

Translating a Culture-based Dialogical Approach into ELT Materials for Lower-Secondary Students from Rural Communities in Northern Brazil

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Abstract

*An approach to teaching and learning that capitalises on the experience and on the context of the students has been advocated by educationalists for some time. These theoreticians and practitioners are normally associated with experience-based learning, social constructivism and critical pedagogy. Building on some of the principles of these theories, I have been working on a theoretical framework, which I am provisionally calling a culture-based dialogical approach (CBDA) to teaching and learning additional languages. In this paper, I present some excerpts of an EFL teaching unit developed as a first draft of a response to the need for materials that bring to the fore the students and their way of life; and I make an attempt at demonstrating how the CBDA can be materialised in the pages of this pilot material, which is currently being tested in a rural community in the Amazon region with a group of Year 7 students attending a government-funded school. In the form of a case study, the piloting process is being documented through teacher log, interviews, language tests and a paper-and-pencil version of the Implicit Association Test. A quanti-qualitative approach will be adopted for the analysis of the data. It is expected that the responses of the participants in the testing process will provide insightful information on the quality of the materials so far produced and inform further stages of the research.**

1. Introduction

The initiative of developing English language teaching (ELT) materials that exploit the experience and context of the students is informed by theories such as critical pedagogy, experiential learning and constructivism. Apple [2], for instance, is an advocate of contextualised education. He also recognises the pivotal role that context plays in a critical reflection on education itself: 'Context counts and it counts even more when we think critically about education [2]'. Nevertheless, this is by no means a new perspective on the educative process, since Dewey [9] was already stressing the importance of context in education at the beginning of the last century. He argues that educators

should exploit student context in a way that it becomes conducive to learning: '... [educators] should know how to utilize the surroundings ... that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile [9]'.

Freire [12] also reminds us of the strong relationship between text and context. He conceives it as a symbiotic process: 'Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world [12]'. This symbiosis is also underscored by Vygotsky [30]. One can notice the value that this author attributes to student immediate reality in the educative process in his suggestion, for instance, of how the teaching of writing should be approached: '... writing should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life [30]'.

Despite this recognition, student context is not always taken into consideration in EFL textbooks that are used in many schools in different parts of the world. This is very much the case in classrooms located in rural communities in northern Brazil. An analysis of ELT textbooks utilised in government-funded lower-secondary schools throughout this region reveals a significant lack of cultural sensitivity and an absence of local themes in them. The students' immediate reality is not reflected in such materials. This is amply exemplified in *Links: English for Teens* [26]. In this much utilised textbook series, there is little mention of issues related to Brazilian culture, and no mention whatsoever of matters relevant to those who live in more remote areas of northern Brazil.

This obliviousness to the surroundings of the students is also evident in another popular series, *Alive! Ensino da lingua inglesa* [23]; here, too, there is no record of issues related to the context of the Amazonian youth. I believe this phenomenon constitutes a significant gap in the field of materials development for additional language teaching and learning in northern Brazil. I argue that the sociocultural, economic and geographic contexts of the students should be capitalised upon in ELT textbooks used in the region as a means to incentivise learning, and more importantly to help the members

which works in collaboration with the Brazilian Ministry of Education.

* This research is being funded by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) through the research grant BEX 6916/14-7. CAPES is a government agency

of these communities become more effective agents of positive social change and sustainable regional development. Therefore, my objective is to develop ELT materials that incorporate the physical and social contexts of lower-secondary school students living in rural communities in northern Brazil.

2. The rationale for the study

The rationale guiding the research has a practical and a theoretical dimension. The practical rationale builds on the claim that English may play an important role in the socio-economic development of northern Brazil. Some reasons for this claim include the urge for Amazonian people to engage in discussions about sustainable development at an international level on the assumption that the international academic community can provide important contributions through actions such as research partnership, mobility and a variety of events like the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015 [29] and the 2015 International Conference of Sustainable Development [20] that took place in the United States of America in September of 2015.

The Brazilian government has made efforts to send Amazonian youngsters abroad to acquire the scientific knowledge needed for the region. One example of this is the Science Without Borders (SWB) programme, through which 2,030 Amazonians were sent to non-Portuguese speaking countries from 2011 to 2015 [6]. However, one of the obstacles for international mobility through programmes such as the SWB is lack of proficiency in the English language – a requirement for most of the international destinations, due to the fact that the English language is used as the medium of instruction in various countries.

Even in some countries where the first language is not English, either for the better or for the worse, institutions that accept foreign students through mobility or research programmes and those promoting international events adopt this language as the medium of communication. According to a report published by the British Council in 2014, this is a phenomenon that is on the rise. The report reveals that, in the 55 countries that participated in the study, 78.2% of government-funded universities and 90.9% of private universities allow the use of English as medium of instruction [8].

Still on the practical dimension of the rationale, as it was mentioned before, is the fact that the English coursebooks that are being used in schools located in rural areas of northern Brazil are less than adequate for those contexts; and it is assumed that, because they fail to capitalise on the students' immediate experience of the world, they also fail to encourage them to have a positive attitude towards learning the English language. It is believed that an active

engagement with learning this language is less dependent on the colourful pictures of wonders in unknown countries than on the familiarity of the themes covered by ELT textbooks.

The theoretical dimension includes a number of assumptions about the educative process, which are informed by authors associated with critical pedagogy, experiential learning and social constructivism [2, 3, 8, 10-13, 23, 25]. One assumption is that content has to capitalise on the experience and immediate reality of the learner. The claim that the physical and social contexts of the learner constitute a recurrent point of departure in the educative process is another one. These claims echo theorists and activists associated with critical pedagogy such as Shor [28] Apple [2] and Giroux [14], who continuously advocate a contextualised education. These authors consider the context of the school setting itself as an arena where ideas can be challenged or passively accepted. Their argument in favour of a critical pedagogy is also an attempt to overcome indoctrination and undermine the neoliberal reproductive system.

Additionally, there is the assumption that a dialogical approach to teaching and learning can empower and liberate the learners by providing them with a critical understanding of reality. This claim is also informed by critical pedagogy. Freire [13] suggests that a dialogical education enables both teachers and students to play an active role in the educational process. He uses the expression 'problem-posing' to refer to this type of education, and he believes that it can help them defeat 'authoritarianism', 'alienating intellectualism', and 'false perception of reality [13]'. A dialogical approach is thus seen as a powerful weapon in the ideological and political arenas.

Yet another assumption which is part of the theoretical rationale behind the study is that a culture-based dialogical approach is conducive to deeper knowledge of *self* and *other*. It rests on Bakhtin's [3] ideas about intercultural dialogue. This scholar calls our attention to the value of dialogue between different cultures. He argues that it is in the difference that we see more clearly the other as well as ourselves – in this argument, one can observe once more a symbiotic process. Even if, here, it involves self and other, this process can be paralleled with that between text and context or, in Freire's words, between the 'reading of the world [12]' and the 'reading of the word [12]'.

A key element in these intercultural encounters is the prospect of the ability to generate questions and seek answers to them: 'We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it ... [3]'. Bakhtin [3] believes that without taking this inquiring stance we are unable to use our creativity to appreciate things that seem alien to us. However, it can be argued that,

not only by raising one's own questions, but also by listening to the questions that are raised about one's culture by different cultures mutual learning may occur even more effectively. Nevertheless, this kind of learning does not imply harmonious relationship; it simply suggests a more accurate perception of self and other. It seems thus to represent just one important stage in the process of intercultural relationships.

3. A concept of culture

The study adopts an anthropological concept of culture that was formulated by Edward Byron Reuter, an American sociologist and social philosopher, in the first half of the twentieth century. Reuter [25] argues that 'Everything, created by man', is culture. His stance was also embraced by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in the second half of that century. Thus, Freire [11] also conceives culture as an umbrella term that encompasses all man-created things, be them tangible, as a house, or intangible, as a concept, for instance: '...culture as the addition made by men to a world they did not make; culture as the result of men's labour, of their efforts to create and re-create; ... culture as a systematic acquisition of human experience ... [11]'

This broad concept of culture suits the purpose of my project because it permits the extrapolation of the limitations imposed by some characterisations of culture as simply '... a combination of learned beliefs, values and customs...' [21]. Hence, it allows for critical engagement with a comprehensive variety of topics and themes in the foreign language classroom, which constitute a fundamental component of a culture-based dialogical approach to additional language education.

4. Two hypotheses

Two hypotheses have been proposed for the study. The first one is the claim that the development of materials that take into account the context of the learners and resonate with their needs have the potential to yield positive results in terms of linguistic development and overall motivational attitudes towards learning the target language.

The second hypothesis invokes the value of a culture-based dialogical approach in education. Thus, it is the assumption that dialogue between cultures, mediated by dialogue between the teacher and his or her students and amongst the students themselves, can help both the teacher and the students develop critical thinking capacities, have a clearer understanding of the world, and thus prepare them to engage in transformative actions based on reason rather than prejudice, for instance, or any other unworthy motives.

5. Coursebook series and Pilot Material

The coursebook series that I plan to write includes four books, each one of which will be divided into part A and part B; each part containing eight units plus some reinforcement activities – a kind of workbook spread, which will be placed right after each unit.

Initially, it was expected that these materials would be completely aligned with the Brazilian National Curriculum Parameters, or *PCN* as the document is commonly known [5]. Nevertheless, considering the increasing demand for higher levels of foreign language communicative competency in the country, especially in the English language, these parameters no longer suffice to inform syllabi that are more in line with the current needs of Brazilian students.

For the insightful reflections on various dimensions of the processes of language learning and teaching that it provides, I am capitalising heavily on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [7] in the construction of the scope and sequence of each book of the series.

So far, I have written a pilot material: a 21-page teaching unit (Figure 1), into which I have attempted to incorporate elements of the surroundings of the students as well as elements of a different culture.

The unit contains the following sections: Reading, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Communicative task, Grammar, Writing, Play the expert, Listening, Critical thinking, Grammar hints and Reinforcement, which is a built-in workbook.

Two of these sections represent a novelty in relation to most existing EFL textbooks: Play the expert and Critical thinking. The first is based on a drama technique developed by Professor Dorothy Heathcote in the 1980's known as Mantle of the Expert (MoE) [4, 10]. The MoE is an essential part of Process Drama – a type of drama which is episodic and capitalizes on improvisation [19].

When students wear the MoE, they can become engineers, doctors, archaeologists, teachers and whoever they want or need to. In role, in addition to developing their creativity, the students have the opportunity to learn school subjects in a non-threatening and light-hearted way.

But, as Heathcote [17] makes the point that the MoE is not a 'garment', and facilitating learning school subjects is just one of the educational possibilities it offers: 'Mantle is not a cloak by which a person is recognised. This is no garment to cover. I use it as a quality: of leadership, carrying standards of behaviour, morality, responsibility, ethics and the spiritual basis of all action. The mantle embodies the standards I ascribe to. It grows by usage, not garment stitching.'

Critical thinking, the other section not commonly found in EFL textbooks, is meant to help learners develop thinking and *critical thinking*. Knowing that *mango* is part of *forest* in a Venn diagram may indicate some development in thinking. Knowing that

mangos are a source of protein and income for poor families in northern Brazil may nevertheless represent a step further: it is *critical* thinking.

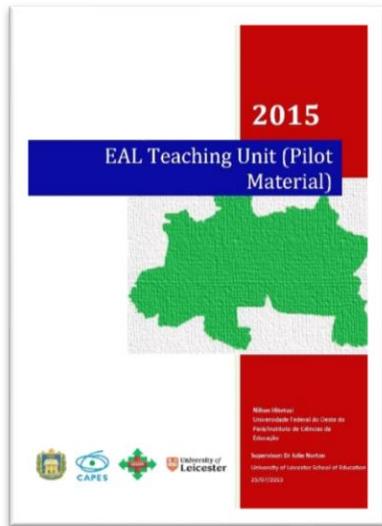


Figure 1: Front cover of the Pilot Material

Figure 2 shows a photograph of an actual classroom where the material is being tested with a group of Year 7 students. The physical aspect of this classroom is typical of many classrooms in rural communities across the Amazon region.



Figure 2: A typical classroom in the Amazon countryside

This photograph and two others are part of a reading activity in the pilot material, in which the students have to match them with two texts.

Throughout the unit the same object in different cultural settings are put before the students with the purpose of calling their attention to similarities and differences so that they have the opportunity to reflect critically on the reasons behind the likenesses and discrepancies of the cultural art crafts.

This schooling environment or - capitalising on the concept of culture that informs the study [25] [11] and on Bakhtin's [3] call for a dialogical approach

between cultures - this Amazonian cultural product, is being placed in conversation with a European one, which is represented in Figure 3 [15]:



Figure 3: A European classroom

The two texts to which these photographs are associated are expected to contribute to the dialogue between the cultures involved. Thus, these texts purposefully present descriptions of school facilities and elements related to the degree of comfort the classroom settings offer to both teachers and students from the perspective of the latter.

The context of the texts is a social media chatroom where two students from different countries meet and talk about their school environment. In text one, a boy from a rural community in northern Brazil introduces himself and talks about the conditions of his classroom (see Figure 4).

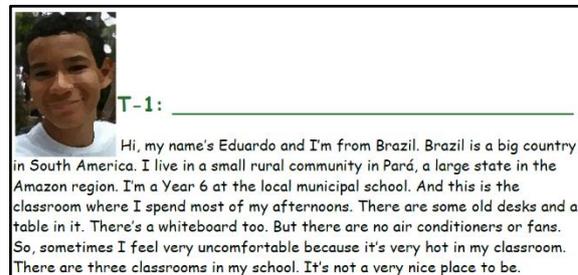


Figure 4: A Brazilian northerner's view on his school

Similarly, in text two, a Ukrainian girl, who lives in the United Kingdom (UK), also introduces herself and talks about her school in this country (see Figure 5).

Whilst fictitious in form, these social media interactions are true in substance, since they do represent two very different classroom setting realities. This very fact seems to attest to the potential of these texts to offer some food for thought on, for instance, the school facilities provided for students in some places on both sides of the Atlantic.

The students might discuss the reasons why, even their parents having to work five months a year to pay their taxes to the Brazilian government [22], they are

not offered a decent schooling environment. Why isn't there a library in their school? Why don't they have air-conditioning in their classrooms since the weather is so hot that it is hard to focus on the lesson? Why do their classrooms look like a shed for animals?



Figure 5: A Ukrainian's view on her school in the UK

Additionally, the teacher can call their attention to other dimensions of these classroom settings that have the potential to facilitate or hinder learning. One such is the way students are seated sometimes implying collaborative work, sometimes, non-interactive individual work.

Throughout the unit, the students as well as the teacher are encouraged to mediate the dialogue between the Brazilian Amazonia culture and the UK culture on this specific topic. Considering Bakhtin's [3] argument on intercultural dialogue, it is possible that by placing these cultural products in conversation with each other, their blatant differences will help the mediators 'raise' their 'own questions [3]', and accordingly achieve the level of awareness that can help them make rational choices in the exercise of their citizenship.

Capitalising on a drama technique known as Mantle of the Expert [4, 10], a section labelled "Play the Expert" was introduced in the pilot material (Figure 6). This is another section of the unit that provides the students with opportunities to exploit their creativity and to use the target language more freely both orally and in the written form. But not only that because, when wearing the 'mantle of the expert', students are exposed to a wide range of learning possibilities, as underscored by O'Neill: 'Working in Mantle of the Expert, students are required to question, negotiate, compromise, take responsibility, cooperate, and collaborate, all in the service of something beyond themselves [24]'.

The tasks in Figure 6 materialise O'Neill's description of the potential of the Mantle of the Expert. When the students are required to work in groups in order to draw their dream classroom, they will have to confer, to brainstorm together so that they can achieve the outcome of the task. As the task relates to their social and physical contexts, one assumes that this fact may stimulate them to engage wholeheartedly more fully in it.

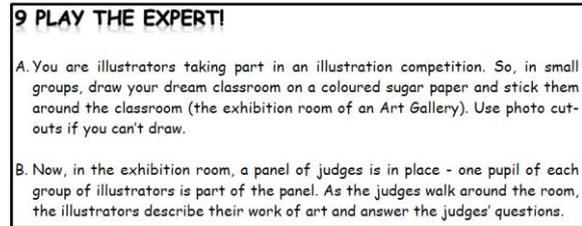


Figure 6: Play the Expert

With a more advanced class, "Play the Expert" provides plenty of opportunities for genuine interactions in the target language because, in a way, it follows the same structure of the types of activity that Willis [31] calls communicative tasks: '[...] tasks are [...] activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.' This is clearly exemplified by the verbal interactions demanded from the students in part B of the set of activities in Figure 6.

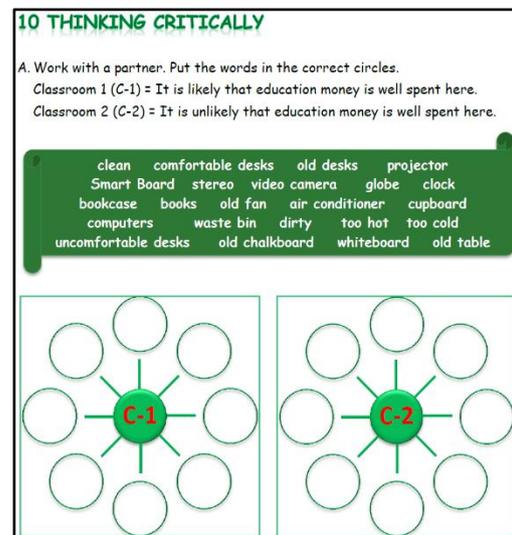


Figure 7: Thinking critically – Part 1

The adoption of this culture-based dialogical approach also provides a space for focus on critical thinking skills development in different ways through a variety of activities. There is even a section labelled 'Thinking Critically', in which the students and the teacher can reflect more critically on the topic, which is necessarily connected with their reality, considering that their experience and their immediate reality always constitute the starting point in the journey towards their attempt to conquer the unknown. This section is the last one before the reinforcement activities spread. First the students are invited to do an exercise, as demonstrated in Figure 7.

Subsequently, following the problem-posing approach suggested by Freire [13], the students are asked some 'why' questions, as shown in Figure 8.

Notice the tone of these questions. They are meant to instigate criticism based on things that are somehow affecting the lives of the students themselves. One way of doing this is by analysing how the same object under scrutiny is dealt with in other contexts in their own country and abroad. Parenthetically, this is another example of how the teacher and the students can mediate a dialogue between cultures.

B. In small groups, answer these questions.

EXAMPLE:

It's more like... Because there is/isn't... are/aren't...

My dream classroom is more like... There is/isn't... are/aren't...



- 1) Is your dream classroom more like C-1 or C-2? Why? Why not?
- 2) Is your real classroom similar to one of these classrooms (C-1 and C-2)?
- 3) What is there (or isn't there) in your real classroom? (Make a list of things that there are and things that there aren't in your real classroom.)
- 4) Is it possible to have the things you want in your real classroom? How?
- 5) Are other classrooms in the countryside like your real classroom? Why? Why not?
- 6) In your opinion, is this sentence true or false? Why? Why not?
'Classrooms in the countryside have to be the way they are because they are countryside classrooms.'

Figure 8: Thinking critically – Part 2

Nevertheless, depending on the level of proficiency of the students, they are not expected to engage with these questions through an English-only approach, due to the challenge that some of them might represent in terms of the complexity of the language required to answer them. As they become more proficient, the students can move gradually from an English-Portuguese to English-only approach; meanwhile, as Agudo [1] maintains, the students' mother tongue can be judiciously used for the achievement of learning objectives.

Despite the long-standing controversy over the use of learner mother tongue in the foreign/second language classroom [18], my experience as foreign language teacher leads me to a solid belief in the 'harmlessness' of resorting to the students' mother tongue in monolingual classrooms for the sake of clarity. As I see it, the adoption of an English-only approach can be adequate and even satisfying for those students who have, for some reason, a special interest in it.

6. Assessment of the materials

The case study of the piloting process is being oriented by two questions, which are considered crucial for the assessment of some of the impacts of the materials: one is (i) how the students and the teacher respond to the materials; and the other inquires (ii) whether or not the proposed hypotheses are supported by evidence.

The method of data collection for assessing the impact of the teaching unit includes a paper-and-pencil version of the Implicit Association Test, which was developed by Greenwald and his associates [16];

language pre- and post-tests; audio and video recordings; a teacher reflective diary; an interview with the teacher; and a focus group interview with the students.

Despite the fact that well-informed answers to questions (i) and (ii) can only be obtained through a long-term study, it seems reasonable to believe that the answers provided by both the teacher and the students involved in the piloting process will shed some light on the value of what has been crafted so far.

7. Conclusions

As outlined in this paper, my project is focused on creating ELT materials for lower-secondary school students from rural communities in Brazilian Amazonia. These materials will incorporate issues related to the local culture of the region in a comprehensive way, including themes such as economy, history, geography, politics and social matters. This type of material can be used to raise awareness about ways in which Amazonians view themselves; ways they view other cultures and ways in which they are viewed by different cultures. Moreover, it can add to the broader theoretical discussion on the role of student context as a pedagogical tool in the language classroom.

I also envision these materials playing an important role in regional curricula and in galvanising students from rural areas and remote towns in the northern interior of Brazil into studying English more intently and becoming more effective users of this language. In addition, I expect that these materials will provide the students with opportunities for reflection on their unique reality. These reflective spaces can constitute an important step towards encouraging them to situate themselves and their communities within wider narratives and broader thinking about regional, national and global engagement.

Having said that, the attempt to translate a culture-based dialogical approach into textbooks is undoubtedly a complex endeavour, considering the numerous tasks that have to be carried out and the many factors involved, such as students' and teachers' needs; their levels of proficiency in the target language; their motivation to learn and teach the language; gathering of data from local and global sources, paying attention to the adequacy of vocabulary and grammar when writing original texts or when adapting others; setting up the right scenario for the users of the materials to mediate the dialogues between the different cultures involved, amongst so many other factors that come into play when developing teaching materials. In the same vein, the fact that I am a novice in the area of materials writing increases the complexity of the work that has to be done. Thus, I have no doubt whatsoever that this is a

‘steep hill’ I am trying ‘to climb’. Therefore, it does not seem an excess of caution to follow the Shakespearean character’s advice to the letter: ‘To climb steep hills requires slow pace at first ... [27]’.

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