

To what extent is American English the most appropriate variety for Brazilian EFL state school students?

Até que ponto o inglês Americano é a variedade mais apropriada para ser ensinada nas escolas estaduais brasileiras?

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***Abstract:** This article sets out to examine the most taught varieties of English in Brazilian public schools (British and American), as well as the effect of these varieties on students' perception and attitudes towards other varieties of English. The issues of language competence, cultural identity, local context, ELT in Brazilian public schools and English as an international language are discussed. The text begins with a brief discussion on the varieties of English most taught in Brazilian public schools, then the issue of ELT status in Brazil is examined, followed by a brief review of the spread of English as an international language.*

***Key words:** language; identity; culture; context; attitude.*

***Resumo:** Este artigo tem como objetivo examinar as variedades de Inglês mais ensinadas em escolas públicas Brasileiras, bem como o efeito dessas variedades na percepção e atitudes dos alunos em relação a outras variedades de Inglês. Assuntos tais como competência linguística, identidade cultural, contexto local; o ensino de Inglês em geral na rede pública Brasileira; bem como o papel do inglês como língua internacional são discutidos. O texto começa com uma breve discussão sobre as variedades de inglês que são mais ensinadas na escola pública brasileira, então o status do ensino da língua inglesa bem como o inglês como língua internacional é discutido.*

***Palavras-chave:** Língua; identidade; cultura; contexto; atitude.*

1 Introduction

This paper proposes that enabling students to become competent users of an intelligible international variety of English, as well as building up students' cultural identities according to their context should be the main aim of English Language Teaching (ELT) in public education in Brazil. It seems more relevant for Brazilian public school students to learn an international variety of English which enables them to communicate with other non-native speakers (NNS) in the world rather than focus learners' attention only on American or British standard varieties, because learners' chances of interacting with other NNS of English are much greater than interacting with native speakers (NS) of the target language.

According to Friedrich (2000:218), most EFL Brazilian students are taught either the American or British variety of English. However, it is important to reflect to what extent these varieties fulfil Brazilian students' needs, especially public school students who do not have other possibilities to afford private language courses and depend completely on the state to learn a foreign language.

According to Brazilian National Public Education Policy, which is dictated by the law 'LDB' 9.394/1996, teaching at least one additional language is compulsory from the fifth grade of primary education until the last year of secondary school; and a second foreign language should be added at the beginning of secondary school. These foreign languages can be chosen by the school community according to the importance of the languages to the local context (Bohn, 2003:160). Unfortunately, neither the private nor the public education systems seem to be able to provide adequate English education in the regular elementary and secondary curriculum (ibid). Therefore wealthier families tend to send their children to private language courses where they can develop their English language skills (ibid). This emphasises the idea that English language learning is still the privilege of a few in Brazil (Bohn, 2003:159).

These discussions are carried on throughout this article in the following way: firstly, a brief review of the spread of English as an international language is presented, leading to a reflection on the implications of this phenomenon for the Brazilian context; secondly, the issue of varieties of English in Brazil is discussed to broaden our understanding of Brazilian attitudes and perceptions about varieties of English; and thirdly, the pedagogical implications of teaching other varieties of English and the consequences this has on Brazilian students' pronunciation are analysed. Having outlined the directions of this text, in the following paragraphs the role of English as an international language is analysed.

2 English as an international language / Lingua Franca (ELF)

It is important to understand why a language acquires the status of a world language. A language becomes a global language when it acquires a high status of importance around the world (Crystal, 1997:2). Crystal explains that it can happen in two different ways. Firstly, a language can be made the official language of the country and may serve as a means of communication for the government and the educational system and, secondly, a language can acquire the status of the most important foreign language in the country (ibid). In Brazil, English seems to have the status of the most important foreign language and Brazilians have very positive attitudes towards learning it (Friedrich, 2000:219). She explains that her research on Brazilian attitudes towards leaning English enabled her to understand that Brazilians would

study English even if English did not have the status of a global language (ibid). Her study is discussed later in order to broaden our understanding of ELT in Brazil.

It seems that the most important function that English can have in state schools in Brazil is one of a lingua franca. The term, lingua franca, defines English as an international language where the English language is used to enable speakers of other mother tongues to communicate intelligibly with one another (Graddol, 2005:2). It does not mean that there should be a standard model to be followed (ibid). The main reason why there should be a common language for international communication is that a vehicle of mutual intelligibility among international communities, for example air traffic controllers or scientists, is needed (Ibid). In this international scenario, speakers can maintain their cultural identity, linguistic characteristics and accents of their first languages provided that it does not hinder mutual intelligibility (ibid).

There seem to be many explanations for English becoming an international language. Some people argue that English became one due to its simple grammar and few endings (Crystal, 1997:7). However, the main reason why a language becomes international is the political power of its people (ibid). Military power is responsible for establishing the language as international but it is the economic power of a nation that maintains an international language (ibid).

The twentieth century experienced fast technological development and a globalisation of the world's economy (Crystal, 1997:8). As a consequence the distances between countries and cultures were shortened and it became necessary to use a common international language to serve as a means of communication (ibid). English has acquired the status of an international language due to British and American influence on industrial and scientific development in the world, as well as the economic and military power of these nations (ibid).

According to Smith (1976 in: McKay, 2002:12), a definition of international language is “[...] one which is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another”. McKay (2002:12) explains that this definition is illuminating regarding international language and culture. She supports the definition above in the following way: firstly, students do not need to acquire the norms of native speakers of the target language; secondly, there is no owner of the target language; and, thirdly, the main aim in learning the target language is to be able to communicate our own ideas and culture and not depend on inner circle countries' norms. The inner circle countries are the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada where English has the status of mother tongue (McKay, 2002:6).

It is apparent from the above that English language teachers in state schools in Brazil need to rethink their methodologies and concepts regarding varieties of English so that the students can develop autonomy and critical thinking regarding other possibilities of English accents and varieties.

This idea of becoming independent of inner circle country varieties of English seems to be extremely important as it allows the individuals to choose the culture and language variety that best suit their needs. There is no clear explanation why Brazilians should learn only the American or British variety of English. Having analysed the importance of English as an international language, the proceeding paragraphs will focus on varieties of English in Brazil.

3 Varieties of English in Brazil

This section explores the varieties of English in Brazil. Firstly, the role of English in Brazil is presented focusing attention on Brazilian attitudes towards varieties of English; then discussion of another study on varieties focusing on pronunciation enables the reader to understand why the American variety is the most prestigious in Brazil.

According to Kachru, the status of English in Brazil can be defined as:

Some English-using communities require the use of the language (largely by individuals and in limited numbers) for contact with the external world, for communication with other individuals and communities, for access to science and the other international uses for which English is the vehicle; these international needs constitute the major requirement for English in certain countries (e.g. Japan, Turkey, Brazil) (Kachru, 1983:25).

This definition gives a clear idea of the role of English in Brazil, which is to enable learners to participate actively in an international community of users of English. Consequently, English as an Additional Language (EAL) Brazilian teachers should reflect on their teaching practice and evaluate whether the learners are being prepared to communicate in English or not. Through my professional life as an EFL state school teacher in Brazil, the theory seems to be perfect; in other words, the public education laws in Brazil seem to reflect exactly what learners' need, as these laws emphasise the importance of communication in foreign language classes. However, it seems that in practical terms this is not exactly what happens in public schools in Brazil. According to Mompean (1997:7), in general ELT in Brazilian state schools does not guarantee students' communicative competence as the focus seems to be on the formal aspect of the language.

Brazilians generally study American or British varieties of English (ibid) and the choice of pronunciation model depends on the school or historical and geographical reasons (Mompean, 1997:1). Speaking English seems to be the main goal regardless of the variety studied (ibid). This information suggests that in Brazil there is a lack of critical awareness of the importance of learning other varieties of English (ibid). It also raises the question of what the consequences of offering only two possible varieties of English to the learners' communicative competence are and whether Brazilian students are able to communicate effectively with speakers of other varieties of English in the world.

According to research carried out by Friedrich (2000:218), English is considered a very important additional language in Brazil. In fact, it is the most studied foreign language in the country (ibid). Brazilians have positive attitudes regarding learning English and understand the necessity of using it as an international means of communication (ibid). English is directly related to status and seen as a gateway to job opportunities and professional development (ibid).

Although the focus of this essay is on varieties of English taught in public state schools in Brazil, it is relevant to contrast the situation with private language schools in Brazil as the literature is larger in this area. The first study was carried out by Friedrich (2000:216), which investigated private language schools in Brazil. Her study was carried out in a prestigious private language school in São Paulo. A questionnaire was designed to elicit information about attitudes and expectations of Brazilian students regarding their English learning process.

She carried out her research by applying 190 questionnaires in a private language school in São Paulo. The questionnaires contained 24 questions regarding participants' socio-economic situations as well as their personal perceptions of the English language. Her essay focuses on students' answers to four questions regarding varieties of English. 82% of the students answered that they recognise the existence of only American or British English. According to Friedrich (2000:218), this is a consequence of a lack of contact with other varieties. She argues that the students' model is the variety spoken by the teacher and the variety of the student's book and audio material. She also explains that 54% of students answered that the American variety has more prestige, and 26% claimed that both American and British have the same level of status (ibid). Another analysis provided by Friedrich (2000:218) argues that 41% of the students answered that the British variety is easier to understand than the American, which in a way contradicts the assumption that the greater the exposition the more intelligible the variety becomes (ibid). In general, Brazilians think that the British speak slowly and articulate the sounds clearer than Americans (ibid).

Brazilians seem to judge the British variety as easier to understand and this might be influenced by the selective material provided by teachers for listening comprehension activities (Friedrich, 2000:218). She explains that when asked what variety best suits their needs, 80 % of students answered that the American variety is the one which suits their needs as they believe they will have more chances to interact with Americans. 60 % of the students agreed that English is an international language and added that they would study it even if it were not an international language (ibid). However, her study found that generally Brazilians have unrealistic expectations towards the length of time necessary to become fluent speakers and believe that they will be fluent in English in three or four years (Friedrich, 2000:221).

Friedrich's study is very useful to understand how Brazilians deal with varieties of English but there should be more research in public schools for a clearer idea of how ELT is integrated into students' lives and to what extent state school students understand the importance of learning other varieties of English. The literature is vast in the private sector of education in Brazil but regarding public education there should be more research and investigation. As emphasised at the beginning of this essay, ELT in public state schools should be a gateway for opportunities and a catalyst for changes in Brazilian attitudes and perceptions towards varieties of English.

According to Mompean (1997:3), Brazilians have ambiguous attitudes towards the choice of variety. She argues that it is possible to identify two distinct groups in Brazil. The first is formed by those individuals who were university students in the sixties and experienced the dictatorial period and now tend to resent the American variety. They had bad experiences in those times and they associate those experiences with the idea that the USA supported the Military (ibid). Nonetheless, those students from the sixties are professionals nowadays; some are professors at universities or researchers who need to speak English to travel abroad and attend conferences in English (ibid). This information on the dictatorial period in the sixties when Brazil suffered political and economical oppressions contributes to the scope of this essay as it suggests that those parents who avoid enrolling their children in schools where American English is the variety taught might associate this variety with negative experiences from that period.

Conversely, as Mompean (1997:3) explains, the second group of Brazilians consists of very young people who are overshadowed by an American way of life which seems to influence learners' culture and attitudes. Mompean argues that this American influence on Brazilian behaviour might be a result of the geographic proximity of these countries. Another aspect is the influence of American television in the world. She supports her argument, quoting Kachru:

The intrusion of American English into British English is slow perceptible.... American English is slowly becoming today's world language and its impact is all pervasive on the English speaking world. This new trend may therefore influence the choice of a model (Kachru, 1990: 143 cited in: Mompean, 1997:5).

This quotation gives a clear idea of the influence of American variety of English in the world. However, this raises the question to what extent American English is able to fulfil Brazilian EFL students' needs.

Mompean's (1997:1) research offers some insights towards the American variety. In her study, she analysed Brazilian oral production. This study was part of her doctoral research in the city of Campinas in São Paulo state. She chose a language school situated on campus where most students were university students or from the students' families. She distributed sixty-six questionnaires among beginners to advanced English language students. The students indicated that their aim in learning English was to be able to communicate and improve their pronunciation (ibid).

To check which variety of English they would use to perform certain tasks, twenty-seven students were chosen and given some tasks (Mompean, 1997:7). She explains the sequence of activities as the following: the first activity consisted of a task in which students were supposed to describe a picture; in the second activity students were asked to read a list of words including all the phonemes of Received Pronunciation (RP), at the initial, middle or final position (ibid); and the third activity consisted of students telling the story of Little Red Riding Hood (ibid). RP was recorded by the phonetician Daniel Jones in the first half of the twentieth century, and it was considered a sign of status (Harmer, 2001:7).

The data analysis offers some insights regarding Brazilian students' oral production (Mompean, 1997:8). She explains that in relation to vocabulary, 78 % of words used by Brazilian students while describing the picture consisted of American English. Regarding pronunciation, she argues that some examples of pronunciation elicited while learners were telling the story of Little Red Riding Hood are associated with Brazilian pronunciation, rather than a choice of RP or GA (General American) pronunciation. She gives an example: the word 'red' /red/, which contained a vocalic ending. Mompean (1997:8) explains that the diphthongs tend to be monophthongised and lengthened, as in 'hair'/reɪ/. She explains that this modification followed an American principle. While analysing the vowels, she argues that Brazilians have the tendency to use RP pronunciation (59.8%) in the words 'not' and 'box'. She explains that GA pronunciation was chosen in the opened sounds in 'red, text, there'. She concluded that this might be interference from Portuguese.

Mompean (1997:8) identified a clear influence between Portuguese and the American variety of English regarding nasalisation. The students tended to over emphasise nasalisation in the word 'London'/Lɒndən/ for example. Regarding vocalisation, again she identified interference of Portuguese influencing the choice for GA, and an example is the word 'milk'. She explains that in general the phonic model, followed by Brazilians, represents (63.7%) of GA. She claims that many similarities between the American varieties of English and 'Brazilian' Portuguese were identified, which might serve as an explanation for Brazilian preference for the American variety.

Although Mompean's (1997) research has given useful explanations for Brazilians' choice of English, it does not mean that the American variety is the most appropriate for Brazilian state schools. As her study was in private language schools, her findings collaborate but certainly do not explain the situation of varieties in public state schools in Brazil. Students from state schools seem to have different needs and expectations of the English language. These students consider English an important tool to enable them to progress in life. Therefore the choice of variety of English in Brazil should be revised so that students can become competent users of the language as an international language. Considering that most of the interactions Brazilians have in English is not with English native speakers, there is no explanation why they should learn only native varieties and pursue native-like pronunciation. Having analysed the issue of varieties of English in Brazil, the next paragraphs discuss the practical teaching implications.

4 Teaching Implications

The terms native and non-native speaker create barriers among TESOL professionals (Holliday, 2005:4). The term 'non' entails something negative, inferior and not appropriate (ibid). This term is so strong that it will take a long time for people to accept an idea beyond this concept (ibid).

According to Jenkins:

Instead of speaking a monolithic variety of English, it is considered more important for speakers of Wes and ELF to be able to adjust their speech in order to be intelligible to interlocutors from a wide range of L1 backgrounds, most of whom are not inner circle native speakers (Jenkins, 2006:174).

The term Wes stands for World Englishes, the variety of English spoken in outer circle countries. The outer circle is formed by countries where English is spoken as a second or significant language, such as Singapore, India, Pakistan, Malawi, Malaysia, Nigeria (Harmer

2001:8). It seems that the quotation above resembles the situation in Brazil, where some teachers believe that learners of English should be taught the target language as a lingua franca and does not necessarily need to follow specific patterns and models dictated by native speakers.

Following Phillipson (1992 cited in: Holliday, 2005:10), it is possible to identify the influence of inner circle authors and publishers who dictate varieties that should be taught around the world and how these varieties should be taught. The first step is recognising the necessity of changing this situation and start producing materials which include other varieties of English, with different accents and include local culture (Prodomou, 1988:78). Teaching English should be a way of making individuals aware of their own reality as well as widening their horizons to the world (ibid). It is suggested therefore that teachers should evaluate the teaching materials, taking into consideration the varieties presented as well as the culture embedded in these materials (ibid).

According to Jenkins (2005:535), there should be an ELF core which would enable speakers from all over the world to keep intelligibility when interacting with each other. She argues that this lingua franca core pronunciation cannot be based on American or British varieties, as non-native speakers outnumber native speakers nowadays. Teachers seem to understand the necessity of teaching an international variety of English but insist on pursuing native-like pronunciation (ibid). Students from the expanding circle do not need to imitate native speakers; what they need is to be able to communicate intelligibly within an international community of English speakers (ibid).

The lingua franca core (LFC) has been the most researched approach in order to provide a core language to enable English as an international language (EIL) speakers' mutual intelligibility (Jenkins, 2003:126). The core features include for example the 'th' sound, which is problematic for some non-native speakers of English. The LFC would accept this sound as a consonant sound instead of unvoiced or voiced dental fricative (Setter and Jenkins, 2005:12). They explain that the other characteristics of NS English pronunciation such as vowel length, features of connected speech such as assimilation, elision, weak forms, word stress, pitch direction would be unnecessary for intelligibility in EIL communication and are therefore non-core. Jenkins (2005:12) claims that these non-core features, when influenced by a speaker's L1, are not considered errors but regional L2 sociolinguistic variations (ibid).

However, teachers from the expanding circle seem to have different and sometimes contradictory opinions about ELF pronunciation (Jenkins, 2005:540). They seem to accept the

idea of teaching different varieties of English but personally want to acquire a native-like accent (ibid). In order to widen students' horizons, teachers ought to understand the importance of accepting ELF so that they can raise students' awareness of the ELF phenomenon (ibid). It is also important to understand that developing an identity as a speaker of English as an international language is more important than trying to imitate and acquire native-like pronunciation (ibid).

According to Prodromou (2007:47), the lingua franca core proposed by Jenkins, who suggests that the native speaker should have a minimal influence in the target language and be excluded from the international community, should be carefully analysed. Firstly, he believes that what hinders intelligibility among native and non-native speakers is 'idiomaticity', in other words, the idiomatic expressions used by native speakers which are unknown to many foreigners. This way, Prodromou (2007:47) suggests that standard English grammar should be maintained and the lexical items should be culturally independent.

It is impossible to conceive the idea that a lingua franca should accept over-simplified grammatical forms (Timmis, 2003 cited in: Prodromou, 2007:48). He explains that this is not what students want or need. There must be a balance between the extremes of 'a total dependence on native speakers' norms and a self-contained variety of international English with a new set of norms' (Canagarajah, 2006 cited in: Prodromou, 2007:47).

These new ideas regarding ELF teaching and learning demand from teachers a reassessment regarding their methodologies and approaches (ibid). According to McKay (2002:119), it is no longer necessary to look at inner circle varieties of English and pedagogy in order to teach the language in expanding circle countries. She argues that teachers ought to reflect on the positive sides of communicative language teaching (CLT) as well as on the negative sides and be critical in understanding that CLT is a model created by inner circle countries; hence it does not suit and fulfil students' needs in all parts of the world (ibid).

Although CLT seems to fulfil the needs of EFL teachers and students around the world, it is important to take into consideration that the CLT does not consider the context of learning as the base in the learning process. The first procedure before planning a course or a class is to consider the students' context, needs, expectations, the classroom culture, the school culture as well as the national culture (Bax, 2003:285). Teachers should know learners' context, objectives and expectations so that it becomes easier to fulfil learners' needs. This would enable easier facilitation of the learning process, and suggest new ideas. EFL Brazilian state school teachers are responsible for promoting changes and perceptions towards varieties of English in Brazil. It

depends on the teachers giving examples to the students and helping them broaden their possibilities in the world.

5 Conclusion

Having discussed the importance of teaching other varieties of English rather than only American English in state schools in Brazil, as well as the importance of developing an identity as a speaker of an international language, it can be said that there should be more research on teachers' and students' attitudes and perceptions regarding varieties of English so that it could be possible to teach EFL in a more modern and meaningful way in state schools in Brazil. From a reflection on the law 'LDB' which gives the directions for public education in Brazil, it is possible to conclude that the role of English in public schools in Brazil is to be a means of international communication, but in practical terms there is very little communication in the EFL classroom.

To conclude, English is an international language and nobody owns it anymore. There is no reason why one should teach only the American variety of English in state schools in Brazil. Students can benefit more by being in contact with different accents, cultures and ideas. My responsibility as an EFL teacher in Brazil is to be a catalyst and motivate other teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and accept new ideas, new varieties of English. This way teachers and students can become independent from the inner circle norms dictated by the USA or the UK and focus attention on other countries, other possibilities.

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