’t speak Portuguese there either, so ...’ (Participant 1)*

*Comment 3: ‘I have a student in his first semester. He is a beginner, and he’s a police officer. And you know we are going to have two important sports events: the World Cup in 2014, and the Olympic Games in 2016. And he told me ... that if he learns English by 2014, he will spend the period of the competition in different states to help, because they need policemen who speak English.’ (Participant 4)*

*Comment 4: ‘Students need English ... they need to know what is going on, and they need the language to participate in society.’ (Participant 2)*

These comments show how English has been perceived as a language that facilitates access to different places and social positions, both locally and internationally. In comments 2 and 3, more specifically, this access is materialized through the importance of the language as a *lingua franca* both outside and within Brazil. However, this issue of movement becomes more complex when other claims made by participants are taken into consideration. These other statements show that English and mobility are in fact more closely associated with specific groups of people (defined according to their socioeconomic and professional status) than they are to others. Such associations are evident in the comments presented below.

*Comment 5: 'You know the school I work for [private language institution] has lots of students who can afford traveling abroad, and many students go.'* (Participant 1)

*Comment 6: 'Most of our students [from private language institution] have to study because they are doing their masters or doctorates, and they need English. Many of them are really interested in getting to know other countries, other cultures. They have seminars in the US, in Canada, so they need to understand it.'* (Participant 5)

*Comment 7: 'Even those who are from the lowest classes are familiar with the idea that you need to learn English. They see it on TV, they see it on the news. I think it's really something global.'* (Participant 5)

*Comment 8: 'The students [from public schools] think they'll never travel to a foreign country, so they don't need to speak a foreign language ... some of them have a very low perspective in life, so they don't think, "Ah, but I'm going to get a job in which I'm going to interact in English," they don't have this perspective.'* (Participant 7)

*Comment 9: '[Impersonating student from public school] ... why the heck do I want to learn English if I'm never going to leave Brazil?'* (Participant 10)

What we see in comments 5 through 9 is the juxtaposition of those who study English for legitimate interests and who 'can afford traveling abroad,' with those who 'will never travel to a foreign country' and who see the need to study the language only on television. Thus, mobility is not only associated with the language in the sense that those who master it will gain the ability to move across social and physical spaces, as suggested by many language commercials and official guidelines. Many times, it actually predetermines the very possibility of learning it – that is, you will only have a real chance

to learn English if you have mobility in the first place. When understood this way, English is no longer conceptualized as empowering many students (mainly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) and connecting them to a larger global community; instead, it becomes one more factor that may distance this global community from them.

This does not mean that the desire for English is not seen as existing among students of lower socioeconomic status, as might be implied from comment 9. On the contrary, many students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do aspire to learn the language and have successful experiences in doing so (Lima, 2011). What it does mean, unfortunately, is that such aspiration may be undermined by the poor conditions of ELT in several institutions, and by the commonplace belief that it is only those who already have economic power and access to mobility who have a realistic chance of learning the language.

### Questioning international ownership

The second issue that deserves attention in relation to the participants' accounts has to do with the use of English as a language of *international* communication and scope. The issue here is that several teachers made the case that their students do not see the language as one that belongs to a *global community* or that can belong to themselves, but rather as one that pertains exclusively (or mainly) to the US and the UK. This perspective, although not universal amongst the participants, was very strong in the narratives of eight teachers, as illustrated below.

*Comment 10: 'We don't usually say, "Yeah, you are going to learn English so you can go to Japan, you can go to Paris ..." We usually say that they are going to get their ideas across very well in English-speaking countries.'* (Participant 5)

*Comment 11: 'The teachers ... bring Indian English ... for students, this is unreal, what they think about is the United States.'* (Participant 9)

*Comment 12: 'People tend to associate [English] to Americans and the US. We don't think other countries speak English.'* (Participant 7)

*Comment 13: '... they usually think of the US, or British English. So when you go to a language school ... the school itself says North American English or British English.'* (Participant 10)

Comments 10 through 13 show that teachers do not think that the perspective of English as an international language that can connect people to a *global* community, and that is also present in *local*

realities, has been adopted by their students. Although this simply shows teachers' views on students' perspectives, these comments are still important for a number of reasons. For instance, such understanding reflects Friedrich's (2000) claim that for Brazilians, English only has two varieties: British and American. It also echoes Matsuda's (2003) claim that the view of English as an international language is actually not widespread amongst the actual learners and users of it in the expanding circle (as defined in Kachru, 1992).

This fact is particularly relevant when one considers the objectives of national curricular guidelines – which seek to challenge hegemonic and monolithic views of the language – as it seems that perceptions of English as a language of the US and the UK have not changed since their publication. This issue may contribute to the distancing of several students from English, which, as discussed earlier, affects possibilities of mobility and empowerment through the language.

It is also important to consider that many language institutions still emphasize that they teach British or American English – as pointed out in comment 13. Although it is arguable that these schools may be simply responding to student demand for these varieties of English, they may also be contributing to perpetuate the commonplace belief that the language is still dominated by its native speakers – which in turn contradicts the very associations created by these schools (or at least a number of them) between English and international ownership.

### English as a subject

The final issue that I wish to highlight here is that of the treatment of English *as a subject* in regular schools. Whilst curricular guidelines emphasize the importance of having critical components in relation to the language, where issues of hegemony, localization, and internationalization become central aspects of ELT, nine of the participants stated that in actual practice the English that is taught in these schools is presented solely with the goal of preparing students for the university entrance exams that are the gateway to Brazilian higher education.

*Comment 14: 'Without a doubt, [the objective of ELT in regular schools] is to fill the students up with information so they can pass the exams.'* (Participant 8)

*Comment 15: 'It [the purpose of teaching English in regular schools] is just to pass the entrance examinations.'* (Participant 6)

It becomes difficult to put guidelines into practice when the actual curricula of regular schools are oriented towards the passing of examinations – which are often based on grammar and reading comprehension only. Moreover, as many of the interviewees explained, the difficulties they have are aggravated by factors such as the lack of appropriate resources for language teaching (particularly in public schools), the high number of students in the classrooms, the little time for class, and the complete indifference with which ELT is treated by several school administrators and even colleagues. (For more on these issues, see Lima, 2011.)

The accounts of participants thus attest to the incoherence that exists between policy and practice in Brazilian education. This question becomes more critical when one considers that until recently it was usually only the country's elite who passed the most competitive of entrance examinations and consequently attended the best – usually free – universities (Fishlow, 2011); although this has been changing gradually, due to new affirmative action policies. Hence, in this case, once again, rather than being a language that can enable empowerment and mobility for all, English may actually become one more instrument for distancing many Brazilian students (mainly those in lower socioeconomic classes) from the possibility of change.

## Conclusions

The accounts of the teachers presented here signal that there is a belief that mobility and empowerment – often associated with English – do not necessarily come with the language, but are actually often seen as assets that one must have in order to be able to learn it in the first place. According to the teachers interviewed in this study, this is usually the case with students who have no interest in learning the language simply because they do not envision themselves traveling outside of Brazil. Therefore, based on these participants' accounts, the case of Brazil seems similar to those of other expanding circle countries – such as Argentina, China, Japan, and Ukraine, to cite a few (see, for instance, Hu, 2008; Niño-Murcia, 2003; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Nunan, 2003; Tamopolsky, 1996; Zappa-Holman, 2007) – where larger discourses about English (promoted by pedagogical policies, for instance) are all too often very detached from the realities of local schools, teachers, and students. In other words, while on the one hand we have institutional and governmental messages of international English,

mobility, power, and appropriation, on the other, we have the old economic, sociocultural, and educational barriers still exerting a negative influence upon the way English and its teaching and learning are understood by individuals.

Hence, the picture of English in Brazil presented by the participants of the present study seems to reflect the country's positioning as a hierarchical society, 'in which social origin and social position are critical to determining what an individual can or cannot do' (Almeida, 2008, p. 235), and where people themselves, as well as institutions, do not see each other as equals, especially because of differences in their social and economic status. According to Almeida, such a hierarchical structure can only be overcome through 'the evolution of the educational sphere', which 'implies sociological, ideological, and macropolitical change' (p. 239).

That is not to say that English in Brazil is (or must be) seen in an entirely negative light, based on notions of imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and polarization (O'Byrne & Hensby, 2011), or that the messages conveyed by major agents in Brazilian education are necessarily wrong (although some may certainly be exaggerated and/or misguided). After all, knowledge of the language can certainly be empowering and help individuals achieve higher levels of physical and social mobility, which is one of the main reasons why a great number of educators and researchers in the country (including the present author) have been working hard in order to ensure that students from different educational and socioeconomic levels have access to it. Furthermore, analyses of English in other domains of language use (e.g., pop culture) show that the exclusive association of the language with the elites in emerging countries like Brazil can be questioned, as people can appropriate it for their own needs and purposes (Diniz de Figueiredo, 2015).

Nevertheless, what the voices of participants in this study suggest is that the relationship between English, mobility, empowerment, and international ownership is a very complex one that seems to be in need of further investigation at a conceptual level. To that end, we must continuously engage with the ways in which language professionals and their students conceptualize the language in their situated discourses and practices. The present study has focused on the discourses of teachers only, and a small number of them at that. Still, it is hoped that the analysis of these professionals' voices may help to bring a clearer picture of the ways in which English has been understood and

experienced at local levels, and to stimulates further debate and research on this issue in Brazil and elsewhere.

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