

## Bridging national and universal cultures through intercultural materials and activities: an experience teaching language and culture through code-switching texts in Bragança, Pará

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper describes the experiences of a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant while leading extracurricular English language and Anglophone cultural activities in Bragança, Pará. The activity described presents how the teaching of 'local' U.S. national culture can be expanded upon to introduce intercultural conversations about language use in the globalized world. The materials are based upon theoretical cultural publications by scholars, such as Harish Trivedi and Jaques Derrida (1978) and pedagogy materials by Rebecca Wheeler and Michelle Devereaux (2012).

**KEYWORDS:** EFL; intercultural competence; code-switching; cultural translation.

### Introdução

Academia has come to accept the importance of a balance between culture and linguistic courses and materials in language education programs.<sup>2</sup> English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and programs are no exception. In fact, in many instances, EFL programs take the lead in showing a balance of linguistic and culture courses in pedagogy materials.<sup>3</sup> Publications such as, Alptekin's "Target-language culture in ELF materials" and Corbett's *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching*, provide an excellent framework for cultural lessons. However, even with these advancements, academia has not yet fully incorporated the position of the teacher in the culture classroom.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, the role of the native-speaking English teacher in an Anglophone culture course. Or, at least that was my perception when I, as a native English speaker teaching EFL in rural Brazil, perceived while constructing Anglophone culture materials for extracurricular programs designed for English pedagogy students. This paper seeks to identify problems native speakers face while teaching English language and culture abroad and offer suggestions on how to

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<sup>2</sup> H.D. Brown indicates that the intrinsic link between culture and language should be reflected in the teaching of both subjects (2000, p. 177).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the current state of culture content in EFL/ESL materials, see Nault 2006.

<sup>4</sup> C.M. Jordão addresses the role of non-native English teachers in Brazil.

incorporate ‘local’ native-speaking culture into intercultural curriculum. The experience related here is that of a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant working in Bragança, Pará, Brazil in 2013.

### **Challenges of native-speaking English teachers**

A native-speaking English teacher working abroad faces two main challenges: how to diversify materials to be suitable to the needs of the local students and how to tailor cultural materials to meet ‘universal’ cultural standards.<sup>5</sup> Nayar best pinpoints the complexity of this problem when he indicates, that most literature on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and English language teaching materials are produced in the inner-circle of native-English-speaking nations, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, and then disseminated as ‘received wisdom’ to countries looking to learn English, without taking into account the needs and existing teaching practices of those nations (1997, p. 15).

The second challenge native-speaking English teachers face is identified in the concerns presented by Enrique Alejandro Basabe, who points out that although native-English-speaking countries have attempted to ‘decentralize’ themselves from the focus of EFL culture materials since the 1990s, the materials which now attempt to present universal culture through English, present such material through the values of the material producers, who largely remain native-English-speaking countries. In other words, despite the requested ‘deanglicization’ of the lingua franca by the academic community, the teaching of the language is still reflective of internalized Anglo norms. Thus implying that the fear born in the late 1970s, that the use of English as a lingua franca would lead to linguistic and cultural imperialism led by the West is still a relevant threat. So, how does a native-speaking English teacher go about avoiding imposing cultural values and norms on the countries they work in? First off, one of the main objectives of this article is to alert the academic community of this very much unresolved issue. The experience I offer in the continuation of this article, is one example of a proposed curriculum, but by no means is it a perfected resolution nor a complete model. Instead, I hope it serves as stepping- stone for future practices to build and improve upon.

### **Addressing the challenges of native-speaking teachers**

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<sup>5</sup> The distinction between ‘local’ and ‘universal’ culture referenced in this paper is based on the understanding that most EFL curriculum presents ‘target culture’, or U.S. and British culture, as local culture. ‘Universal’ culture refers to the international community which also encompasses a growing number of native and second-language English speakers.

To address the first mentioned challenge, of incorporating the students' own learning styles and practices into lessons, I incorporate a collaborative approach to our bi-weekly meetings. This requires re-thinking of the activity set-up in two ways. I, the teacher, allow the students to present half of the material, and also allow them to choose how they present the material. This can evolve what was originally planned to be a simple book club, into other forms of interactive activities such as a sing-along or drama skit. Future practitioners may find that meeting preparation takes a bit longer and classes are not as well organized as had the teacher organized the entire meeting. However, the students feel more ownership of the materials, the materials are the fruit of their own knowledge, and the activity is also a product of their own creativity.

When considering the second challenge, of 'decentralizing' the teacher's culture from the culture classroom, I believe that native English speakers must first come to accept that although their cultural expertise might always be limited to the 'local' English-speaking culture of their home nation, they can expand upon their expertise to make that 'local culture' to present universal themes and allow for more global discussion. For my part, my educational background is in literary theory and language and culture teaching. A large focus of my literary studies' education has been on how to teach both culture and literary theory using revised curriculum, based around non-canonical works. When I teach English language and Anglophone culture abroad, I incorporate these changing canons to better reflect the current use of the English language in the U.S. culture, paying special attention to the English language's unofficial status as the country's preferred language, and the growing number of people living in the U.S. who do not consider English their first language, and of that number the approximately 28 million people based in the U.S. who consider Spanish their at home preferred language (RYAN, 2013).<sup>6</sup> I do this by looking at new teaching materials based on the literature of Latino activist, immigrant, and diaspora writers, such as Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Ana Lydia Vega, Rudolfo Anaya, and the 2008 Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Díaz. The Latino authors mentioned, amongst others, offer a unique study of language when it is used as a literary device, as they incorporate both Spanish and English simultaneously in their texts by way of isolated borrowed words and code-switching.<sup>7</sup> The very use of language in these texts can serve as political messages, reflections of identity, and embodies what Post-colonialism and Translation scholar Harish Trivedi

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<sup>6</sup> Readers should be reminded that legally there is no 'official' language of the United States. Federal Government programs are required to provide forms and information to speakers of 'limited English speakers' or in other languages, if requested (SCHIDKRAUT, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The term 'code switching', for our purposes, is used in a sociocultural linguistic context. Our understanding of the term is based around Níle's definition. He explains: "Code switching is defined as the practice of selecting or altering linguistic elements so as to contextualize talk in interaction. This contextualization may relate to local discourse practices, such as turn selection or various forms of bracketing, or it may make relevant information beyond the current exchange, including knowledge of society and diverse identities" (1).

describes as the art of making language in itself be an effective vehicle of cultural expression which charges the reader with the task of questioning the role of language both in the text and in their own society (2005). I use materials that meet two objectives: 1) question the use of English as a dominant language and 2) allow reflection on the fact that in many instances a single lingua franca is not sufficient to be all encompassing because in many contexts a language other than the lingua franca is used to contest or protest the use of an all-encompassing, dominant language.

At this stage, I am now confronted with how to plan to introduce native Portuguese speakers learning English as a second language to texts that frequently mix English and Spanish. We should note that the limited use of Spanish in the texts cannot simply be translated, as the blended language is as intrinsic to the cultural expression of the texts as the individual words themselves- the blended language is an expression of the writers' blended identity. As French linguist and philosopher, Jaques Derrida, affirms when the signifier cannot be separated from the signified, a text can simply not be translated (1978, p. 281). The philosopher's point draws upon the idea that so much of the meaning of words is embedded in the cultural characters that composes the language used to communicate. This is even more true in cases of code-switching, in which an author chooses to alternate between two languages while finding some positions best expressed in a language different than that of the majority of the text, in this case Spanish. What presents itself as an ideologically complex language issue resolves itself as an activity in building intercultural competence. The fact that the Spanish words in the code-switching texts presented cannot be translated, shows the cultural meaning of those words and the cultural value of language- a universal case that is our lessons is seen through the use of English in the United States. The materials remind future language teachers of the importance of cultural lessons in language class. We are reminded by Nguyen that "communication is an interrelationship between a language and its people and if cultural information is not taught as a part of communicative competence, complete communication cannot happen" (2008, p. 31).

To solve the difficulties of teaching intercultural competence through code-switching texts by Latino authors, I combine both theoretical culture theory and practical application studies on English language teaching. For the theoretical part, I base my ideas in literary scholar J. Maggio's latest work on literary limitations produced by marginalized authors, entitled "Can the Subaltern be Heard?", in which he advocates in line with Spivak, that instead of using these texts as an attempt to know 'the other' in and out and reduce 'expression' of otherness to our own terms, we should rethink translation and reading of such texts as an exercise in only desiring to understand and opening ourselves as readers to listening to what we will never totally understand. It is this idea of

reading and listening to the unfamiliar without trying to fully translate nor condense literary context that I want to bring into my coursework. For the more practical presentation of such texts I apply the strategies established by Michelle Devereaux and Rebecca Wheeler in their article “Code-Switching and Language Ideologies: Exploring Identity, Power, and Society in Dialectally Diverse Literature.”

To establish the criteria for selecting primary texts, I choose only two works that contain limited examples of code-switching and hence are more English based than Spanish based. The motivation being to allow for time, ample discussion and reflection on this introduction to code-switching material. The first text, “How to tame a wild tongue,” is a literary essay by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa’s code-switching in this piece shares her experiences growing up as a native Spanish speaker in southern Texas and trying to learn English in the oppressive U.S. public school system. The second text, *Dominicanish* by the Afra-Latina, Dominican immigrant writer, Josefina Báez, was originally a poem that was later adapted into a performance piece. The title of the work, *Dominicanish*, refers to her race, geographic home, and invented language, which is a mix of Dominican-Spanish, Cuban-Spanish, English and Hindi. By using the suffix ‘ish’ she implies that her language and identity are like ‘Dominican’, but not completely. These selections exemplify the importance of language as a literary device, as culture theorist Lorgia García-Peña indicates, the code-switching and blended languages used reflect the confusing and at times unintelligible experiences of being a foreign language speaker in a mostly monolingual society. The language used in the texts are more than just a means of communication, they embody the writers themselves.

### **Pedagogy student information and procedures**

The materials taught were part of an optional, bi-weekly, extracurricular activity, a book club, that met for four months. The seven students that attend regularly are all high-intermediate to advanced English students and are enrolled in English pedagogy curriculum at the Universidade Federal do Pará. At the time of our meetings, they were all in the third year of their studies and were starting their first English teaching internships in the public schools. As part of the required courses in their curriculum, the students take a combination of linguistics, teaching methodology, culture, and literature courses. In relation to knowledge of other languages, only two of the seven students had previous exposure to Spanish language courses.

To provide framework of the unit’s process, first, after an initial reading of each of the texts the students underlined words in Spanish they felt were necessary to know to understand the text.

Upon discussing the words we saw that almost all of the terms they didn't know were cultural terms and concepts that did not have English equivalents, they all had to be described. For the second reading of each text the students underlined each example of code-switching and then wrote a reflection on the use of code-switching as a literary device in the text. As a guide, they were given the following questions, which are variations of the those established by Devereaux and Wheeler(2012):

- 1) How does the character's language change throughout the text?
- 2) How does the character's language vary by time and place?
- 3) How does the author's language change between monologues and dialogues?
- 4) How do other characters in the text react to code-switching?<sup>8</sup>

### **Student responses and reflections**

We then discussed if the students could think of any similar uses of code-switching in their own culture, whether it be in literary texts, song lyrics, or political discourses. Responses varied from examples of songs that mix Portuguese with English and French lyrics to other examples of online social media posts that blend Brazilian Portuguese with *Bajúba*, a language identified with Brazil's gay, bi, queer and lesbian population. Another issue students brought up in their open discussion was the way a speech accent associates an individual and creates their identity. They mentioned that some people are discriminated if their accent reveals that Portuguese is not their first language, implying that they might be from an outlying indigenous area, in cases in which Portuguese is their first language their accent might reveal them being from a poor and underdeveloped region of the country. The student-led conversation also indicated positive notions of accent use; one student indicated that when Brazilians hear different accents and variation of Portuguese they are reminded how large and diverse the country is and it brings about a certain pride for the rich linguistic differences that exist within Brazilian Portuguese. The group reactions and discussions were analytical and informative. The materials presented provided an opportunity for them to both explain information about their own country and culture in the target language, and discuss how their culture fit into a global conversation about culture and language.

From my observations, one of the most beneficial moments of our group meetings was when discussing the benefits and drawbacks of an all-encompassing language, whether it be English at the local level, or a national language within countries. For the Brazilian students, this point was

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<sup>8</sup> Devereaux and Wheeler propose the following questions: "How does the character's language change throughout the text?" and "How does the author's narrative writing or the character's language vary by time, place and purpose?" (20012, p. 69).

especially complex, as they foresee both English and Portuguese as imposing forces on local and national culture. They pointed out that just as English can at times oppress cultural groups in the United States, Portuguese can have the same effect the same to local indigenous and immigrant groups that see their cultural traditions and language disappear as they are forced to use Portuguese to integrate themselves into society.

What first appears to be a U.S. national issue raises a point of international cultural standards best explained in the words of Modiano, “Retaining our indigenous cultures and language(s) while reaping the benefits of large-scale integrations via a language of wider communication is the challenge many of us will no doubt have to come to terms with in the years to come” (2004, p. 225). The students were asked to collect information on their own country’s language use and present it in one of our meetings. After the students presented statistical information on their findings I discussion resulted in the conclusion that political, social, and cultural dynamics of language are essential topics that should be discussed in any linguistic or pedagogy curriculum, however, discussions of such themes are especially relevant in Brazil. In which despite the only two official languages being Brazilian Portuguese and LIBRAS, the official sign language, the country has 228 spoken, living languages, 215 of which are indigenous and 13 are immigrant based (LEWIS, 2013). Being able to discuss and present their region and country’s language and how it interacts with English, I believe, will allow the students to become better informed language teachers in the future.

## **Conclusions**

Although the activity presented cannot claim to be a perfect example for intercultural teaching in all instances, there are multiple benefits that can be learned from the experience described. First, the materials used present a new facet of U.S. culture that is not normally presented in EFL materials. Second, the issue of the English language in the U.S. invites discussion about dominant languages, both in Anglophone culture and around the world. Creating a space for an open conversation about language marginalization, code-switching, and dominant languages challenges and expands the minds of pedagogy students as they are in the critical stages of developing their own personal teaching philosophies and styles. Third, and most important, the activity inspires both nonnative-speaking and native-speaking languages teachers to reconsider how we teach culture in language courses. Hopefully, by better preparing our language educators, we, as a society, can enter the increasingly globalized world ready to hear contributions from all languages and all voices.

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**RESUMO:** Este trabalho descreve as experiências de uma Assistente de Ensino de Inglês, participante do Programa Fulbright – ETA, enquanto coordenava atividades extracurriculares reacionadas à língua inglesa e à cultura anglófona no município de Bragança, Pará. A atividade apresentada mostra como o ensino da cultura 'local' dos EUA pode ser desenvolvido para introduzir conversas interculturais sobre o uso de línguas no mundo globalizado. Os materiais estão baseados nas publicações culturais de acadêmicos como Harish Trivedi e Jaques Derrida (1978) e materiais pedagógicos de Rebecca Wheeler e Michelle Devereaux (2012).

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** EFL, competência intercultural, alternância de código linguístico, tradução cultural.