Decolonizing identities: English for internationalization in a brazilian university

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Abstract: In the context of international higher education, the English language can be a burden to scholars and students who do not feel this language belongs to them. When learning English as a foreign language in a country such as Brazil, where I am writing from, such a burden easily becomes a tool of colonization – of mouths and minds. In Brazilian higher education, attempts to use English as a medium of instruction have just started, creating feelings of inadequacy and contributing to construct troubled professional identities. This is the scenario focused on in this text, whose aim is to examine one dimension of an institutional practice established to tackle such feelings and identity constructions from a decolonized discursive perspective. In order to do this, the text starts by presenting the context in which English becomes a problem, offering a post-structuralist perspective on language as a way to decolonize the identities of Brazilian English-speakers. Then, it focuses on a higher education initiative in Brazil taken at a public university to discuss language issues with Brazilian professors of different areas of knowledge, using English as an International Language as a medium for discussion.

Keywords: EMI. Higher education. English language.

Resumo: no contexto da educação superior, a língua inglesa pode ser considerada um fardo pesado para professores e alunos que sentem que esta língua não lhes pertence. Ao aprender inglês como língua estrangeira em um país como o Brasil, onde escrevo este texto, tal peso se torna facilmente um instrumento de colonização – de bocas e mentes. No ensino superior brasileiro, tentativas de usar o inglês como meio de instrução são recentes, criando sensações de inadequação e contribuindo para construir identidades profissionais atribuladas. Este é o cenário sobre o qual se debruça este texto, cujo objetivo é analisar uma prática institucional estabelecida com o objetivo de abordar esses sentimentos e construções identitárias a partir de uma perspectiva pós-colonial. Assim, o texto apresenta o contexto no qual

a língua inglesa pode representar um problema, e defende uma perspectiva pós-estruturalista de língua como uma forma de descolonizar as identidades de professores brasileiros que usam a língua inglesa em suas aulas. Através da descrição e análise de uma iniciativa tomada por uma universidade pública brasileira voltada para a discussão dessas questões com professores de diferentes áreas do conhecimento que usam, ou pretendem usar, a língua inglesa como meio de discussão.

Palavras-chave: EMI. Ensino superior. Língua inglesa.

Introduction

English is the language of internationalization – it's on the papers, in academic research, on TV, in the social mind…. Inescapable, it seems. If an academic institution wants to be international, it needs to teach in English, to publish in English (RAJAGOPALAN, 2015; PILLER & CHO, 2013). It needs to live and breathe in English. Those who do not feel comfortable with this language will soon (if not yet) be considered dated, old-fashioned, lagging behind. Even though this seems to be consensual, the Brazilian government only realized the importance of English for their undergraduate student exchange program Science Without Borders, launched in 2011 , after its two first editions had more places than students who could reach the minimum TOEFL score to study abroad. Then the government created a subprogram called English Without Borders (2012), so that university students preparing to be English teachers could teach English to other undergraduate students before they all finished their university education (JORDAO & MARTINEZ, 2015). Problem solved? Well, not really. But TOEFL scores did increase and more students have been able to study abroad now. So does that mean the program is a success? Well, not really, again.

The reason why I believe this did not solve the problem is simple: there is a bigger language problem than the low scores on TOEFL can bear witness to. This problem is that English has been treated as a neutral, instrumental language rather than as a locus of meaning-making, object of desire and investments (MOTHA & LIN, 2013). We seem to have forgotten (if we ever really knew) that a language is not a neutral means for the transmission of meanings created in the minds of some people and conveyed to the minds of other people. A language is always a contested site, a dialogical space where people construct meanings, identities, knowledges, and are also constructed by the associations, links, relations made among meanings; such meanings and relations are, in turn, loci where identities are performed. A language has history, it exists in political territories, ideologically marked and ever-changing. A language such as English has its own history, its specific ideologies, its particular meanings, associations and users, all of them identified, constructed, related in specific ways, never neutral, never innocent.

Meanings thus constructed have an impact on how we see ourselves and one another, and even more so in the context of higher education (HE) in Brazil, a highly competitive space where neo-liberal ideas have recently found fertile ground, emphasizing concerns with quantity over quality and immediateness over maturation, thus privileging areas where it is possible to measure impact and to concretely observe quantifiable research results.

English is linked to discourses on globalization, internationalization, efficacy, competitiveness, neoliberalism, American international politics (ZACCHI, in print). In education, these discourses translate into practices that consider deep analysis and critical thinking as "killjoy naysayers" whose sole wish is said to be to demolish good initiatives and impede change. When

you see languages as autonomous grammatical systems corresponding to neatly-bounded world views, when you see them as domains of nation-states and expressions of national cultures, there is no surprise you associate specific languages to specific ideologies. When you ignore that these views on languages have been constructed by linguistics based on abstractions and overgeneralizations (HARRIS, 2003; PENNYCOOK, 2007), you can easily fall on the trap of colonization by not being able to see languages also as open spaces for the construction of meanings, spaces that are simultaneously bound to and by distinct ideologies and liberating from these same ideologies. Looking at the specific domain of English, one cannot but agree with Widdowson (2003, p.46) that

> One might accept the conspiracy theory that there was an intention to use English to dominate, but the assumption that the intention was successful, this is often taken as a necessary corollary, is based on a concept of the language as an invariant code with communication as the simple transmission of encoded messages by ideal speaker-listeners in homogeneous speech communities. Far from "ideal", the world of English as an International Language is unpredictable, as are the nationalities, identities and peculiarities of those that use it across borders, cultures, perspectives, nation states and world views. It is a transnational language (BRYDON, 2013) whose colonizing history cannot be forgotten, but at the same time a language that cannot be allowed to silence new histories and its contemporary users and uses that open up the language to the world. It is in this two-fold simultaneity that English needs to be faced, so that it can help us decolonize the identities of those who have been submitted to it for a long time and grown to be insecure professionals, suffering from what has already been diagnosed as "the Impostor Syndrome" (BERNAT, 2008).

The Impostor Syndrome

Eva Bernat (2008) presents us with the concept of "impostorhood", originally from pshychology, using it to explain the identitary constructions of "non-native" teachers of English. Characterized by "feelings of inadequacy, personal inauthenticity or fraudulence, self-doubt, low self-efficacy, and sometimes generalized anxiety" (BERNAT, 2008: 1), this syndrome can be an integral part of "non-native" teachers practice, since according to Bernat there is a tendency that such teachers feel uncomfortable when teaching a language they don't feel as "theirs", or when they realize their command of the language is not "near-native", as traditionally expected from teachers of English. The communicative approach, with the help of some language acquisition theories and mainstream applied linguistics, has produced a widespread myth around the "native" proficiency and projected some local language uses as global objects of desire (LEUNG, 2005; PENNYCOOK & MAKONI, 2007; TÍLIO, 2015).

The binary construct "native X non-native" has exerted more than strong influence on teachers: being a "non-native" teacher of English has been conceptualized as something to be overcome through hard work and diligence but also colonially engineered as a "deficiency" that can never really be "cured", since it is a birthmark no plastic surgery can delete. Thus constructed as always "lacking", teachers of English who were not born in legitimized English speaking countries have built their professional (and personal, since separating the two can be an impossible task) identities around the myth of the native speaker: insecure and submissive in terms

of their abilities as language users, they have submitted to the colonial structure and accepted imported methods, imported language descriptions, imported acquisition theories and pedagogies.

English as an international language

Recent developments in applied linguistics have been taking into account studies about language use in contexts where English is not the first language. Research with users who have learned English as a "foreign" language (explicitly intending to learn the language and having previously learned another language - their "mother tongues") has shown that these users develop strategies for intelligibility that are different from those when native speakers are part of the situation, since in the absence of a "native" speaker the authority over the language is more horizontally shared (LEUNG, 2005, pp. 128-130). Firth (1996) has pointed out that "non-native" users tend to resort to two principles in business interactions in English as an International Language that he names as let it pass and make it normal, where, for intelligibility's sake, users "tolerate ambiguity" and do not "seek reformulations" (LEUNG, 2005, p.135). Whether this is exclusive of interactions among non-natives or it can be noticed in every interaction, with our without native users present (JORDÃO & MARQUES, in print) is not the question here. The importance of Firth's research for us now lies on what it says about how users interact in language when their purpose is to be intelligible: they let go "the norm", they move beyond their previous expectations (as far as their learned concepts of language adequacy or appropriacy are concerned) in order to construct meaning in the interaction itself, as language exchanges go along.

This pays evidence to what Harris (1990; 1998) has called integrative linguistics and to what Pennycook & Makoni (2007, p.109) advocate as a need to redefine language:

> The myth(s) of EIL (English as an International Language) erase the memory that English is a fabrication, that languages are inventions and that talk of English as an international language is a piece of intellectual slippage that replaces the history of this invention with a belief in its natural identity. The myth of EIL depoliticizes English, and does so not by ignoring English but by constantly talking about it, making English innocent, giving it a natural and eternal justification, a clarity that is not that of a description but an assumption of fact. The myth of EIL deals not merely with the invention of English, but with the strategies that constantly keep that invention in place, with the relentless repetition of the stories and tales about this thing called English. We need to disinvent English, to demythologise it, and then to look at how a reinvention of English may help us understand more clearly what it is we are dealing with here.

Among these inventions are, of course, the concepts of adequacy and appropriacy mentioned above, created in and from abstractions about how languages work, based mainly (if not exclusively) in generalizations of local native uses. Also, among the strategies that keep the myth in place are the tales around English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and its relation to internationalization. Nevertheless, such inventions do have a material objectivity and importance to language users, as they set norms and deviations, right and wrong, good or bad in terms of language use. As mentioned by Pennycook & Makoni (2005, p. 98), “although languages were invented on invented terrain, and although the dubious attempts to trace the linear linguistic origins of languages do so along invented genealogies, these

inventions have a reality for the people who deal with them". This reality is manifest, among other contexts, in the use of EMI in HE, especially when "non-native" professors and students are involved, as we will see below.

English as a *locus* for discussion

Informed by research on EIL, globalization, HE internationalization and ethics, the Federal University of Paraná, in the south of Brazil, idealized a course for professors called "English for Internationalization". The course was developed from an initiative taken by the administration to teach English to professors of different areas who already taught or were planning to teach their postgraduate courses in English. Presented with this demand, the university language center contacted me due to my involvement with the international research project "Ethical Internationalism in Higher Education" and my university affiliation with the English area of the Modern Languages Department, at the same university. Based on such request, I presented the administration with a sort of "counter-proposal", as the course I planned to "teach" went beyond the usual model of extension courses offered at the university. The course main aim would be to deal with English as a Locus for Discussion rather than the usual Medium of Instruction or EMI. Instead of conceiving a course to "teach English", the course was designed to critically reflect on the importance of internationalization and of English in this process, discussing different concepts of language and their implications to teaching in English at a public university in Brazil.

The assumptions guiding the course were the following:

- Our language center already offered ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses for the general public. Our initiative here

should be different from that.

- The audience for the course would be experienced professors-researchers whose contact with the English language was already part of their professional routine. For a professor to teach at our postgraduate programs they must have already published internationally and participated in international conferences, most of them in English. So the target professors were already proficient in English. Although it was clear to me that the concept and criteria for “proficiency” I was using was different from those of the administration and the professors themselves, I carried on conceiving of proficiency in terms of familiarity, practice and exposure. Therefore, professors with this profile would need a critical approach to English, rather than an instrumental one. I took the latter for granted, and geared the course to professors who wished to use English for discussion not just instruction.
- As participation would be voluntary, the professors who showed up would be hopefully willing to engage in debates on the (1) impact of English in the academy, (2) issues involving research partnerships abroad, contact with other scholars in English and being published in that language, (3) participation in international conferences in English, and (4) the consequences of using English in our classes with a majority of Brazilian students.

Indeed, the course proposal sent both to the administration and later to

the postgraduate programs/target participants clearly stated that the course

> was not going to be a course of English as traditionally conceived. The idea is to create an environment where English is used (partial immersion) to discuss actions related to academic activities, such as paper presentations in conferences and seminars, mail exchange with potential foreign partners, planning and teaching classes in English for international and Brazilian students (Course Proposal, 2015)[7].

The administration embraced this proposal and the 40-hour course started in April 2015, with the explicit intention of becoming a site for future research – and for this I had the collaboration of a fellow professor from Languages. She took the responsibility of taking ethnographic notes of our meetings and giving me suggestions for class planning, occasionally stepping in for some of the time . Before she could join us, though, our first meetings were used to clarify the course design, its aims and intended participants, as well as to do some prospective diagnosis of the group in terms of their experience with the English language. We discussed especially what we understood by the reference to a collaborative course syllabus, focusing on one extract from the course proposal that read

> It is important to make it explicit that this is neither a pre-planned course with an already established syllabus, nor English classes as traditionally understood, but discussions and activities around academic actions, developed in English from the experiences of participants as researchers in international environments. Our main aim is to create a routine (culture) of discussion and academic production in the English language, thus preparing the university structure for internationalization (Course Proposal, 2015)[9].

From the initial 20 professors enrolled, only 7 attended the meetings all the way through. Half of them never showed up; one gave up right after the first meeting, when the aims of the course were made clear – she was expecting a language course; two of them attended the first three meetings only – perhaps to make sure it was really not going to be a language course, but they never explained why they quit. The remaining seven were present till the end of the course, though some of them missed many meetings due to their participation in conferences abroad, thesis committees and administrative meetings. We later found out that many of the ones who enrolled had never actually read the proposal – they were simply told by their course coordinators that the university administration was offering an English course for teachers.

The two next sections briefly analyze one of the dimensions of such course, focusing on the concept of proficiency associated to core-subject contents and language, especially the demands placed on scholars by the construct of the "native speaker".

Professing...

This was a course for professors, by professors. It was important to make it clear that the course would be a space for sharing our English-related practices, our conquests, our efforts, our pain using English, in English. The agreement was that we would all contribute with our own professional (and personal) experiences and expertise using English in academia. The course syllabus was therefore actually built in the process, with everyone's collaboration, as we had professors from the biological sciences, engineering, management and languages.

We often talked about how we felt in relation to our own ability to

use English: most described themselves fairly (this turned out to be a key word) comfortable speaking English with non-native speakers such as us all in the group, but when there was a native-speaker present, they said things changed drastically for the worse. They also felt it took an absurdly long time to write academic papers in English. As to publishing, all of us had had terrible experiences with editors and reviewers from mainstream journals in our areas. We shared our discomfort with the criteria used to reject our submissions, feeling most of it was based on prejudice as it took a local "style" (or cultural/academic discourse) and projected it as universal criteria for text and research quality; for us, such standards should be negotiated rather than used as a justification for turning down high quality papers.

We debated the impact of the constructs "native and non-native speaker", to which most of the participants had never given much thought. It came as a surprise to many that applied linguistics had exposed these as myths (PENNYCOOK, 2007) and that language teachers were now looking at language uses from the perspective of English as a Lingua Franca. This meant that the norm (as an abstraction inspired in "native" uses) was being challenged and that intelligibility and accommodation strategies were considered more important to proficiency than grammatical accuracy. Such perspective contrasted with the feedback professors had received from editors, and thus the colonial aspect of the publishing industry (even when it did project itself as "neutrally" scientific, and therefore "a-political") was foregrounded in our discussions. Speaking from professors to professors, we shared our angst but the group generally felt "there was nothing we could do", since they still needed to be published in those journals.

This built a sort of complicity among the participants and allowed for

us to share some of our deepest desires, including the admiration for some "native" accents, countries, histories, cultures. We could question our own assumptions by making them explicit and exposing them to reasoning, scrutinizing them with English as a Lingua Franca theory and new trends in applied linguistics, but that did not mean we were ready to let go of them. We finished the course perhaps still wishing we could be this or that "native", but now with some understanding about where that fascination may have come from and how it impacted our professional and personal identities and practices when teaching in English.

Being *ignorant*...

Ranciére, in his **The Ignorant Schoolmaster** (1991), defended the importance of what Freire & Foundez had earlier called a "pedagogy of questions" (FREIRE & FOUNDEZ, 1985), that repositions the teacher as someone who instigates students to wonder and ponder, to think critically and to learn from questions. For Ranciére, as for Freire, one has to start from the assumption that we are all intelligent beings, students included (JORDÃO, 2014 b). It follows then that students may not need endless verbal explanations, tiresome talks and expositions, long boring lectures in order to learn: they certainly need, though, encouragement and motivation (as well as time, academic literacies, a good budget, but those are for a different discussion, of course).

To accept the limitation of our knowledge in and of a foreign language may perhaps open doors to a more humble position. The relative horizontality thus produced can generate another kind of learning than the one that stimulates reproduction. This idea was dealt with in the course

in the form of discussions about the importance of asking questions and how that changed our roles as professors – and also how significant this change was when we were called to teach in a language that was not "our own". By not needing to be an expert in the language, we were allowed (even expected) to make "mistakes" – and by taking up English as an international language we would be liberating ourselves from native speakerism and its demands. Easier said than done, though, as mentioned above.

When thinking about EMI, we had two dimensions of the Impostor Syndrome to consider: the language we were to teach in, and the content of the subject area we specialized in. Ourselves and our students, as well as colleagues – friends and foes – did expect us to be experts in our fields. Suffering from impostorhood, it was a great relief to many that this disease had already been identified and remedies assigned for its symptoms relief. The cure, however, has not been found. When instantiated to talk about their impression on fellow scholars' English, they said everyone abroad was comfortable speaking and writing "their own English". When talking about their peers at the university, however, professors were adamant to say that they needed to improve their English by taking language courses, preferably abroad: the argument that English as an international language could be learned in Brazil was not really convincing.

For the participants, their fellow-professors were reluctant to teach in English due to their lack of proficiency in the language, besides not being convinced of the importance of English for internationalization. In other words, it was not a sense of fairness to students who did not know enough English that moved resistance against EMI, but the professors' perception of their own proficiency as lacking.

We did linger on the assumptions that allowed for such colonial discourses to emerge among the course participants. We problematized the binary constructions of adaptation-transformation, assimilation-change, reproduction-difference, looking at both poles in each binary as being hybrid and contingent. We stressed the importance of change from within such practices, of promoting colonial resistance, and discussed practices to legitimize our discourses when facing powerful institutions such as publishing houses in the Global North, from the simple idea of responding to negative feedback when having our papers rejected, to refusing to comply – negotiation was a key word for us here.

Final remarks

As a researcher, I do not take the participants impressions at face value, but as an indicator of their own (dis)associations with English (LATOUR, 2005). The lesson learned from this aspect of the course was precious, though: intransigence towards teaching in English was closely linked to how professors conceived language, and more especially English, in their personal and professional lives. Their past and present experiences using English were determinant of their perceptions of proficiency and therefore of their (lack of) confidence associated with English.

Therefore, in order to understand what goes on with English in the internationalization of higher education, we need to revisit our concept of what languages are, what they do to us (and we to them), as well as the position occupied by English in each specific cultural and political scenario where it is being used and adapted, or in other words, re-signified. In contemporary applied linguistics, proficiency can no longer be defined in

abstract, generalized terms, since it is performative, contingent, localized in each situation of practice (LEUNG, 2005; CANAGARAJAH, 2014). This needs to be discussed with professors in postgraduate programs using EMI, alongside its political implications, if we are to have ethical internationalization practices that do not suppress differences and cater for everyone's rights to learn differently.

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Notes

[1] Doutora em Letras – Língua Inglesa e Literaturas Inglesa e Norte-Americana pela USP (2001). Atualmente é professora de Língua Inglesa e Linguística Aplicada na Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, PR, Brasil. clarissamjordao@gmail.com.

[2] “Decreto da Presidência da República Nº 7.642”, dated December 13th, 2011.

[3] “Portaria do Ministério de Educação e Cultura Nº 1.466”, dated December 18th, 2012.

[4] Although terms such as “mother tongue”, “first language”, “foreign language” have been contested by various reasons (see JORDÃO, 2014 c), they are used here for clarity sake. It is important to remember, however, that as the concept of unitary, cohesive and clearly limited languages can be challenged, as we will see below, so can the idea of the order in which we learn “different” languages.

[5] More information on the Project blog at http://eihe.blogspot.com.br/.

[6] In our educational system, a public university is an institution fully supported by the government, absolutely free of charge for students (no fees, no tuitions) and whose selection process – of students and professors – is made through open, transparent examinations. We have professors and students from diverse backgrounds, the vast majority of them being Brazilians, though the international student and professor population has been growing in the last 5 years.

[7] The original in Portuguese: "Não se tratam de aulas de língua inglesa nos moldes tradicionais. A ideia é criar um ambiente onde o inglês seja utilizado (imersão parcial) a fim de se discutirem ações ligadas às atividades acadêmicas, como a apresentação de trabalhos em congressos e seminários, troca de correspondências com potenciais parceiros no exterior, planejamento e execução de aulas em língua inglesa para alunos internacionais e brasileiros."

[8] And for this I thank Aleksandra Piasecka-Till, who readily accepted the partnership.

[9] The original in Portuguese: "É importante frisar que não se trata de um curso pré-planejado e com currículo fechado, ou de aulas de inglês como tradicionalmente concebidas, mas de discussões e atividades em torno de ações acadêmicas, desenvolvidas na língua inglesa a partir das experiências dos participantes como pesquisadores em ambientes internacionais. O objetivo principal é criar um hábito (cultura) de discussão e produção acadêmica em língua inglesa, preparando assim a estrutura da UFPR para a internacionalização."

[10] As I described elsewhere, based on Eva Bernat's description of the Impostor Syndrome (BERNAT, 2008), "As 'non-native' English language teachers, our language proficiency is constructed in relation to the theoretically abstract (but putatively concrete) notion of 'native' uses and knowledges of English. We are characterized as lacking a 'perfect' or 'complete' command of the language we are teaching, despite the fact that no living creature has such command, including the "native" speakers. Thus, we are perceived, by others and by ourselves, as professionals who teach something we cannot ever really know – like some sort of masqueraders pretending to be what we are not, suffering from an 'impostor syndrome'.". (JORDÃO, 2014 a, p.232).