

**DECOLONIZING IDENTITIES: ENGLISH FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION  
IN A BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY**

Clarissa Menezes Jordão<sup>1</sup>

**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 poststructuralist 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.

**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

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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 nationstates 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 psychology, using it to explain the identity 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 or 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.

Com base no texto “**Decolonizing identities: english for internationalization in a brazilian university**”, responda às questões de 1 a 5.

### **Questão 01**

Com base no artigo, responda às questões:

- a) Qual é o cenário descrito inicialmente pela autora em relação à educação superior e a aprendizagem de língua inglesa no Brasil? (1,0)
- b) Qual o objetivo do artigo? (1,0)

### **Questão 02**

- a) Qual foi a política linguística do governo brasileiro em relação ao ensino de inglês na universidade? Qual problema ocorreu ao longo desse processo? Como o governo brasileiro buscou resolver esse problema? (1,5)
- b) Por que a autora acredita que as soluções para o aprimoramento do ensino de inglês, feita pelo governo brasileiro, nas universidades públicas não foram bem sucedidas? (1,0)

**Questão 03**

Segundo a perspectiva da autora, quais os elementos que compõem a noção de língua/linguagem que normalmente esquecemos ou ignoramos? (1,5)

**Questão 04**

Como se caracteriza a síndrome do impostor? (2,0)

**Questão 05**

Quais os efeitos na constituição identitária de professores em relação ao binarismo nativo e não-nativo de língua inglesa? (2,0)

## Espelho das Respostas

### Questão 01

Com base no artigo, responda às questões:

a) Qual é o cenário descrito inicialmente pela autora em relação à educação superior e a aprendizagem de língua inglesa no Brasil? (1,0)

*Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que a autora descreve o cenário da educação superior a língua inglesa pode ser considerada um fardo pesado para professores e alunos que sentem a língua como não lhes pertencesse, tal peso se torna um instrumento de colonização. Dessa forma, tentativas de usar o inglês como meio de instrução pode criar sensações de inadequação e contribuindo para construir identidades profissionais atribuladas.*

b) Qual o objetivo do artigo? (1,0)

*Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) compreenda que o objetivo é analisar uma prática institucional estabelecida com o objetivo de abordar sentimentos de fardo na aprendizagem de inglês 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.*

### Questão 02

a) Qual foi a política linguística do governo brasileiro em relação ao ensino de inglês na universidade? Qual problema ocorreu ao longo desse processo? Como o governo brasileiro buscou resolver esse problema? (1,5)

*Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) aponte que o governo brasileiro implementou o Programa de intercâmbio Ciência sem Fronteiras, lançado em 2011. O problema que os alunos brasileiros não atingiam a nota mínima no exame de TOEFL para estudar no exterior. Em 2012, o governo brasileiro criou o programa Inglês Sem Fronteiras no qual estudantes que se preparassem para ser professores de inglês pudessem ensinar inglês a outros alunos de graduação antes que todos concluíssem sua formação universitária.*

b) Por que a autora acredita que as soluções para o aprimoramento do ensino de inglês, feita pelo governo brasileiro, nas universidades públicas não foram bem sucedidas? (1,0)

*Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que a autora acredita que há um problema de língua maior do que as pontuações baixas no TOEFL podem demonstrar. Segundo a autora, o problema é que o inglês tem sido tratado como uma língua neutra e instrumental, e não como um locus de construção de significado, objeto de desejo e investimento.*

### Questão 03

Segundo a perspectiva da autora, quais os elementos que compõem a noção de língua/linguagem que normalmente esquecemos ou ignoramos? (1,5)

*Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) infira que língua/linguagem não é um meio neutro para a transmissão de significados criados na mente de algumas pessoas e transmitidos às mentes de outras. Uma língua é sempre um lugar de contestação, um espaço dialógico em que as pessoas constroem significados, identidades, conhecimentos e também são construídos pelas associações, vínculos e relações feitas entre os significados. Tais significados e relações são, por sua vez, loci onde as identidades são realizadas. Uma língua tem história, existe em territórios políticos, ideologicamente marcados e sempre mudando. Um idioma como o inglês tem sua própria história, suas ideologias específicas, seus significados, associações e usuários particulares, todos identificados, construídos, relacionados de maneiras específicas, nunca neutro, nunca inocente.*

### Questão 04

Como se caracteriza a síndrome do impostor? (2,0)

*Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) compreenda que a síndrome do impostor é um termo apresentado por Eva Bernat (2008) utilizado para explicar as construções identitárias de professores “não nativos” de inglês. Caracteriza-se por “sentimentos de inadequação, inautenticidade ou fraudulência pessoal, dúvida, baixa autoeficácia e ansiedade às vezes generalizada” (Bernat, 2008: 1), essa síndrome pode ser parte integrante da prática de professores “não nativos” há uma tendência de que esses professores se sintam desconfortáveis ao ensinar um idioma que não se sentem como “deles, ou quando percebem que seu comando do idioma não é “quase native”, como tradicionalmente esperado dos professores de Inglês.*

### Questão 05

Quais os efeitos na constituição identitárias de professores em relação ao binarismo nativo e não-nativo de língua inglesa? (2,0)

*Espera-se que o (a) candidato (a) entenda que o binarismo “nativo x não-nativo” é fruto de um discurso colonial que imputa ao professor de língua a ideia de ser um sujeito “deficiente” linguisticamente. Essa estado é de permanente “falta”, pois são professors que não nasceram em países legitimados de língua inglesa, portanto afastam do mito do falante nativo. A consequência em suas identidades é a insegurança e a submissão à estrutura colonial na aceitação de métodos, teorias e pedagogia de aquisição importadas.*