

## A Postcolonial Framework for Brazilian EFL Teachers' Social Identities

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This article discusses some of the implications of using a poststructural and postcolonial theoretical framework to understand the positioning of Brazilian EFL teachers in contemporary global society. Foreign language teachers are seen as having a hybrid identity that engages the foreign language/culture and, consequently, interpolates their native language/culture in a reflexive process. The main theoretical perspectives used here are the Foucaultian poststructuralist notions of discourse, knowledge and power and the postcolonial view of identity, resistance and transformation. Such perspectives are pivotal for the understanding of the social practices of power/knowledge in the context of cultural globalization that informs this text.

**Key words:** Teacher identity, hybridity, knowledge, discourse, language, foreign languages, agency

Este ensayo presenta algunas implicaciones derivadas del referencial teórico posestructuralista sobre el papel (como sujeto) de los profesores Brasileños de inglés como lengua extranjera en el mundo contemporáneo globalizado. En general, profesores de lenguas extranjeras son vistos como poseyendo una identidad híbrida en constante interpolación con la lengua/cultura nativa de los profesores. Las principales perspectivas teóricas que explican tal situación son los análisis posestructuralistas del discurso como la de Foucault y el reconocimiento poscolonial sobre identidad, resistencia y transformación. Estas perspectivas nos ayudan a entender los modos de conocer las estructuras coloniales relativas a las prácticas sociales del poder/saber en el contexto de la globalización cultural.

**Palabras Clave:** Hibridismo, identidad, lenguas extranjeras, globalización, resistencia, transformación

Este texto apresenta algumas das implicações advindas do uso de um referencial teórico pós-estruturalista para refletir sobre o posicionamento de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira no Brasil no mundo contemporâneo globalizado. Professores de línguas estrangeiras em geral são percebidos aqui como tendo uma identidade híbrida que engaja a língua/cultura estrangeira e, conseqüentemente, interpola sua língua/cultura nativa, refletindo-se nela e sobre ela. As principais perspectivas teóricas que constituem tal olhar são as noções foucaultianas pós-estruturalistas de discurso, saber e poder e as teorias pós-coloniais sobre identidade, resistência e transformação. Tais perspectivas contribuem diretamente para o entendimento das práticas sociais de poder/saber no contexto da globalização cultural neste texto.

**Palavras-Chave:** Hibridismo, identidade, línguas estrangeiras, globalização, resistência, transformação, agência

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### **Setting the Scene**

The colonial era is over: most ex-colonies are independent nations now. However, former empires continue to exert a strong influence not only on the nations they once openly dominated politically, economically and culturally, but also on the planet as a whole. Although traditional colonialism does not reveal itself in contemporary societies *as it used to* in colonial situations *per se*, another shape of colonialism prevails in the world today, in a form of domination whose guise is not easy to identify. The once-called “advanced” nations (Altbach, 1971) – today called “Global North”, “developed” or “first-world countries” – still have a firm influence on other nations, especially as far as knowledge, culture and education are concerned. Our contemporary ways of knowing, of producing and distributing knowledge, science, cultural products, and our intellectual lives, so to speak, are directly informed and influenced by the former colonizers’ own ways to produce knowledge (Mignolo, 2000).

Considering such neo-colonial relations, the scope of post-colonial theory has been largely amplified since the academy first started to look seriously into questions of domination in colonies and ex-colonies. According to Ashcroft et al (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006), the “complex fabric of the field” of postcolonial theory

involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being.

If we take that as the scope of post-colonial theory, we will see that teacher education, and more specifically EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher education in Brazil, does fall into its fabric, at least as far as the following aspects are concerned:

The colonial distinction in EFL teaching between native and non-native speakers, and the implications it brings to what and how to teach, still informs the identities of EFL teachers and how these see themselves and are seen by their communities. The teaching of a foreign language, especially one such as English, usually places the “non-native speakers”

locally involved in the process on a lower level when compared to the authority “native speakers”<sup>1</sup> are supposed to have over “their own language”.

EFL has been turned into a commodity for the contemporary middle and upper classes in Brazil (Jordão, 2004). It is bought and sold as such based on the belief that the mastering of the English language will take people (including those of underprivileged races, social classes and cultures) to better positions in society (May, 2001).

There is another cultural belief, shared by many academics, that “equates literacy with rationality and intellectual ability” (Norton, 2007, p.9) and sees English as the international language of science, media and technology; from such belief comes the even more dangerous mindset that “people literate in English [could be considered] as more rational and intellectually able than those who are not” (Norton, 2007, p.9).

EFL teaching and learning in Brazil have largely been a reproduction of so-called “international” models of language learning – most of them developed in the “Global North” or, in other words, in England and in the United States of America; the education of EFL teachers has followed the same models, usually aiming simply at developing teachers’ “knowledge *for* practice”, hardly being concerned with teachers’ “knowledge *of* practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

EFL students and teachers in Brazil have been resisting such models, making the imported/imposed assumptions and desires in regards to the foreign models project on EFL in Brazil either experiences of failure and impotence (some common statements we hear from teachers and students in Brazil are, for example, “we shouldn’t be studying/teaching the language of imperialism”; “nobody learns English in our public schools anyway”), or of uneasy success (“I learned English despite having received very poor teaching”; “I was privileged to learn, not everybody has the same privilege”<sup>2</sup>).

The result is a society that, despite institutional and community efforts (not too strong, I must say), is far from “speaking” English or presenting the underprivileged with social and/or economic mobility.

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1 These categories of “native” and “non-native” users of languages have been widely questioned by many applied linguists and therefore are used in quotation marks. For some of these recent discussions, see Halliday, (2005); Llorca (2004); Kumaravadivelu (2003); Davies (2003); Phillipson (1992).

2 Such statements were actually produced by EFL teachers in Brazilian public schools, and collected during my work as a consultant with the Parana State Secretariat of Education in 2004-2005.

The kind of relation established between the teaching/learning of English in Brazil, our educational system and Brazilians' citizenship may be of interest here: academics, state educational departments, education policymakers, teacher associations and politicians have a lot to say about the status and the need for EFL in our public school system. An instance of this is the "Pelotas Letter"<sup>3</sup>, a document produced in 2004 by foreign language teacher associations and university professors of foreign languages that manifested various concerns about the situation of foreign language teaching/learning in Brazil, in response to the Federal government's announcement of the decision to have Spanish as a foreign language offered by all public schools in Brazil by the end of 2010. However, legitimate as are the concerns listed, the Letter was motivated by a political decision that clearly voices the government's attempt to strengthen the links between Brazil and the other countries in Latin America, all of which have Spanish as their first language (except Belize and Guyana).

Although teachers invariably point out insistently, whenever they can, the same afflictive constraints in regard to their work (such as the lack of appreciation of the EFL teaching profession, the shameful salaries public school teachers earn all over the country, the precarious conditions they have to face in their everyday school and classroom practices, their poor professional education), none has ever caused such national *commotion* as the mandatory offer of Spanish as a FL. Maybe this suffices to show how political an activity education in fact is, how much of a public concern is the choice of foreign languages to be taught in a country as large and culturally diverse as Brazil.

This is, in general terms, the context I am writing from (or against). This being stated, we now proceed to the one specific basilar concept of post-colonialism to be explored in this text in relation to EFL teachers in Brazil: hybridity.

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<sup>3</sup> This letter, in Portuguese, can be found at <http://www.ipol.org.br/ler.php?cod=132>

### **Post-Colonial Hybridity: Resistance and Agency**

In order to discuss the notion of hybridity it is important to understand how *difference* is conceived in post-colonial theory. Rather than an inherited biological trait (as race) or a cultural aspect conferred by place of birth (as nationality), difference is understood as a discursively constructed process of symbolic representations, an on-going movement of identifications and *des-identifications*. The subject, therefore, is conceived as being discursive too: it is fragmented, contradictory, contingent, provisionally located: a speaking and spoken subject, determined by discourse and at the same time determining it. Although the process of difference (which can also be understood as the process of meaning-making) cannot be *controlled* by the subject, it can be resisted and acted upon on those very moments when the slippage of meaning is made apparent. The assumption here is that meanings, like difference, are also in flux, moving from one moment of provisional fixity to another, never permanently fixed and always in *différance* (Derrida, 1978), only temporarily established in relations of difference and delay. Such movement implies that there are spaces in-between, spaces where meanings are creatively fabricated just before they become fixed again.

It is precisely on these spaces, called *third spaces* by Bhabha (1994; 1985), that resistance and agency come into being. Thus, intervention in the process is not informed by a “competing system of representation”, a new system to replace the previous one, but, instead, is a consequence of one’s positioning in a *bordering* place, a *third* space which is neither the one occupied by the colonizer nor the one occupied by the colonized: it is a *hybrid* space where totalizing narratives are challenged, where the supposed stability of meanings is disrupted, where the conflicting character of our representations is perceived. Bhabha refers to this space as a “temporal break in representation” (Bhabha, 1994, p.191) in which the ambivalence of discourses of authority is revealed and subversion is enabled (Bhabha, 1985, p.144):

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that

uncertainty, that turns *the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention*. (emphasis added)

According to Costa (2006), for Bhabha the possibility of agency and resistance lies in the multiplicity of difference, in the possibilities of constructing different ways of knowing in *hybridity*. These hybrid spaces and subjects, resulting from dislocations of meaning, can resist totalizing discourses and create possibilities for articulating new meanings; the dislocation of signs can potentially hybridize ways of knowing and meaning-making, “introducing uncertainty, ambivalence, noise and doubt into what before seemed coherent, ‘pure’, precise, orderly” (Costa, 2006, p.126).

Therefore, resistance is not pre-established in a neat plan of action: it is “the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of domination discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power - hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth.” (Bhabha, 1985, p. 41). Agency lies in the same framework: it is the discursive interpolation of different forms of representation (of self and others) and their transformation. Larger than specific and necessarily observable “action”, agency does not presuppose a neatly pre-established plan to achieve pre-determined outcomes: agency refers to action that is built in the discursive process of meaning-making, in the production and establishment of discourses that define and categorize people, ideas, kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing.

### **Hybridity, Literacy and EFL**

The teaching of EFL in Brazilian public schools has not been successful: although most students have EFL lessons from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade on<sup>4</sup>, they do not seem to learn English or to understand why it is included in the curriculum (Celani, 2003). According to recent research (Lima & Sales, 2007; Campani, 2006) and to a generalized *impression* in society, students can’t speak or read or write English, they can’t understand films or TV shows, they can’t translate from one language to another, they can’t sustain a phone conversation

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<sup>4</sup> The Brazilian regular educational system consists of 8 primary years or grades – now in the process of being extended to 9 – plus 3 secondary years.

in English. The reasons appointed for such situation are many, from deficient human resources (teachers themselves cannot use English “properly”, they cannot prepare or deliver “good lessons”, etc.) to structural (crowded, inadequate classrooms and school facilities, lack of teaching equipment, etc.) and financial concerns (there is not enough investment from the government, communities do not engage with schools, teachers salaries are too low, etc.)<sup>5</sup>.

The contrast often made between EFL in public schools and EFL in private language institutes seems to accentuate the “poor achievement” or deficit of public schools, apparently offering *evidence* that learning English is possible once minimal conditions are met by schools, students and teachers. These so-called “minimal conditions” are then idealized by public school students and teachers, who believe that their positions and roles in society can only be attained if they are granted the same infra-structure (and the same perceived outcomes) of language institutes i.e. small classes in ambience rooms (where there is *English all around* – from posters on the walls to whiteboards and markers), teacher training (update into new *international* – that is to say, British or American – methods and techniques for EFL teaching) and students who share the same “level” in their previous knowledge of English (Brasil, 2006, pp. 88-90). However, that is very far from the reality of public schools, and the effect such frustrated desire has on public school EFL teachers and students is, of course, destructive: low self-esteem, sense of powerlessness, inferiority, conformity and passivity, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, such frustration only happens in case the *efficacy* of teaching/learning EFL is informed exclusively by “purely” linguistic objectives (as opposed to *discursive* ones) that place the evidence of learning primarily in the mechanical use of linguistic structures (grammar and lexicon). Such restricted view on the importance of learning a foreign language does not consider wider benefits that learning a foreign language can bring about, ignoring crucial objectives or possible effects of the contact with a different language as, for example, the enlargement of one’s participation in different interpretive

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<sup>5</sup> These “problems” have been extensively mentioned in the academic literature and official documents produced in Brazil in the area of EFL teaching/learning. Some of these are, for example, the “Report of the Second Seminar for the State Parameters for Primary School – EFL”, produced by the State Secretariat of Education in Parana, Brazil, and Bellotto, 2002, Gasparini, 2005 or Barcelos, 2006.

communities or communities of practice; the awareness of how languages can be culturally (as well as structurally) diverse and can give rise to different forms of communication, of understanding and making sense of the world; the perception and experience of the roles different languages play in different societies (Brasil, 2006); the potential a foreign language has to transform our ways of knowing and how we relate to different kinds of knowledge and to the construction of our own identities (Jordão, 2006).

The silencing of such wider benefits gained by society from the opportunity of learning foreign languages confers to private language institutes the aura of success, and to public schools the position of failure caused by deficit. In other words, private language institutes usually focus on the instrumental uses of a FL, and proclaim success at teaching FL; public schools, attempting the same instrumental aims as the language institutes but having a completely different structure, claim not to succeed at teaching FL (Brasil, 2006; Lima & Soares, 2007). The increasing awareness that the gap between the public and the private educational sectors (which includes language institutes) might not be so big since students from the regular schools in the private sector do not seem to learn either, and teachers are shown to be less motivated and valued than we previously thought, has been helping to bridge that gap. Yet, such awareness points to a double failure: students do not seem to learn *in school*, whether we think of private or public sectors. If that is true, then, educators seem to be faced with two alternatives: to give up on school altogether, looking for other forms of learning/teaching elsewhere (communities, internet, family), or to conform to “teaching the basics” as the lesser of two evils (Gee, 2004), in the hope that at least a minimum amount of information might *stick* on students during their formal education – a choice that would reinforce a “banking” view of education (Freire, 1996).

If you are getting hopelessly depressed by now, dear reader, let me try to reassure you<sup>6</sup>. A pessimistic view is not the only perspective on the educational process available to us. Maybe there is a third alternative: a third space... And maybe this space can be framed by a critical approach to education, an approach that relies on the Foucaultian view that, alongside the oppressive use of power, relations of power in society are potentially positive,

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<sup>6</sup> I have been advised to use a “more academic” language. Whatever that means, however, I chose to maintain my register and style closer to fictional and everyday languages, as a reminder of the narrative character of science (Lyotard, 1986; Maturana, 2001).



producing knowledge by establishing or modifying certain relationships among different ways of knowing and the kinds of knowledge they bring about (Foucault, 2006). School could then aim at allowing *critical* subjects to develop their possibilities to act upon discursive, social relations and practices, examining their assumptions and implications, producing understanding of how they come in to being and how they function in society.

This notion of power brings forth the idea that every knowledge, action and subject are located (Bhabha, 1994); that is, they always presuppose realities that are culturally constructed in the relations they establish among different world-views; they complement one another and allow the production of a concept of criticality, that is fundamentally different from that put forward by some critical pedagogies (Jordão, 2004). There is one main difference between the now “classical” critical pedagogies of the 80’s and 90’s and the critical literacy approach I am suggesting here as an alternative to help schools to engage with society and to be significant to people in their daily lives. In critical pedagogy, educators seem to be attributed the role of helping students to thread through the same “path of liberation” that their critical-thinking teachers have already travelled through: the path of realization and struggle against injustices and oppression through the use of *reason* (or what they call “critical thinking”) and engaged, participatory action (Giroux, 1993; 1997a; 1997b)<sup>7</sup>. This path – perceived as *the* way to enlightenment and growth, to socially engaged and responsible action – is not challenged by critical pedagogies in its narrative and localized construction; it remains as the universal alternative for societies to reach a more just world, regardless of the different meanings it might have to different societies and despite subjecting students to a local construction of subjectivity projected as universal (Garcia, 2002; Jordão, 2004b).

I like to think of the poststructuralist perspective of approaches to critical literacies as an alternative to such universalizing narrative, as a perspective that ponders the different paths one can take to value different forms of knowledge and knowing, as well as the people who (re)produce them; I like to think of it as a perspective that reflects on the different judgements we make on the quality of actions and the values that make agency

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<sup>7</sup> See also the critical reading Usher & Edwards make of critical pedagogy in their 1996 book *Postmodernism and Education*.

possible. This perspective sees every understanding of knowledge and agency as immersed in cultural, ideological and moral assumptions, whose value and importance are conferred to them by different societies in specific historical moments. Depending on how prestigious or powerful one community is perceived to be in relation to others, legitimacy more or less will be given to its interpretive procedures – and the ways of knowing they adopt and value – by the different communities involved. This is not to say that all is valid or to eliminate power relations from the equation: this is to see the world in its discursive nature and, therefore, to accept that the values our society has built, including those most dear to us like freedom and democracy, are locally constructed but projected as global and, as such, cannot be imposed on others as if they were absolute truths for salvation under the risk of establishing world cultural dictatorships.

If we manage to *smuggle* such perspective into our educational systems, we will be able to allow teachers and students to manifest their opinions and to open up to be changed by others, to be transformed by the encounter with difference and to contribute somehow to the transformation of others, thus exercising their agency as informed agents in the world. Whether the transformations they undergo will be for good or for worse we can't tell - good and bad can only be so with reference to specific systems of values that depend on how specific societies construct their worlds, not on absolute, arrogant wills to the power that possessing an *absolute truth* could bring to the knower.

### **Conclusion**

The critical analysis of the constraints in education that insists on the contingency of our actions and on not developing miraculous solutions in a sort of *one-size-fits-all* fashion stops me from presenting local procedures and provisional, contextual alternatives as global solutions in disguise. I have not, and will not present “fully developed proposals to solve the problems” raised here, as some readers might expect. That is due both to a deep belief in the localized, contextual nature of every designed alternative, and a deep faith in the Freirean notion of *praxis* as a theoretical practice and a practical theory.

For Freire (1998; 1999) there is a profound interaction between theory and practice, so much so as to blur the distinction between the two, and to bring forward the notion of theory as a form of practice. This is to say that theoretical discussions and alternatives provided by theory are practices themselves and, as such, constitute ways of knowing and constructing realities. Another implication of the Freirean *praxis* is its reconceptualization of agency in discourse; its understanding agency as a reflexive practice that constantly challenges, against different ideological grounds, its own assumptions and implications, focusing on the transformation and constant reappraisal of interpretive procedures and the knowledge they produce.

Thus, to discuss and allow the transformation of perspectives, knowledge and ways of knowing (as so-called “theoretical” or “reflexive” academic texts are prone to do) is to exercise one’s agency and to let others exercise theirs. It is also to offer grounds to other actions in the actions of others, and to the development of different orders of proposals (concrete, theoretical, ethical, political, etc.) from which other subjects, in other contexts, can contingently “solve” contextual problems.

Therefore, the refusal to present “fully developed proposals” as solutions does not necessarily lead to pessimism and inaction. In fact, many scholars and educators, as well as sectors of the organised society, even being aware of its difficult situation, do see schooling with confidence and hope: hope that these institutional spaces become opportunities of resistance, agency and transformation. And such view on education is made possible by a poststructuralist perspective that emphasizes the discursive quality of knowledge, the narrative aspects of culture, the capillary structure of power. Instead of leading to a supposedly passive and conformist attitude, the realization that power is everywhere as a potentially productive force as much as a destructive one can bring about the awareness that in its interstices, resistance and change are always taking place (Foucault, 2006).

As hybrid subjects, students and teachers are seen as able to “operate” in the fissures of authoritarian discourses (Bakhtin, 1981), being able to transform – contingently – these same discourses. Agency, from a poststructuralist, discursive perspective, acquires different

tones from those of revolutionary struggles for liberation: it is not based on self-determination, but on difference and conflict, conceived as positive conditions for learning to take place. It presupposes openness to difference, perception of contextual constraints and strategic forms of resisting them, as well as creative reflexivity, since it problematizes its own assumptions in the encounter with other ways of knowing. Agency in this perspective happens *in discourses* that can, at the same time, restrict and allow – reinforce or transform – the construction of meanings and subject representations in concrete social practices.

In the educational domain, therefore, agency plays an extremely significant role: its assumption that different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing are not inherently good or bad, superior or inferior, but that it is social practice that makes them so, allows teachers and students to engage in critical dialogue with their own meaning-making practices. Such dialogue, *dialogical* in nature (Bakhtin, 1981) because initiated from a concern with and a curiosity about different ways of knowing, when materialized into teachers' and students' everyday practices in the classroom can construct encounters with difference that change the participants and their knowledge, that transform their ways of constructing meanings in the awareness of our dependence on the other to be able to understand ourselves and the world around us.

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