

English language teaching and the challenges for citizenship and identity in the current century

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ABSTRACT. Recent educational reforms in Brazil have emphasised the need for developing citizenship at all school levels. However, in order for this call to become reality it is necessary to provide teachers with opportunities for reflection on the meanings of citizenship and how language learning can contribute to those understandings. Especially in relation to English, a language that is more and more branded as an international language, it is important to consider definitions of planetary citizenship, its role in fostering global citizenship and the potential for bringing together people from different parts of the world. Parallel to those considerations, the notion of identity has to be redefined, since in a global world the global and the local are in constant tension. In this paper the changing context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education considering the technological milieu of the next century and the advantages and threats technology poses to identities and the democratization of knowledge will be discussed. It will be argued that this new context requires EFL teachers who are increasingly aware of the connections between their classrooms and the outside world, and who are able to think anew about their roles as educators.

Key words: English language teaching, identity, citizenship.

RESUMO. O ensino da língua inglesa e os desafios para construção da cidadania e identidade no século XXI. As recentes reformas educacionais no Brasil enfatizam a necessidade da educação para a cidadania em todos os níveis. Entretanto, para que essa proposta seja viabilizada é necessário oferecer aos professores oportunidades para reflexão sobre os significados de cidadania e como a aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras pode contribuir para seu desenvolvimento. Especialmente com relação à língua inglesa, cada vez mais reconhecida como língua internacional, é importante considerar definições de cidadania planetária, seu papel na construção de uma cidadania global e seu potencial para reunir pessoas de diferentes partes do planeta. Paralelamente a essas considerações, a noção de identidade deve ser redefinida, uma vez que no mundo atual o global e o local estão em constante tensão. Neste trabalho é discutido o contexto dinâmico da educação na língua estrangeira, considerando-se os avanços tecnológicos do século XXI e as vantagens e ameaças que a tecnologia coloca para as identidades e democratização do conhecimento. Argumenta-se que essa realidade requer professores que façam constantemente relações entre suas salas de aula e o mundo exterior, e que sejam capazes de inovar em seus papéis como educadores.

Palavras-chave: ensino de inglês, identidade, cidadania.

The teaching of a foreign language in schools in Brazil has been subject to changes in the last decades, following changes in the society as a whole. From the point of view of legislation, a foreign language must be taught at high school level (5th to 8th grades) and at secondary school (Ensino Médio), with the possibility of adding another language to this latter level. The choices must take into account the community the school belongs to and the

conditions for language teaching. In practice, English is the language chosen by the majority of the schools. This option is, of course, linked to the "value" it is given by the whole society.

As we are about to start a new millenium, communication among different peoples of the world is facilitated by global networks such as CNN and the Internet. These channels, using mainly English to convey news to the world, reinforce the

status of this language as a *lingua franca*, a fact already noticed by authors such as Crystal (1997) and Graddol (1997). This status, however, faces resistance (see Pennycook, 1991 and Canagarajah, 1999).

The teaching of foreign languages, from the government standpoint, however, has remained untouched by such considerations. All the foreign languages (mainly European languages, one must say) have been treated as equal, following the same rationale for inclusion in the curriculum. The Ministry of Education has launched national guidelines for all areas of knowledge as part of the educational reform. However, as the English language gets repeatedly branded as a *lingua franca* of international character, it begins to distance itself from other foreign languages competing for adoption in the school curriculum, as the label “foreign” is replaced by “international”.

The consideration of English as an international language (EIL) has implications for the ways in which it is taught. Although risking the repetition of a cliché, English has been associated with globalization and its links with economy can no longer be neglected by educators. So far, this language in the curriculum represented the possibility of access to other cultures, other ways of thinking about the world, and provided room for reflections on one’s own identity.

Learning a language will necessarily involve issues of cultural identity. Hall (1998) discusses identity in relation to the distinction between global and local, arguing that the more our lives become global the more our identities become detached, disconnected – from time, space, history and specific traditions and seem to “float” freely. Accepting the assumption that in the late modernity it makes no sense to talk about one single identity, he argued that within the discourse of consumerism (and the English language is an object of consumption) the differences and cultural distinctions that have so far defined our identity are now reduced to a kind of *lingua franca* or global currency, into which all specific traditions and different identities can be translated. Although this may represent a menace to those who would like to celebrate diversity, it may also present possibilities of transformation.

This position is reinforced by Oliveira and Tandon who believe that cultural differences cannot be wiped out by speaking a common language. They argue for a sense of planetary citizenship:

This sense of common belonging, however, cannot be sustained by ignoring differences in cultures, religions, languages, or ethnicity. Cutting across traditional

boundaries of caste, class, religion, and nation-state, the notion of global citizen action, rooted in a common set of values, implies the acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity as one of the most distinctive characteristics of humankind (1994:10).

Planetary citizenship, therefore, can only be exercised by those who are able to celebrate diversity, and yet think about common causes. For this sense to find existence in the real world, it is necessary to disconnect English from particular nation-states. A language of international character does not have nations or accents particularly associated with it. However, it is very common to associate English with the United States or England.

My point is that when we learn another language we do not need to take the identity of the Other. In the case of English that would be even more difficult because we would not know who the Other is. If we learn a language of international scope, this concern becomes irrelevant. If the identity this language allows is one of the inhabitant of the planet Earth, there is no point in talking about nationalities.

One example about the tension between the local and the global can be found in the great interest for celebrations of Halloween. I am surprised by the level of interest of teachers who encourage their students to wear costumes and celebrate Halloween in schools. Although I do not see anything wrong in talking about different world views of people around the world (including the less mentioned African countries), I see no reason whatsoever to encourage young children to celebrate a date they hardly know about and whose meaning is unclear to them.

I know this may be a controversial topic, but I can only understand this well-intended attitude of teachers if what they want to do is to make their students feel like native speakers. The parties teachers and schools organize reinforce the myth that in order to learn a foreign language one needs to assimilate the cultural values of the speakers of that language. As English becomes more and more spoken by people from different parts of the world, what is the purpose of associating it with things like Halloween?

I believe that today, more than ever, those who teach English contribute to the education of individuals who should see themselves as citizens of the world, a world whose boundaries are becoming less and less important. Teachers of English deal with notions of who we are, relaborating constantly our individual and collective identities. Teachers of English work with their learners in order to produce language that expresses us and allows us to

understand difference and diversity. To celebrate Halloween without this in mind is, at least, cultural subservience, and at most, a silliness that boosts the sales of costumes and pumpkins.

Vereza (1999) also thought of this topic along the same lines:

At a time when "globalization" is a fact which, despite its controversial social and economic nature, cannot be denied, cultural and linguistic isolation is the last thing we should wish for a nation. But that does not mean that in order to integrate into and with the international community, we have to give up our identity. A "global citizen" integrates with but does not have to assimilate passively a hegemonic culture" (1999:305).

My view is that expressing this new global spirit in deeds is one of the most important challenges facing teachers of English today.

Technology, society and English language teaching

I have argued that to consider English as an international language poses new challenges for educators. Cultural identity and planetary citizenship were two examples mentioned. These intertwined concepts become increasingly more visible as technology is developed. The creation of Internet and the possibility of global communication have already influenced the English language classroom. Teachers can no longer ignore that their students one day will have to deal with the constantly changing language and need the skills to communicate with people from other parts of the world. Cable TV is also present with images that challenge preconceptions about countries and peoples, and although these technologies are still restricted to a minority there is no doubt its use will become more widespread as their costs go down.

In this milieu, it is vital for teachers of English to consider their classrooms and the subject they teach as part of the larger picture. Notwithstanding the importance of considering local identities, the possibility of reaching out, and thinking globally, has to be assessed and worked within the educational context, as technology and a *lingua franca* enable identities to be reshaped.

I would like to exemplify my understanding of how the creative possibilities offered by the English language can be incorporated pedagogically, by describing a recent episode in advertising campaigns in Brazil. Advertising pieces are good sources of analysis because they appeal to their audience, offering what their creators identified as the motivations and desires of their potential clients. From the two ads I will identify two constructs:

citizenship and identity, which seem fundamental in discussions about EIL as opposed to EFL.

First example: English as the language of the galaxy

Following the idea that English is an international language, a creative advertising piece was produced for a language school and broadcasted on TV. This ad portrayed two ETs landing on Earth and meeting a young couple (YC) who could not speak their language. For this reason, they missed the chance of getting a briefcase full of money, after the following dialogue:

ETs: We're friends. We wanna talk

YC: ???

ETs: We wanna talk.

YC: ???

ETs: You do speak English, don't you?

YC:????

ETs: No contact. Maybe they're also from another planet.

YC: ?????

Ets: Oh,oh, sorry.

And the puzzled ETs took off to another planet leaving the flabbergasted teenagers behind. Worth noticing is that they dismissed the traditional "Take me to your leader" and tried to establish direct contact with the youngsters using the language that is now associated not only with the globe, but also with the galaxy, i.e. English.

Of the many images that caught my attention while seeing this video one was particularly striking: the idea that English is the vehicle to financial fortune, represented by the briefcase full of money. If for nothing else, the teenagers should know English in order to obtain thousands of dollar bills. We are all aware of the promises attached to this language in terms of financial improvement for those who are fluent and the ad captures and capitalizes that desire. The underlying message is that knowing English can bring many material rewards. The language becomes the object that can be exchanged, thus subscribing to the view of the language as a commodity.

However, at the same time the ad offers what could be considered an unflattering view of its potential learners it also allows another dimension of English to surface: one of a language that identifies and creates the possibility of participation on a planetary scale. If ETs ever come to Earth, what sense of global citizenship will we be able to show? If English is the language that allows people to come together and think of themselves as belonging to the same community, what kind of community is this?

It is perhaps unnecessary to stress that having a common language helps in the process of considering ourselves as human beings who live on the same planet and therefore form just one community. Usually, threats to humankind in general, such as environment degradation, force us to unite around a common issue. That is why knowing the common language would have allowed the young couple the right of participation, i.e., of citizenship. However, because of the emphasis the ad put on the individual, it missed the *collective substance*, discussed by Oliveira and Tandon.

Given the global interconnectedness of contemporary civilizations, the prevailing movement toward poverty, ecological imbalance and exclusion cannot be reversed by actions taken only at the local and national level. Global market mechanisms and structures of world governance can only be democratized through concerted global action... the challenge to planetary citizenship is, therefore, to expand to the global arena the struggle for democracy and human development that has so far been carried out basically at the national level (1994:8).

Citizen initiatives aimed at public issues and problems are qualitatively different from self-interest. The value of knowing English is not so much to be able to gain material things but the possibility it offers of creating respect and acceptance of diversity. As an international language English allows us to advance toward global exchange and solidarity among the institutions of civil society, extending citizen bonds far and wide across the globe.

The two messages that emerge from this ad have implications for the teaching of EIL: the value of English as a currency that can open doors to financial improvement and its possibility of allowing participation on a world scale.

The other ad I want to introduce was printed as a billboard announcement and will be discussed in the next section.

Second example: Being Brazilian

The ad for another language school stated: *After the course it will be difficult to prove you're Brazilian.* This statement is revealing because of its appeal to the desire of getting rid of all signs of our identity as Brazilians, as if to know a foreign language well one needed to be stripped off of all clues of one's nationality. Never mind the ad does not mention which nationality should we be aiming at.

While the first ad was directed to the desire of wealth and inclusion, this one targeted those who want to achieve a native-like proficiency or to create

a sense of homogeneity. Those of us who have been following current discussions about EIL are too aware of the questioning of native-speakerdom. It has become extremely difficult, if not impossible, to define who or what this ideal should be. What is the relevance of this concept? In the same vein, it would be futile to advocate the "pure English", as another language school would advertise, because the concept of a "pure" language is hardly sustained nowadays. Why should anyone advertise that after the course your nationality will hardly be identified?

I believe both ads invite questions in terms of advocating EIL. If a language is international there is no point in associating it with particular nations or accents. However, the video somehow associates English with the USA (the currency is the dollar note) and the second sells the idea that unless no one can tell you are Brazilian, you do not know this language well. If English has the status of an international language why would anyone want to sound or look like a native speaker? And more importantly, who is this native speaker? Who would decide?

If English is seen as a world language that has no particular country, state or nation more directly associated with it this allows us to think of ourselves as inhabitants of the same planet, fellow beings who are moved by a sense of what Oliveira and Tandon (1994:2-3) put as "solidarity and a sense of compassion for the fate and well-being of others, including unknown, distant others: a sense of personal responsibility and reliance on one's own initiative to do the right thing; the impulse toward altruistic giving and sharing; the refusal of inequality, violence and oppression". This allows us teachers of English to rethink our teaching in terms of citizenship and identity.

Concluding remarks

I have attempted to show how citizenship and identity are interconnected with EIL and argued that a process of commodification of this language feeds into and is fed by the status of English as an international language. This dialectical process, can also bring a sense of possibility in terms of strengthening a sense of planetary citizenship, i.e. creating a new identity that will acknowledge differences while searching for commonalities. Graddol speaks about this sense of possibility:

"We can thus expect the English language to have rather different meanings in different parts of the world: it can be used as a resource for constructing new forms of identity as well as a mechanism for destroying traditional ones. It may be that English is making the world a more homogeneous

place: it may also be that the world is making English more diverse in its forms, functions, and cultural associations" (1997:216).

To that it could be added that English is revealing a world that is diverse and yet able to create spaces for common ground for action. As teachers of this language we have to make pedagogical choices related to the reasons why it is important to learn it. As I have tried to show, I see these reasons more related to creating planetary citizenship than to acquiring a commodity. Vereza presents some of the pedagogical choices available:

Why not unveil those assumptions and discuss them openly? Why not establish a clear relationship between what we do and the so-called hidden curriculum which feeds much of our pedagogic decisions? Do we want to question these beliefs, support them, criticize them, reflect upon them? Or just keep taking them for granted? (1999:305)

I think that reconceptualising EFL as EIL poses one of the most interesting challenges to teachers of English today.

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Received on November 24, 2000.

Accepted on January 22, 2001.