

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceptions of teachers about their practices after a PARFOR language and culture education course

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the need for more research into the education of English language teachers in PARFOR programs. Through the analysis of questionnaire and interview data, we investigate the perceptions and reported practices of teachers who were enrolled in a language and culture PARFOR course in 2012 (in a northern state) in relation to their teaching practices after completion of the program. The results indicate that since the end of the course, some participants have shown a growing level of awareness towards working with an intercultural approach, which has reflected upon their practices. However, others still seem to show more traditional, less interculturally-oriented approaches to teaching language and culture. Implications for teacher education are presented.

KEYWORDS: teacher education; language and culture; PARFOR.

Percepções de professores acerca de suas práticas após uma disciplina sobre língua e cultura ensinada em um programa PARFOR

RESUMO

O presente estudo aborda a necessidade por mais pesquisa sobre a formação de professores de inglês no PARFOR. Através da análise de questionários e entrevistas, investigamos as percepções e práticas relatadas de professores que fizeram uma disciplina sobre língua e cultura no PARFOR em 2012 (no norte do país) com relação a suas experiências de ensino desde sua formação no programa. Os resultados indicam que desde o fim da disciplina, alguns participantes têm mostrado uma crescente conscientização com relação ao trabalho com uma abordagem intercultural, o que tem refletido em suas práticas. No entanto, outros professores ainda parecem mostrar práticas menos orientadas por visões relacionadas à interculturalidade. Implicações para a formação de professores são apresentadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: formação de professores; língua e cultura; PARFOR.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2009, many universities in Brazil are part of the National Plan for Basic Teacher Education (*Plano Nacional de Formação de Professores da Educação Básica*, or PARFOR, in Portuguese). In brief, PARFOR is a Federal emergency initiative that seeks to address the lack of certification by many teachers already working in public schools as instructors of various disciplines, including English. The program is particularly strong in the north and northeast regions, which together had around 90% of all participating teachers in 2012, according to numbers of the *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (CAPES, 2014).

Because students of PARFOR programs already work as teachers, the programs are generally designed in an intensive manner, during the months when these students/teachers are free from their regular duties at school. This is generally a major challenge, since contents have to be condensed in order to meet the strict time frame for each course¹. In spite of such challenge, the degrees that are offered through PARFOR are designed to follow the same guidelines as the regular teacher education programs. This means that they have the same number of required and elective courses as those regular programs, which in this case comprised a total of 26 courses.

The impacts of the program upon educational and social issues (such as teacher identity and socioeconomic realities) have been critically discussed by some scholars (e.g., Bueno et al., 2016; Souza, 2014). In the particular case of the Language Arts – English Teaching undergraduate program (*Letras-Inglês*, focus on English language teacher education), some of the matters that have been investigated include the attitudes of teachers towards the PARFOR English program in their institutions (Alves & Calvo, 2018), analysis of PARFOR curricula (Pessôa, 2012), teacher identities (Nabarro & Silva, 2013), and the teaching of specific skills to individuals enrolled in PARFOR programs (Belém, 2014). However, there is still a dearth of specific investigations in the area, including examinations of the long-term perceptions of teachers who graduated from PARFOR about the program as a whole and about PARFOR courses, more specifically.

The objective of the present study is to address this gap by investigating how participants in an English as an international language (EIL)-based *language and culture* course for pre-/in-service teachers of English in a PARFOR context perceive their teaching practices and knowledge about this topic since the end of the program (5 years earlier). Our hope is that the investigation we present may be relevant to the understanding of the benefits and difficulties related to PARFOR programs and courses – especially in the case of Language Arts – English Teaching (*Letras-Inglês*).

2. RELEVANT LITERATURE

For a number of years now, scholars in the field of language and culture – which was the focus of the course taken by the participants of the present

¹ The word “course” is used here with the meaning of subject (*disciplina*, in Portuguese), rather than as *curso*. For *curso*, we used the term “program.” We felt it was necessary to clarify this information because such terminology differs across contexts.

study (see Method) – have emphasized the importance of intercultural awareness and communication, and of plural understandings of cultural identities for teachers and students (see, for instance, Baker, 2015; Gimenez, 2001; Kramsch, 1998). In terms of intercultural sensitivity, Friedrich (2012, p. 47) has made the claim that teachers may have often paid too much attention to the linguistic component of communicative competence – in detriment, many times, of the awareness which has “more to do with expecting to be taken by surprise and keeping a calm, curious and open attitude toward differences than either erasing these differences or, worse yet, ignoring them.”

Gimenez (2001) has also addressed this issue, showing that there are three main approaches to the teaching/learning of language and culture in the classroom:

- a) a *traditional approach*, which understands culture as mere facts and dates, and separates language from it;
- b) a *culture as social practice approach*, which sees a relation between language and culture and looks at how the “Other” thinks and acts;
- c) an *intercultural approach*, in which language *is* culture, and therefore the focus of teaching is on the creation of a space that is in-between the linguaculture of the self and that of the “Other.”

As for the plurality of cultural understandings, Matsuda & Friedrich (2011) have suggested that teachers need to focus not only on cultures of the target languages students are learning but also on students’ own cultures and on issues that are taken to pertain to culture(s) on a more international level (see also McKay, 2002 for a similar understanding). Other scholars have suggested that teachers need to take one step further and address border-crossing communication in general, going beyond English (e.g., Kubota, 2012).

How can such recommendations be implemented in teacher education courses and programs? Some scholars have tried to address these issues. Siqueira (2008), for example, argues that language teacher education must, amongst other things, be in dialogue with general education, taking into account socio-political matters that are related to the very act of forming new citizens. In addressing intercultural communication more specifically, Dongacay-Aktuna (2005, p. 103) defends the use of a discourse-based approach in teaching methodology classes, which “helps trainees to acknowledge their own cultural dispositions and possible stereotypes concerning particular learner groups,” and makes them aware of issues related to socialization, identity, and forms of discourse that are valued by their current and/or future students. Dongacay-Aktuna goes on to present a sample activity that is based on this approach. The activity helps future teachers make methodological decisions based on the sociocultural diversities of their classrooms, and also assists them in negotiating their cultural expectations with those of their students. Examples of such activities can be of great significance for teacher educators, as they illustrate what can be done in programs and courses.

In spite of the richness of these accounts and suggestions, the teaching of language and culture has still faced a number of challenges. As explained by Matsuda and Friedrich (2011), “the unfortunate trend in language classrooms is that the discussion tends to be very narrow. This often leads to stereotypical recommendations about intercultural interaction that are very shallow”

(p. 341). Thus, teacher education programs need to address these issues, preparing current and future educators to work with language and culture in complex ways – and this is perhaps even more urgent in the case of programs that face other types of challenges, such as limited time and space, as in the case of PARFOR.

3. METHOD

3.1 Setting

Participants of the present study were students in a language and arts (*Letras*, in Portuguese) PARFOR program, with focus on English teaching, in a public university in the north of Brazil. The language and culture course in which participants were enrolled was a 68-hour required course. The participants took the course in 2012, when they were students in the aforementioned PARFOR English teaching program. One of the present authors (who was working at that institution at the time) was the instructor of the course.

The original objective of this course (based on institutional documents) focused on cultures of contexts of English inner-circle countries (Kachru, 1992). However, the course that participants took was reviewed to fit an EIL paradigm (Gimenez et al., 2011; Sharifian, 2009). Thus, classes incorporated notions of EIL, intercultural awareness and sensitivity, cultural studies, and postcolonialism. They initially focused on critically reviewing the concepts of culture (and its relation to language), and of English/Anglophone, as well as those of identity and nation. Issues such as globalization and culture, the global spread of English, native-speakerism, and intercultural communication were subsequently addressed.

As stated previously, a major challenge in those circumstances was the limited time frame for the course, which took place in an intensive format during a two-week period. Reflections at the end of the course revealed that students felt positively about their learning, but found it would be difficult to implement the notions presented in the course in their teaching contexts. Such difficulty, they said, was mainly caused by issues such as the lack of appropriate time and resources in their contexts (which were mainly rural – see below). These reflections were particularly meaningful for the present study, as we are now looking at these participants' perceptions about the course *after* it took place (for more details about the course and the reflections, see Diniz de Figueiredo & Sanfelici, 2017).

3.2 Participants and instruments

Nineteen participants were enrolled in the course that took place in 2012. All of them were invited to participate in the present study. Eight of them responded, agreeing to fill in an anonymous questionnaire that was sent to them electronically. At the time of the course, participants' ages ranged from early twenties to mid-sixties. Over a third of the 19 participants who were invited worked and lived in rural areas. As stated previously, the participants already worked as teachers at the time of the course. As it is common in

Brazil, many of them taught in more than one school (often 3 or 4). All of the participants (7 female and 1 male – Participant 2) who answered the questionnaire had been working with English language teaching (ELT) for at least 5 years.

The questionnaire had 8 open-ended questions pertaining to the following issues: a) the relation between language and culture, in participants' views and practices; b) whether and how the participants had worked with culture in their classes; c) whether and how culture was addressed in the textbooks they used; d) difficulties the participants have faced in working with culture in their classes; e) what else they would like to do in order to better address cultural issues in their classes; and f) whether they felt the course from 2012 had had an impact in how they had worked with culture since then. An online questionnaire format was chosen because of the distance that currently separates the researchers from the participants (both researchers now live and work in a different region of the country).

The participants were later invited to participate in an interview. Our objective in this case was to: a) better understand participants' trajectories since the end of their degree programs in English language teaching; b) better grasp their current teaching realities and practices regarding language and culture; and c) ask further questions about the impact of the course.

Three participants (2, 4, and 5) responded to the call to participate in the interviews. We feel that this low number was a result of inhibition on the part of participants to share their difficulties and concerns related to their workplaces and profession – two things they usually shared in class and in the questionnaire, but might not feel comfortable sharing in more detail in an interview.

The interviews were conducted over the phone by one of the researchers – the one who had been their instructor of the course. They lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and were not recorded, due to our wish of conceiving them as casual, natural conversations with the participants – something that was already difficult to do over the phone, after five years of not having seen them in person. We felt our choice had been right in that regard after talking to one participant (5) and learning about her unwillingness to be recorded. Instead of recordings, notes were taken during each one of the interviews; these notes were later analyzed in relation to the whole set of questionnaire answers.

We are aware of the possible limitations that our methodological choices may pose to our study, especially the fact that an online questionnaire may be considered a simple method for understanding the impact that a discipline may have had upon participants' practices. Another limitation is the fact that the interviews were not recorded. However, none of these limitations invalidates the richness of the data we gathered. Moreover, given the gap that this study begins to address, its importance is again highlighted here.

Questionnaire and interview data were analyzed through content analysis (with systematic coding and categorization of data into themes), and then connections were established between them. In what follows, we present the results of these analyses.

4. RESULTS

Our analysis was divided into three subsections. The first two were based on the questionnaire items. They were: a) relation between language and culture, in participants' views; and b) participants' work with language and culture since the end of the course, including their practices, difficulties, what else they still want to do to work with language and culture, and whether they feel the course from 2012 had an impact on how they have worked with culture since then. The third subsection is based on a category that emerged from participants' answers to the questionnaire and interviews: focus on the inner circle (Kachru, 1992). Each of these subsections is presented individually below.

4.1 Relation between language and culture

All of the participants stated that it is important to work with language and culture in the English language classroom. The reasons for their answers varied slightly, and included issues such as making classes more interesting, and making students understand content more easily (in a contextualized manner). What was most interesting to us was that five participants (2, 4, 5, 6, and 8), in particular, stated that language and culture are already intrinsically (or at least closely) related, and so teaching one presupposes working with the other (Jordão, 2006). Some examples of their statements are presented below (all statements in this article were translated from Portuguese by the present authors):

"It's an intrinsic relation. Both must be treated clearly and in a ludic way so that the students can broaden their cultural repertoire and take ownership of the language." (Participant 4, questionnaire)

"Yes. No doubt, because one presupposes the other." (Participant 8, questionnaire)

On the other hand, four participants (1, 2, 7, and 8) stated that in general it is still hard for teachers (not necessarily themselves) to work with language and culture in an inter-related way. Three of them – participants 1, 2 and 8 – feel that the teaching of English in many classrooms is still decontextualized, and takes place exclusively through the teaching of structures (simple present, simple past, etc.). Participant 2's account below illustrates that feeling:

"They're currently disassociated from one another, teachers simply work with specific content." (Participant 2, questionnaire)

For Participant 2, there are two main reasons for teachers to work only with content, in structural ways. The first one is the lack of support for English classes in public schools in Brazil; the second is the fact that teachers, according to him, often feel demotivated due to low salaries and difficult work conditions, such as the lack of libraries and materials in many schools. Both of these factors have been previously discussed and problematized by scholars in Brazil (e.g., Lima, 2011).

One interesting issue that also needs to be discussed in regards to the three phone conversations, more specifically, is that for the 3 participants who were interviewed (2, 4, and 5), there seems to be a dichotomy between teaching language and culture on the one hand, and the exclusive teaching of structures on the other. Integrating culture and language, in that sense, is a way to avoid the mere teaching of decontextualized grammar in the classroom (which, according to their accounts, is common in their realities).

This is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it seems that discussions on culture seem to be understood as the only (or one of the only) type(s) of content (other than grammar) that can be addressed in the language classroom. Such view was actually present in the accounts of other participants in the questionnaire, and was interpreted as evidence that a course like the one presented here gives students/teachers at least an alternative way of thinking about the very content of their classes; an alternative that can be crucial, especially for those whose classes are/were based on grammatical structures only (this issue is addressed further later).

Second, there is the notion that grammatical structures can still be taught in isolation, separately from culture – something that has been disputed by different scholars (e.g., Jordão, 2006). Although it is positive that our participants seem to have moved away from such a view (at least most of them), the fact that they still reported that this type of practice exists in their contexts suggests that in many settings we may still be far from a perspective on English language teaching that centers on notions such as culture and intercultural communication.

What the accounts of participants, in both the questionnaire answers and interviews, seem to show is that there is a general positive attitude and awareness in regards to the relation between language and culture – which, in our view, is already an important result. However, there is still some doubt in terms of whether teachers in general (and for some participants, themselves included) are prepared to work with both concepts inter-relatedly. Therefore, it seems crucial to discuss the actual practices of our participants, in order to understand how they may be actually integrating the two constructs and working with them. It is to such discussion that we turn next.

4.2 Participants' practices

In terms of actual practices in the classroom, participants were categorized in three different ways, based on approaches to culture presented by Gimenez, 2001:

- a) Those whose accounts seemed to show a more complex approach to language and culture in the classroom (Participants 2 and 6) – this group showed approaches to culture that were more *intercultural* (i.e., which looked at relations between local worldviews and those of others);
- b) Those whose accounts seemed to show a less complex treatment of culture in the classroom (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8) – this group generally had approaches that were either more *traditional* (i.e., based on cultural products and events) or that looked mostly at *cultural habits*;
- c) One participant who stated that she rarely addresses culture in the classroom.

We felt that some participants' accounts of their experiences fell within more than one approach to culture. In other words, in some cases we observed elements that were more traditional or based mostly on habits being intertwined with notions of interculturality. This is why we preferred to conceptualize the three groups with basis on degrees of complexity (from more to less complex treatments of culture), rather than categorizing them based on a single approach to culture. We actually feel this lack of clearness in categorizations reflects many practices of teachers in a number of contexts – not only in relation to culture.

The first group (who had a more complex approach to language and culture) described activities that involved their students doing research in order to discuss their home cultures and develop understandings of how their local realities related to those of others in different contexts. Participant 6, for example, described an activity where her middle school students produced a cultural calendar in which they used English to foster cultural awareness. In her own words:

“... through field research, I tried to confront cultural elements that were similar or very different from the cultural manifestations in the region where I work.”
(Participant 6, questionnaire)

Such account may seem somewhat simplistic – as simply comparing and contrasting different cultural realities, based on habits. This, however, can already be seen as a certain advance from the reality of teaching grammatical structures only (presented above). Still, when evaluating her work with the cultural calendar, Participant 6 showed that the activity went beyond comparison and contrast of customs, and sought to develop students' intercultural sensitivity, as shown below:

“The proposal aimed to value the local manifestations of culture as a characteristic element in the social development of subjects. The objective was partly achieved, since students were able to understand that no culture is better than another, but different, and that's why they should be respected and valued.” (Participant 6, questionnaire)

Such view is very positive, and reflects the EIL perspective that was used in the course. For one, it allows “students to critically reflect upon what they take for granted [their local realities] and work on skills to explain it while practicing their English” (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011, p. 341). At the same time, it also helps them develop overall cultural awareness and intercultural awareness (Baker, 2015), in the sense that they start to understand notions such as respect for difference.

Participant 6 went on to show how she felt the results of the work were more positive than she had anticipated. As she explained:

“The biggest surprise was the involvement of students in the project, since their enthusiasm and willingness made them search for information in various ways, even communicating through text message with friends from other cities whom they felt would help them in their work.” (Participant 6, questionnaire)

Participant 2's account was somewhat similar to Participant 6's. In particular, he described a cultural fair project, which also related local realities to those of other contexts. The project was called *Juntos e Misturados*, which roughly translates to *Together and Mixed*, or *All mixed up*, or simply *Blended*. As Participant 2 explained:

"The objective was that all students understand and relate their realities to foreign elements, which resulted in a Cultural Fair." (Participant 2, questionnaire)

In his interview, Participant 2 explained that such cultural fair involved high school students doing research on Amazon folktales, then translating these folktales into English (a process that lasted almost two months), and finally developing a mini-dictionary and presenting their work in a school-wide event. Later, the students still compared the folktales they worked with to pieces of work that are well-known, such as Broadway plays and literary texts. Thus, as in the case of Participant 6, Participant 2 had students use English to engage with elements of their local realities, in this case reconstructing them through the language. These students were also given the chance to see – through the folktales and literary pieces of work they used in the project – how such realities may be similar or different to others.

This practice may be seen as more traditional, due to the focus on folktales and the comparisons made to literary texts and plays. Nevertheless, Participant 2's goal was that of relating local stories to stories told in other contexts, and having students understand that their realities were not isolated from those of other settings – all while developing respect and sensitivity for others. In fact, during the interview with Participant 2, he stated that one of the most interesting results of his work with cultural folktales was students' growing awareness that English is closer to them than they think, both because of the fact that the folktales were similar to pieces of work produced in English, and because of their possibilities of translating these folktales into the language.

Based on the accounts of Participants 2 and 6, it is possible to say that both of them have incorporated at least some of the elements presented in the PARFOR course, which is interpreted here as a positive impact of the course on their practices. In particular, they seemed to have incorporated notions such as the attention to local cultures as well as cultures of others (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011; McKay, 2002), cultural and intercultural awareness (Baker, 2015), and an understanding of English as being close to students' realities (Diniz de Figueiredo, 2015) into their practices. This positive interpretation about the language and culture course is strengthened by the participants' own statements about it:

"The little material I have was taken from that course; there is also the teaching methods which I have incorporated fully into my classes." (Participant 2, questionnaire)

"The course allowed us to reflect upon how important it is to know and develop projects that emphasize the local culture as an integrative part of the social cultures of people at different spaces and times." (Participant 6, questionnaire)

Yet, as expected, both participants still feel that there is a number of challenges they face in their teaching realities – challenges which make it hard for them to work with language and culture in the ways they would like to. For participant 6, one of the biggest difficulties has to do with lack of adequate teaching materials and other opportunities to learn more about teaching methods:

“... I still have many limitations in terms of materials and specific methods to reach these objectives, and there is also my own knowledge in that regard.”
(Participant 6, questionnaire)

It is interesting to observe that in addition to materials and methods, Participant 6 also emphasizes a personal challenge: lack of knowledge. In another part of the questionnaire, she explains that this refers to lack of knowledge about local cultures and other cultures in general. While we do understand such difficulty, we feel that Participant 6 is perhaps putting too much pressure on herself to know about things that she could learn through research. It is very nice to see, therefore, that she has been engaged in such type of inquiry, as shown in her statement below:

“... whenever I can, I search for, save (information about cultures) and reflect upon these cultures.” (Participant 6, questionnaire)

Like Participant 6, Participant 2 discussed challenges related to teaching materials as well. He also mentioned difficulties in terms of students' interest, proficiency levels, and the lack of support to carry out projects like *Juntos e Misturados* (described previously). The following statements illustrate these factors:

“First, there was the difficulty in finding material, it is a rural area, we don't have Internet or a library. Second, students don't have the habit of working with cultural issues, making them aware of the importance of such work is hard. Third, there are differences in students' proficiency levels in reading and text interpretation.” (Participant 2, questionnaire)

“I would like to improve my 'Juntos e Misturados' project, extend its scope, but I do not have technical or human support for that.” (Participant 2, questionnaire)

In his interview, Participant 2 highlighted these challenges again. He stated that students' low proficiency levels was perhaps the most difficult one. Yet, he also mentioned that he had been working with strategies (e.g., pair and group work to collectively construct meanings; use of electronic resources) for students to overcome such difficulties, especially in what regards the reading of culturally-related texts. This was understood by us as a very positive practice.

In brief, then, we can restate that we feel the language and culture course had an impact on how these participants (2 and 6) have been working with culture in their classes. More specifically, we can say that such work has been based on some EIL notions, which again we interpret as a positive outcome of the course. In fact, participant 2 went on to say (during the interview) that the course introduced him into a new world, since he did not know he could

explore these issues in the English language classroom. He also stated that he and other colleagues still discuss some issues from the course.

The second group of participants (those who seemed to show a less complex treatment of culture in the classroom) mentioned that culture in their classrooms was generally addressed through the teaching or discussion of certain artefacts, dates, and habits. The following statements illustrate this type of account made by participants:

"Habits and special dates." (Participant 1, questionnaire)

"I asked students to search for the types of clothing that they generally wore, since the content was types of clothing; it was an interesting project and the young students had fun with what they found." (Participant 3, questionnaire)

". . . through video classes, music, working with special dates." (Participant 4, questionnaire)

"Yes, I do work with it, but in a very simple way; in spite of the lack of resources, the objectives were reached almost entirely: To know the food, dances, literature." (Participant 5, questionnaire)

"Superficially with special dates, vocabulary, typical food." (Participant 8, questionnaire)

However, as illustrated by the last two of the above statements, two participants (5 and 8) seemed to understand that this type of work with discreet cultural elements was simplistic. When asked about that in her interview, Participant 5 stated that she feels her work has evolved since the course, but slowly. Still, Participant 5 feels that the fact that she has moved on from working only with grammatical structures has already been an important step in her practice.

Participant 8 and Participant 4 seemed to have a similar view, especially when they stated that there had been more interaction and interest on the part of their students since the moment when they started working with culture. The following statements illustrate this view:

"Objectives are generally focused on broadening students' cultural repertoire... I was surprised many times by students when they arrived in class with cultural information that I myself did not know, which demonstrated a more effective participation of pupils." (Participant 4, questionnaire)

"When teaching contemplates cultural questions, it is more pleasant, students interact and have much curiosity about the cultures of people from abroad." (Participant 8, questionnaire)

These views of Participants 4, 5 and 8 can already be considered a positive outcome of the course. To us, they show that even participants who had a less complex approach to culture in their classes (both those who were aware of it and those who did not seem to be) reported benefits of bringing cultural issues into their classrooms (including more student participation, better interaction between students, improvement of teaching methods, and classes that were more pleasant). In addition, we feel that the level of awareness about their own work with language and culture presented by Participant

8, and especially Participant 5 (who was interviewed) is also important here, as it suggests that the course may have made them more critical in relation to the teaching of language and culture (even if such critical take might not have translated into practices – at least yet).

However, it is still significant that these participants have only been working with specific cultural information, without taking into consideration issues such as intercultural awareness, different types and concepts of culture, or more critical approaches to the teaching of culture. There are a number of reasons that may account for this. Two of them could be the short period of the course, and the lack of resources (such as libraries and computers) and precarious work conditions in participants' contexts – something that, similarly to the cases of Participants 2 and 6, all of them reported. This was particularly emphasized by Participant 4, who felt that PARFOR was good, but more teacher preparation was still necessary beyond the program (Interview). The accounts of these participants thus reflect arguments made by scholars in the field of language education in relation to the need for continuous, strong teacher development – for both pre-service and in-service educators.

Finally, as stated at the beginning of this section, one participant claimed that she rarely addressed cultural issues in her classes (Participant 7). This participant answered the questionnaire with one-line responses, so it was difficult to really understand anything about her experiences or why she did not work with culture in class. It is still relevant, however, that like other participants she said she felt the lack of resources was still a problem in her context.

4.3 Focus on the inner circle

One final important aspect that emerged from the data and which we had not anticipated was the emphasis some participants placed on inner circle countries (Kachru, 1992) – more specifically, the United States. During the entire language and culture course, discussions over the international status of English and its implications for teaching culture were held. As explained by Diniz de Figueiredo & Sanfelici (2017), and mentioned earlier here, the notions of “English/Anglophone” and “culture” were deconstructed from the very beginning of the course; and we had felt that students who finished it would not focus so much on the inner circle in their future practices.

What we observed from some participants' accounts, on the other hand, was different from our expectations. This was particularly the case of Participants 2, 4, 5, and 8. These four subjects' reports of their practices with culture showed that their work still puts some emphasis on the inner circle. The statements below illustrate this emphasis:

“... I try to relate American folktales to our regional tales and literary texts.”
(Participant 2, questionnaire)

“... I'd like to promote an exchange between public school students and North American students, so that Brazilian pupils could get to know and live an important experience of English culture.” (Participant 4, questionnaire)

“Students present a theater play written by an American writer or a writer from another country that has English as its official language.” (Participant 5, questionnaire)

“I think about having a videoconference with Brazilian and American students.” (Participant 8, questionnaire)

This emphasis on the inner circle – in particular the United States – brings another layer of complexity to our results, especially when we consider the emphasis on the international status of English and the deconstruction of notions such as native speaker and Anglophone that were given in the course. We interpret such emphasis as evidence of two factors: a) the fact that developing EIL perspectives is a thorough process for teachers (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2017), which may take a long time; and b) the fact that inner circle countries and varieties – especially the USA and American English – are still very strong in Brazilian ELT (Friedrich, 2000).

The cases of Participants 4, 5, and 8 are more understandable in that sense. After all, as previously discussed, these individuals had more traditional approaches to the teaching of culture. Participant 2’s example, on the other hand, is more intriguing. As shown earlier, this participant’s account of his practices presented at least some notions that seemed to be EIL-informed – particularly his focus on working with intercultural sensitivity, and the fact that he felt his students developed an understanding that English is not a distant entity from them. His focus on the inner circle was thus puzzling to us.

During the interview with Participant 2, we asked specifically about this issue. He explained to us that his choice of using US works in his project was not motivated by a belief that English belongs to that context exclusively, or by a focus on native speaker varieties for teaching. Instead, it was a result of the fact that these were the works he knew and felt confident to work with.

Therefore, we feel that Participant 2’s use of inner circle works can be interpreted based on two important factors. First, it supports the notion that choosing inner circle varieties and materials to work with students is not a problem *in itself*; it is a problem only when this is done uncritically (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). Participant 2’s choice, in our view, was not necessarily made critically; yet, his interview showed us that he at least reflected upon it. Second, it shows once again that developing EIL perspectives and practices is a long process that demands time, reflection, preparation, support, and much teacher development (Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2017).

Participant 2’s case is thus a good example of the complexities that are involved in EIL-guided teacher education and in the choices made by English language teachers on a daily basis; and his reflection can be seen as a positive aspect of his own learning and development as an educator.

The cases presented in this section show us that even after taking courses that emphasize EIL, such as the one presented here (and we know other courses in the PARFOR program participants took also emphasized such orientation to ELT), teachers may still be and/or feel unprepared to work with this perspective. Thus, the data presented here once again highlight the growing need to develop whole programs and specific curricula that are based on the EIL paradigm – not only for pre-service, but also for in-service teacher education.

5. CONCLUSION

An overall appreciation of our data and results shows some positive outcomes of the course we prepared (and one of us conducted). First, there are the accounts of participants 2 and 6, which show a growing level of consciousness and reflection towards working with an intercultural approach to culture, and developing students' perceptions of English as a language that is closer to them than they think. The awareness that participants 5 and 8 have of their limitations in terms of their practices with language and culture is also important in that sense. It would be interesting to see if/how such awareness will translate into more intercultural, EIL-based practices in the future.

Another benefit is that most participants felt that what they learned in the course had changed their practices, in more or less complex ways. It may be hard for some readers to realize how difficult the contexts where participants work and come from really are. Working in three to four schools in rural areas in the north of Brazil – where resources are scarce and there is little support – constitutes a major challenge. This challenge is amplified by the fact that many times teachers in these contexts feel unprepared, even in terms of language proficiency (see Lima, 2011). Knowing that most participants feel better equipped to prepare and conduct lessons in ways that go beyond working with grammatical structures exclusively after the course is thus rewarding.

However, it is still relevant that a number of participants' accounts showed a less complex approach to language and culture in their classes. Some factors need to be taken into account when considering such results. The main one is the short, intensive nature of this course, and PARFOR courses overall, which makes it hard to work with issues such as language and culture with all the depth they deserve. We thus reinforce other scholars' call for more pre- and in-service teacher development in ELT, especially for teachers who already face many challenges in critical contexts – which is true for the participants of this study and may also be the case of many PARFOR students nationwide.

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