

# ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA IN PORTUGAL: WHAT STUDENTS WANT, WHAT TEACHERS TEACH

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## Abstract

This study seeks to show how Portuguese students and teachers view learning and using English today and how their attitudes can influence or be influenced by ELT policies and practices. It made use of two semi-structured questionnaires, one for students (N=247) and another for teachers (N=26). The subjects were part of four educational institutions – two universities and two polytechnic institutes. The methodology used in the analysis of attitudes toward the English language should be diversified, integrating several means of data collection and focusing on the identification of central aspects related to learning and teaching the language such as native and non-native varieties and cultures, native and non-native speakers' use of English, learner's goal, ownership of English, intelligibility of English, native and non-native teachers and motivation to learn English. Essentially, subjects displayed positive attitudes toward learning and using English as a Lingua Franca. Furthermore, most subjects viewed learning about culture positively, displayed a favourable attitude towards non-native speakers and their English, attached intrinsic value to both native and non-native teachers, and referred that the Portuguese learner should aim to become a competent user of English as an alternative to aiming to achieve native proficiency. However, at the same time they seemed to adopt a linguacentred view of English which emphasized the British variety and culture. By recognizing students' and teachers' attitudes toward learning and using English, this study also hopes to contribute to the ELT field by helping set approaches of investigation into the role of English as a Lingua Franca suggesting relevant areas and methodologies such as ELT in basic and secondary education, basic and secondary school teacher training programmes in universities, materials writers, teaching ESP in universities, and ELT policies for basic and secondary schools.

## Keywords

native and non-native varieties/cultures, motivation, learning goals, language ownership, native and non-native teachers.

## 1. Building a paradigm of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

### 1.1. Intelligibility in ELF

Smith (1983) states that “it is often maintained that the educated native speaker is more likely to be intelligible to others than the educated non-native speaker” (p.49). Some people claim that the model for production should be an English native variety. This choice of model of a standard variety is required because “the use of other models will lead to such a great diversity of non-native varieties of educated English that soon persons speaking English may not be intelligible to their listeners” (p.49). However, later on Smith (1992) declares that native speakers are not “always more intelligible than non-native speakers” (p.76). Smith suggests that intelligibility may seem to depend on the familiarity a speaker has with a variety or accent of English: the greater the familiarity, the more likely the user will understand, and be understood by, speakers of that variety.

### 1.2. The nativeness paradigm and ownership of English

According to Medgyes (1992), non-natives cannot become native speakers because they are norm-dependent, in other words, their English “is but an imitation of some form of native use” (p.343). Medgyes considers that there is an implicit aim of non-native speakers to ‘become’ native speakers, at least in linguistic terms. Medgyes does not consider that non-native speakers might not want to conform to native speaker norms. This belief seems to be quite strong in the nativeness paradigm debate, as Cook (1999) aptly states that “an objection that is sometimes raised to the argument against the native speaker model is that it is the L2 users themselves who want to be native speakers” (p.196).

Smith (1983b) draws attention to the fact that when considering EIL, as far as native speakers are concerned, there is more than just being aware and tolerant toward different pronunciations. First of all, native speakers should know how other people – native and non-native speakers – structure information and argument when using English. Also, they should be sensitised to the probability of misunderstanding and be prepared to deal with it.

Widdowson (1994) suggests that the general assumption in ELT is that the English language belongs to the English, the speakers of proper and genuine English and those who control the language. But Widdowson recognizes that Standard English is an international language, no longer property of England or any other Inner Circle country: “It serves a whole range of different communities and their institutional purposes and these transcend traditional communal and cultural boundaries” (p.382). In a sense, these communities, as language creators, are owners of the language.

### 1.3. Native and non-native varieties and cultures

Modiano (2001a) identifies two major areas in the teaching of English as an international language and their scope: language varieties and culture. Modiano (2001b) also stresses that when students need to learn English as a tool for intercultural communication, they are supposed “to develop the ability to comprehend a wide range of varieties but also strive to utilize language which has a high likelihood of being comprehensible among a broad cross-section of the peoples who comprise the English-using world” (p.162).

As far as teaching culture is concerned, Seidlhofer (1999) calls attention to the current situation in ELT: “Most practical matters which impinge directly on teachers’ daily practice, such as textbooks, reference works, supplementary materials, examinations and qualifications still make almost exclusive reference to notions of the native speaker culture as the (uncontaminated?) source providing the language to be taught” (p.234). In order to promote cultural equality, Modiano (2001a) states that “a multiplicity of teaching practices, and a view of the language as belonging to a broad range of peoples and cultures, is the best that language instructors can do” (p.340). Modiano (2001b) maintains that “the ideologies which underpin globalization and the vision of cultural pluralism are more in tune with a lingua franca perspective as opposed to ELT platforms based on culture-specific varieties” (p.159).

### 1.4. Learners’ goal and motivation

Gnutzmann (1999) refers that although BrE and AmE will continue to be the theoretical model, learners do not necessarily have to conform to these standards. He believes that “expecting learners to comply with the set of linguistic norms would probably put unnecessary pressure on them, since they would hardly be able to fully live up to such expectations” (p.165). Cook (1999) adds that the move beyond the native speaker seems to rely more on a change of perspectives about models rather than following these specific suggestions: “Together with the change in attitude, placing more emphasis on the successful L2 user and on using the L1 more in teaching can bring language teaching to the realization that it is helping people use L2s, not imitate language speakers” (p.204).

To date, the most influential motivation theory in the field of second language acquisition has been proposed by Robert Gardner and associates. Gardner has introduced the most widely known concepts in the field: instrumental and integrative orientations. Based on Gardner's work, Oxford (1996) says that while integrative orientation is related to a desire for learning the language for the purpose of cultural/linguistic integration within the culture of the second language community, instrumental motivation "is motivation to learn the language for a practical purpose, such as getting a better job, earning more money, entering a better college or graduate school, and so on" (p.3).

Dörnyei (1990) calls attention to the fact that in a foreign-language learning context "learners often have not had sufficient experience of the target-language community to have attitudes for or against it" (p.49). He refers to the fact that Littlewood (1984) had already pointed out that "this is particularly true of learning an international language, in which the aim of learning is not so much to get in contact with the native-speaking community, as to communicate with others who have also learned it as a foreign language" (p.49).

### 1.5. Native teachers vs. non-native teachers

Seidlhofer (1999) criticizes the view that native speakers are seen as 'infallible informants' as their language has not been 'meddled with' for pedagogic purposes, giving them advantage over non-native teachers (p.237). Phillipson (1992) believes that the native speaker may be better qualified than the non-native speaker because the native speaker teacher can demonstrate fluent and appropriate language, appreciate the cultural connotations of the language, and assess whether a language form is correct or not. However, he stresses that while on the one hand, these are not crucial virtues in teacher training, on the other hand, well trained non-native teachers can acquire these skills. In these circumstances, Phillipson refers to the fact that non-native teachers may be better qualified than native teachers for a number of reasons. First, they have gone through the complex process of acquiring English as a second/foreign language. Second, they have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners. Third, they may have a detailed awareness of how mother tongue and target language differ and consequently what is difficult for L2 learners. Finally, they have first-hand experience of using a second or foreign language.

## 2. The study

### 2.1. Research questions

The research questions of this study were formulated based on two central aspects: the *theory* and the *practice* of EIL in Portugal. The specific research questions that try to frame the study are:

1. How does the *practice* of ELT in Portugal today represent EIL? What are the students' and teachers' attitudes toward EIL?
2. How do the current ELT *policies* and *materials* for basic and secondary education in Portugal represent EIL?
3. Do the representations of EIL in *policies* and *materials* and in the students' and teachers' *minds* and *practices* converge or diverge?

The concept of EIL was investigated based on the identification of the following pivotal aspects related to ELT: (1) varieties of English; (2) cultural issues; (3) international role of English; (4) language fluency; (5) ownership of language; (6) the roles of native and non-native speakers; (7) motivation toward learning English.

## 2.2. Data collection

This study made use of two semi-structured questionnaires, one for students (N = 247) and another for teachers (N = 26). The aim of the questionnaires was to identify the subjects' attitudes toward EIL. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students and 12 teachers who had previously answered the questionnaires and had volunteered for the interviews. Basically, the interviews aimed at supplementing the findings of the questionnaires. This research also aimed at carrying out a thorough and substantial analysis of the current ELT educational policies in Portugal and classroom materials used in basic and secondary schools. Eleven documents, 31 books (textbooks, workbooks, teacher's books and pupil's booklets reaching almost 3,800 pages) and seven audio cassettes/CDs were examined.

## 3. The results

### 3.1. The linguistic dimensions of ELF

Overall, subjects tended to display a more linguacentred attitude to learning and using English. More specifically, students stated that they like the British accent better than any other and would like to speak English with that accent. However, many subjects pointed out the relevance and importance of the American variety of English. But when asked about the coexistence of both BrE and AmE in the international sphere or in their own experience of learning and using English, many stressed that they consider BrE the 'correct' and target variety although many subjects think that it is important to know the differences between BrE and AmE. But there is no doubt that subjects hold more positive attitudes toward these two standard varieties than other native or non-native varieties of English. Subjects reported being more familiar with BrE and AmE.

Moreover, not many students or teachers believed it is important to learn about non-native varieties of English and few subjects reported being familiar with non-native English. The subjects' lack of interest in non-native varieties might be related with the little or no contact they had with them in their past English language education.

At times subjects displayed a more internationally oriented perception of the English language. The vast majority of subjects believed it is very important to learn about international features of English. Furthermore, many students and teachers accept mixing the American and British varieties when using English. But the subjects who believe they should be consistent in a single variety claimed that BrE is the norm to be followed.

All in all, students and teachers seem to have very similar attitudes toward the English language. Sometimes, though, teachers were closer to a more international approach to English as when a higher percentage of teachers reacted positively to learning international features of English and incorporating non-native varieties (ESL and EFL)

in class and when more teachers than students reported being familiar with native and non-native varieties of English.

### 3.2. The cultural dimensions of ELF

All in all, students and teachers viewed learning culture in ELT quite positively. However, if, on the one hand, they regarded British culture, American culture, international cultural aspects not specific to any country, and other English native cultures as important, they did not have the same opinion about ESL and EFL cultures.

In addition, subjects clearly pointed out British culture as the most important culture in ELT, followed by American culture. However, students and teachers also referred to the importance of international cultural aspects in language classes. These results may indicate that at the same time subjects appreciate British and American culture, they are also interested in approaching English as a lingua franca.

When comparing students' and teachers' attitudes to the cultural dimensions of ELF, it can be said that teachers reacted more positively to learning/teaching culture in language classes than students did. This can be tentatively explained by the fact that some of the teachers in this study have an academic background of literature and cultural studies. One striking difference between the two groups of subjects is that teachers viewed Portuguese culture as much more important in English classes compared to the students' opinion about it.

### 3.3. Language affiliation

On reflection, subjects tended to recognize the value of NNSs and the English they use. In particular, most students and teachers believed that NSs should be more tolerant toward the English used by NNSs. However, while most students thought that NSs should try to use English in a way to make it easier for non-natives to understand, most teachers said that NSs should use English the same way when communicating with other NSs.

Most subjects also agreed that the Portuguese learner should aim to be a competent speaker and writer of English, instead of working toward a native target. Nevertheless, some students were inclined to accept a native model when writing in English. For these subjects, while there is some flexibility in spoken English in terms of having a Portuguese accent and occasionally making grammatical mistakes, grammar mistakes are not supposed to happen in written English. Moreover, the majority of the students referred to the fact that their English is a mixture of AmE and BrE and with features that are consequence of the influence of their first language.

The role of the NS is also reduced as most students and teachers identify English as a global language for international communication which belongs to whoever uses it. However, subjects were not able to indicate if it is easier for them to understand a NS or a NNS of English. Furthermore, most subjects tended to be aware of the value of both native and non-native teachers in ELT, attaching different but intrinsic value to each group of teachers.

Finally, students displayed an approach which emphasizes the international role of English rather than the contact with native speakers when they recognized having instrumental and “international use” motivation for learning and using English.

All things considered, subjects seem to adopt a pragmatic and international attitude toward the English language. Most of the time, students and teachers distinguished the uses and features of native and non-native English and regarded the native speakers not as model providers but as one of the different groups of users of English as a lingua franca.

#### 4. Conclusions and implications

The findings in this study help justify a novel approach to ELF in ELT which takes into account the following aspects:

- a balanced presentation of linguistic and cultural aspects of English
- introduction of the differences between AmE and BrE
- presentation of native and non-native varieties and cultures
- development of international topics
- understanding the local culture
- acknowledgement of native and non-native speakers’ use of English
- recognition of the value of native and non-native teachers
- granting ownership of English to native and non-native speakers
- working on learner’s instrumental and international use motivation to learn English

Finally, this study may make a contribution to the debate on the teaching of English in basic and secondary schools and universities. The knowledge that results from recognizing students’ and teachers’ attitudes toward learning and using English and identifying the major features of the current English syllabi and pedagogic materials used in basic and secondary education may help improve the following areas:

- 1) ELT in basic and secondary education
- 2) Basic and secondary school teacher training programmes in universities
- 3) Teaching ESP in universities
- 4) Materials writers
- 5) ELT policies for basic and secondary schools

As the role of the English language in the world evolves, the facts and truth of the past become the challenges of the future. In order to draw an accurate and reliable picture of the international penetration of English, we need to deepen our understanding of the minds and practices of those who learn and use English in a foreign context. This study offers a contribution to ongoing research, in the hope that it may stimulate debate and provide a possible model for future work.

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