English in Brazil: functions and attitudes

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ABSTRACT: The present survey project aims at investigating and describing the attitudes of Brazilian EFL learners towards the target language. The focus is on their perception of the importance of English as a language for international communication, the role of English within Brazil and the learners' expectations of time and energy to be consumed in the learning of the language. The participants are 190 adult learners attending a private institute in the metropolitan area of São Paulo who answered a survey questionnaire. The answers are discussed and the results analyzed vis-à-vis the importance of creating a curriculum which addresses not only the formal features of the language but also the cultural and attitudinal elements which are brought into the classroom.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

English is everywhere. Millions of people throughout the world make use of it on an everyday basis. Other millions are willing to learn it. Kachru (1992a: 67) calls our attention to the ‘unique international position of English which is certainly unparalleled in the history of the world.’ He goes on to explain that ‘for the first time a natural language has attained the status of an international (universal) language, essentially for cross-cultural communication.’ Given the status of English as an international language, it is impossible to account for it or to describe it as only one language. If we adopt a view of the English language where change, variation, and multiplicity are frequently addressed and acknowledged, we enter the domain of world Englishes.

Adopting a world Englishes perspective to the spread of English, Kachru explains how the countries where English is used can be grouped together according to the type of spread and function attributed to the language. In Inner Circle countries, English is used natively. Outer Circle countries are those where English is used as the official or one of the official languages, whereas Expanding Circle countries are those where English is used as a foreign language. It can also be said that the Inner Circle generates rules that serve as a model for the Expanding Circle, whereas in the Outer Circle, the nativization of English makes generating local norms possible.

Brazilians are part of the large body of learners and users of English in the Expanding Circle. However, not much world Englishes research has been done in the country as far as attitudes and perceptions of the target language are concerned. The use of English in Brazil as a means of international communication has been somewhat investigated (see Barbara et al., 1996; and Schleppegrall and Royster, 1990). While Brazilian learners have been profiled with regard to their academic needs and to their relation to the instructional environment (Couto, 1992) the attitudes of Brazilians toward English have not been thoroughly analyzed. One of the few examples of work done on language attitudes in Brazil is that of Busnardo and Braga (1984). They describe some of the issues related to the teaching of English in the Brazilian environment. One of their main concerns is the need for rethinking language pedagogy in Brazil so that it addresses issues of power and status.

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Their concerns are echoed by studies on other Expanding Circle countries, which also demonstrate that the choice of English is generally associated with status and modernity and even social mobility (see Yong and Campbell, 1995 for China; Petzold, 1994 for Hungary; and Berns, 1990 for Germany and Japan).

Additionally, positive attitudes have been indicated as one of the aspects, if not one of the determiners of the spread of English throughout the world. These attitudes can be directed towards the language or the speakers or, better yet, the stereotype of the speaker (see Lieberson, 1982). Fishman and Rubal-Lopez (1992: 310) explain that ‘the spread of a language can be examined not only by measuring the extent of its use, but also by studying the attitudes of persons towards that use.’ Cooper (1982: 6) argues that ‘when we refer to language spread, then we are referring to the spread of behaviors.’

Lewis (1982: 215) states that language attitudes are part of a category of factors which promote social change and contribute to language spread. Therefore, it is only after educators and policy makers are aware of language attitudes that they can address the needs of the learners and deal with the reality of mixed feelings that an international language such as English provokes.

The study of attitudes is an essential part of a world Englishes approach to language use. For an understanding of the need for English teaching in Brazil (as well as anywhere else) it is necessary to look at the language not only as it is used for international communication, but also at its status and perceived notions of its power. It is also Kachru (1992b: 396) who points to this relationship between language and the notion of power and attitude, which is the central concern of the present study: ‘What draws an increasing number of people in the remote parts of the world to the study of English is the social attitude toward the language.’ Brazilians are no exception.

The following describes a survey study aimed at investigating the attitudes of Brazilians towards English. After a brief overview of the survey design and goals as well as method and analysis, findings are presented and discussed under two broad categories: attitudes towards English and attitudes towards learning English. The central issues structuring the survey are perceptions of (1) status of English as an international language; (2) role of English in Brazil; and (3) role of English in the life of learners (including time and effort involved in attaining English proficiency). In the discussion section, the questions are organized and grouped together according to the aspect (e.g. status, intelligibility, international use, etc.) of English which is being addressed.

THE SURVEY

To add to the literature on attitudes towards English in an Expanding Circle context, a survey study was conducted with 190 adult learners of English. The purpose was an examination of correspondence between the attitudes and expectations and the circumstances of both the learning and the sociolinguistic reality of English in Brazil.

The 24 survey items were designed to elicit information that ranges from the societal (broader) to the personal (narrower) level of English use, which when put in terms of a continuum, correspond to the three central issues proposed above (role of English in the world, role of English in Brazil, role of English in the life of these learners). The private language institute (hereafter the institute) where the survey was conducted is a well-established institution in the state of São Paulo. Founded in 1967, it has since become one of the most respected language schools in the area with 12 branches and more than 6,000 enrollees.
The institute offers courses at the basic, pre-intermediate, post-intermediate and advanced levels. Each course is an 82-hour session, which takes approximately three months to be completed if the student chooses to have classes five times a week.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Random sampling was used to allow for consistent gathering of information. Since the institute has several different branches in different areas of the city, which suggested variation in student profiles (due to socio-economic status, age, etc.) samples were drawn from different schools. Out of the 12 branches of the institute, five were randomly picked through a drawing (these five branches are referred to through letters A–E rather than neighborhood location to account for confidentiality). A table of random numbers was then used to pick six classes out of all the classes of each of the five branches so that the total number of classes surveyed was 30. The fact that classes were used rather than individuals is not considered a biasing factor. Individuals within the groups and their respective teachers are rotated at the end of every stage, which takes approximately three months. Thus, enrollees do not stay together long enough to develop group characteristics and it can be assumed that they are as representative of the whole population as if they had been individually selected from their groups.

Completed questionnaires were grouped according to the five schools. Since classes can have as few as five learners and as many as 10, different numbers of questionnaires were expected for each branch. It was necessary to establish a cut-off point as a baseline for equal numbers of surveys for each branch. The school with the smallest number of returned questionnaires (school C with 38) provided this cut-off number. With 38 questionnaires being randomly picked out of each school a final 190 questionnaires for further analysis were obtained.

The researcher did not get directly involved in the collection process. To prevent bias, the questionnaire was administered by a member of the academic department who gave general guidelines at the beginning of the administration. The classroom teacher was not present; any student could decline to take part in the project; and it was stressed that there were no consequences for those who chose not to participate.

Analysis of the data involved recording the percentages of answers and making comparisons between the substantive results obtained and factors such as age and socio-economic status of the respondents (e.g. Are older individuals more inclined to dislike learning English?).

DISCUSSION

The respondents

The enrollees who answered the questionnaire were grouped by level of proficiency. As expected, and shown by table 1, more beginners were sampled than learners at other levels. This was due to the use of random sampling and the fact that all branches of the institute enroll more beginners than advanced learners.

The majority of the respondents were men (63%). Most of the respondents had completed a program equivalent to a bachelor’s degree (83%) and 6% of the enrollees had a graduate degree. The remaining 11% had completed high school. A large 77% were currently employed, and 12% were students. The remainder were either self-employed or currently looking for a job. As for age, 36% were between 31 and 40 years of age, 31% were between 18 and 24, and 24% were between 25 and 30. Less than 10% were older than 40. Half of the respondents had a family income equivalent to 4,000 dollars a month or more.
As shown by table 2, four items of the questionnaire referred to perceptions regarding varieties of English. The results obtained are as follows.

The majority (82%) of respondents identified American English as the variety they were learning (question 1). Besides American and British English, no other variety was indicated. Those who checked the ‘other’ category explained they were being equally exposed to British and American English.

There seemed to be a lack of awareness of the existence of other varieties besides American and British English, which was possibly the result of lack of exposure because Brazilians in general have very little, if any, contact with individuals who speak other varieties. Thus, respondents probably based their answers on two factors: the variety spoken by their teacher and the variety represented in their textbook (i.e. American or British). Even if their textbook occasionally portrayed speakers of other varieties, which is common in more recent publications, this factor was apparently disregarded by the respondents.

When asked which variety has more prestige (question 2), more respondents (54%) chose American English. As Brazilians are exposed to American English everyday through movies, music and business, familiarity is a possible explanation. Nonetheless, 26% answered that both varieties enjoy the same prestige, possibly indicating that they more readily associate status with the language as a whole than with a single variety. This is a possible interpretation in an Expanding Circle country, where the political and social consequences of speaking a certain variety are less of an issue than in the Outer or Inner Circles. In Brazil, knowing English is primary while using a particular variety is a secondary concern of the learners.

Yet, in spite of the suggestion that American English is more familiar, 41% of respondents claimed British English is easier to understand (question 3), contradicting the assumption that the greater the exposure, the more intelligible the variety. At least

Table 1. The respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total learners</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginners</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-intermediate</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Varieties of English

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three possible explanations could account for this contradiction. It is not uncommon to hear Brazilian learners of English expressing the belief that speakers of British English speak more slowly and articulate the sounds ‘better’ than speakers of American English. This belief could be playing a part in the answers. Another possibility is that Brazilians are exposed to more regional and social varieties of English within American English. Since they cannot always decode all these varieties, they generalize this inability to any variety of American English. Furthermore, they are probably only exposed to British English in educational environments (the classroom teacher, commercial recordings for classroom use, etc.), where extreme care is given to the articulation of each and every sound and to avoiding rapid speech. These respondents might be extrapolating from this experience to all contact with British English speakers.

When asked ‘what variety best suits your needs?’ (question 4), almost 80% of the respondents chose American English. This might be because learners believe they are going to be more exposed to it and should therefore be able to respond promptly.

**English as an international language**

As anticipated, given the international status of English, all respondents without exception agreed English is a language of international communication (question 5). What was not expected was the acknowledgement that almost 60% would learn it even if it were not. Possible explanations for this result might be that these respondents appreciate the language and the cultures it represents to such an extent that they would learn it regardless of its role. It could also be that the widespread use of English has made it difficult for the respondents to objectively imagine what would happen if English was not used internationally. In this case, they would be attributing qualities to a specific language which should actually be associated with any language used for international communication.

**Language knowledge and language skills**

Before asking learners why they needed to know English, an attempt was made to establish what they meant by ‘knowing a language’ (question 6). Nearly half (49%) believed that it means being able to speak the language fluently. It is important to note that throughout the questionnaire speaking was favored as more useful over the other three skill areas (questions 16–17). Given the practical application respondents attribute to English, this was expected. On the other hand, grammatical accuracy and speaking without an accent are not thought of as significant indexes of knowing a language.

**Status, intelligence and other considerations**

As shown by table 3, the respondents indicated they believe that people who know English have better job opportunities and an advantage over others in many areas of study (question 8). However, when asked what people in general think of individuals who know English (question 9), the answers were different. Even though better job opportunities and study advantages were again the most frequently chosen categories, others, which had not been chosen before, were selected, for example, having status and being intelligent were associated with the knowledge of English, as shown by table 3.

A closer look was taken at the individuals who associated English speakers and high status. A possible connection between level of proficiency and the belief in the status of English speakers was found. The lower the proficiency level the more the respondents seem
to identify English with status (88% were beginners and pre-intermediate learners). However, since the number of advanced and intermediate learners is small, further studies are necessary to explore this tendency more fully.

These findings might suggest that even though learners tried to emphasize the functionality of English, they have experienced directly or indirectly the association of English speakers and status, and a parallel between language ability and intelligence.

**English knowledge and the learners’ networks**

Because learning English is generally associated with employment opportunities, the respondents were asked who they would impress by knowing English (question 10). Almost 45% of the respondents selected either a current or potential employer. As respondents could choose any number of categories, the fact that these were the two most frequently chosen indicate they link career success and good English skills. In addition, almost all the respondents (92%) believed they would be able to do something they could not do now when they ‘know’ English (question 11). Two of the most frequently cited activities were traveling alone and closing international deals. In general, the respondents pointed out that they have a feeling of uneasiness and dependence when traveling abroad for not being communicatively competent in English.

**Expectations regarding their learning**

Because it is not uncommon for language learners to have unrealistic expectations regarding time and effort involved in learning a foreign language, questions were designed to address the expectations of these enrollees. The findings are given in table 4.

The total number of respondents studying for fewer than 4 years is very large and corresponds to 76% of the total (question 12). Most of the learners dedicated between 4 and 10 hours a week to the study of English (question 13). A total of 32% studied from 4 to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 12</th>
<th>&lt;1 year</th>
<th>1–2 years</th>
<th>3–4 years</th>
<th>5–6 years</th>
<th>&gt;6 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 13</th>
<th>3 hours</th>
<th>4–6 hours</th>
<th>7–10 hours</th>
<th>11–15 hours</th>
<th>10%</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 14</th>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Not complex</th>
<th>Fluently</th>
<th>Native like</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Actual time of study and proficiency expectations
6 hours and 49% from 7 to 10 hours. A large number studied less than 7 hours (41%) and none studied more than 15 hours a week.

Most of the respondents (63%) would like to become completely ‘fluent’ (question 14). However, a large number (25%) had the ambition of becoming ‘native-like’. A total of 41% of the respondents believed they were going to take 3 or 4 years to achieve their goal (question 15). Out of the total, 31% believed only 1 or 2 years were necessary. The learners who believed more than 6 years were necessary make up 15%.

Because a large number of respondents answered they intended to become native-like or fluent, their answers were analyzed in more detail to determine how many years on average they believed it would take to achieve their goal. Out of the learners who intended to become native-like, 43% believed it would take 3 to 4 years from beginning to end. A total of 32% believed it would take 1 or 2 years; 16% expected to study for more than six years; and 9% believed it should take from 5 to 6 years.

Out of those who wanted to be fluent, 42% expected to study for 3 or 4 years; 28% hoped to achieve their goal in 1 or 2 years, 16% thought it would take more than 6 years; and 14% believed 5 or 6 years were necessary. Table 5, compares the percentages of the items chosen by those who intended to become fluent and the ones who wanted to be native-like.

Table 5 illustrates how unrealistic some of the respondents’ expectations were for their language learning goals. Eighty-eight per cent of the respondents wanted to become either fluent or native-like, and more than 70% among them expected to need 4 years or fewer. These unrealistic expectations could in part explain why the number of advanced level learners enrolled in English language courses is frequently small. When faced with the challenges of formal language instruction, learners with false expectations might drop out of classes and blame either the institution or themselves, or both, for their failure.

Is studying English enjoyable?

In general, most of the learners enjoyed learning English (question 18). Those who ‘liked it’ or ‘liked it very much’ correspond to 74% of the total. Out of the 5% who did not like learning English, 80% were older than 31 years of age, suggesting a possible connection between age and lack of enjoyment in the learning it. Those who disliked it could be those who have tried learning in the past but did not achieve their goal and were being forced by circumstances (new job, desire for promotion) to try again.

Who is responsible for the learning?

Learners believed they were more responsible for their learning than their teachers (question 19). However, teachers were believed to contribute 40%. Realistically speaking, responsibility for learning is not a measurable unit. However, putting it in percentages might help the learners visualize their expectations. Holding teachers responsible for 40% is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1–2 years</th>
<th>3–4 years</th>
<th>5–6 years</th>
<th>&gt;6 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fluent</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-like</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
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still a high expectation. Given that no learning is possible without the willful intent of the learner, learners might need some clarification about the role of the teacher.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the questionnaire confirm many of the issues raised by researchers who study the use of English in Brazil and other Expanding Circle Countries. Busnardo and Braga’s (1984) point about the need to rethink language pedagogy in Brazil is well taken, given that the respondents have many stereotypical ideas about English and learning which are not being addressed in the classroom (e.g. English has two varieties: American and British, or the goal of learning is to become native-like). These results also confirm that attitudes are being directed at the stereotype of the speaker (Lieberson, 1992) as when several respondents indicated speakers of British English were ‘easier’ to understand despite the fact that they might have had little exposure to it.

As for the three main issues upon which the survey was based, the status of English as an international language was agreed on by virtually all the respondents and their intent to expand their network is most likely connected to a desire for being part of a global society where English is a language of wider communication.

When it comes to the local role of English, Yong and Campbell’s (1995) observation about China seems to be true for Brazil as well. The desire for learning English to get a better job or a promotion indicates that English works as a means of social ascension. It also implies, that in Brazil there is a social attitude towards English that draws people to learn the language (Kachru, 1992b). This social attitude equates knowing English with being more materially successful. Finally, while learning English is an important part of these learners’ routine and a necessary requisite for their career goals to be attained, using English will only be possible if these learners are capable of setting more realistic goals.

In conclusion, attitude studies significantly contribute to an understanding of socio-linguistic phenomenon because they raise awareness to the fact that when someone learns a language, they are dealing with more than a set of formal features; they are dealing with feelings, stereotypes, expectations and prejudices. To understand the use of English in the Expanding Circle and, indeed, all over the world, researchers need to examine learners’ and users’ attitudes towards the language. Furthermore, the whole existence of world Englishes is justified by the multiplicity of reactions towards issues of linguistic identity, power and status. By putting together the pieces provided by communities spread all over the planet, we can move a little closer to solving the puzzle.

NOTES

1. To ensure content validity, several drafts were designed and piloted with Brazilian learners at Purdue University. These learners then provided important feedback on both content and form and on how the questionnaire helped or prevented the proposed issues to be addressed. To prevent language from becoming a biasing factor, a Portuguese version was used. Finally, to avoid a reactivity effect (Brown, 1988), careful attention was paid to the phrasing of questions so that it did not hint at any researcher expectations.
2. Note that when the survey was being conducted, the real, the Brazilian currency, was equivalent to the dollar and living in the city of São Paulo was as expensive as living in New York City. The situation has now somewhat changed with a recent devaluing of the Brazilian currency.
3. The questionnaire used for this survey is available from the author.


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