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# Teaching English as a global language: a democratic globalization through an intercultural perspective

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## Abstract

This paper aims at discussing how the English current status as a global language can positively influence language teaching practices. In order to do so, misconceptions about the nature of English and its role as a widely used means of communication are addressed at the beginning of the article, followed by the impact the new status has created in both native and non-native speakers. The issues regarding the teaching process itself involve the political choices teachers make, the incongruence of having a privileged accent in the classroom and how an Intercultural Approach can help build a democratic globalization when it comes to teaching and learning English. The changes concerning the concepts of foreign language and native speaker are also briefly addressed, intending to present their contributions to the process of teaching English as a global language.

**Key-words:** Communication; Classroom; Misconceptions, Non-native speakers.

## *Resumo*

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IΦ-*Sophia*

Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

**Resumo**
*Esse artigo tem como objetivo discutir como o atual status do inglês como língua global pode influenciar positivamente as práticas de ensino da língua. A fim de realizar tal objetivo, concepções errôneas sobre a natureza da língua inglesa e sobre seu papel enquanto meio de comunicação são abordadas no início do artigo, seguidas pelo impacto que o novo status criou tanto em falantes nativos como em falantes não nativos. As questões referentes ao processo de ensino em si envolvem as escolhas políticas que os professores fazem, a incongruência em se ter um sotaque privilegiado em sala de aula e como uma Abordagem Intercultural pode ajudar a construir uma globalização democrática quando se trata do ensino e aprendizagem do inglês. As mudanças com relação aos conceitos de língua estrangeira e de falante nativo são também brevemente abordadas, com o intuito de apresentar suas contribuições ao processo de ensino do inglês como língua global.*
**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: *Comunicação; Sala de aula; Concepções errôneas, Falantes não nativos.*

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## Introduction

English is currently considered as a global language[2], meaning that it is used as a primary means of communication throughout the world. Even in countries in which English is not the official language, it is the obvious choice for both commercial and academic purposes. Studies show that there are much more non-native English speakers than native English speakers in the world – according to Crystal (2008 apud Rajagopalan, 2012) the proportion is three or four to one. This fact has drastically changed the status of the English language, understood now, in a rough way, as a language which belongs to no one. Regarding the teaching of English, this new status implies heavily in the classroom, redefining traditional practices. However, in order to address properly the teaching implications, it is necessary to clarify some misconceptions involving global languages, especially English.

## Misconceptions about English as a global language

Although the huge presence of English can be argued consensually, there are some widespread misconceptions about it,

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2 It is not the objective of this paper to discuss the differences between the terms Global English, International English, World English(es) and English as a Lingua Franca, although the discussion has revealed many interesting considerations, for instance, in Rajagopalan (2012). The position adopted in this paper as the terms Global Language and Global English are concerned is not the one that celebrates dominance, but the one that reflects the fact that English is being used worldwide, regardless of boundaries or territories.

IΦ-*Sophia*

Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

involving (i) the reasons which led English to hold that place, (ii) the future of other languages, and (iii) legal instruments for  the protection of languages.  Those  misconceptions  are individually discussed below, based on historical facts that refute them and reviewing the literature regarding them.

**Reasons which led English to become a global language**

It is often argued that there are grammatical reasons that made English a global language, since its grammar is easier when compared to other languages. Crystal (1997) lists three facts that denies this argument: first, looking back at History, Latin was once an International Language, even verbs having four moods (indicative, subjunctive, imperative and infinitive), two voices (active and passive), two numbers (singular and plural) and three persons (first, second and third). Secondly, "the *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, for example, contains 1,880 pages and 3,500 points requiring grammatical exposition" (CRYSTAL, 1997, p.8)[3]. Thirdly, the English spelling system can be considered anything, but easy: the sequence of letters 'ough', for instance, can have ten different pronunciations. To sum up, the only reason why a language becomes globally used is the power its people have. In the past, the Roman Empire, at its peak, was the most extensive political and social structure in western civilization, so its language,

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3 Crystal was referring to the book "A comprehensive grammar of the English language", by Randolph Quirk et al. (1985).

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Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

Latin, was dominant. Since at least the 1920s, the United States has been the world's largest national economy, and its language, English, has consequently been playing a major role in the world.

## The future of other languages

The idea of a global language makes some people assume that other languages will no longer exist, when, in fact, the result is quite the opposite. Kalva and Ferreira (2011) stated that having English as a lingua franca can boost members of minority languages to invest time and effort into their local languages. A foreign language can develop a much needed intercultural awareness, but it can never have the same identity bond as a mother tongue has.

Following the same misconceived trend, others think that having only one language in the world would be a desirable event. They imagine that it would create a peaceful and united place. However, history set different examples: the American or the Spanish Civil War took place in spite of the fact that all members involved spoke the same language.

## Legal instruments for the protection of languages

Another issue regarding misconceptions about English as a global language is that governments should create legal instruments to protect their own language. Many nations have

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Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

indeed presented laws to avoid foreign words. In Brazil, for instance, the federal deputy Aldo Rebelo introduced a draft bill to restrict the use of foreign words in scientific and technical fields. Crystal (1997, p. 23) mentions another example:

> in recent years, one of the healthiest languages, French, has tried to protect itself by law against what is widely perceived to be the malign influence of English: in official contexts, it is now illegal to use an English word where a French word already exists, even though the usage may have widespread popular support (e.g. *computer* for *ordinateur*). […]They usually forget the fact that English itself, over the centuries, has borrowed thousands of word from other languages, and constructed thousands more from the elements of other languages – including *computer*, incidentally, which derives from Latin, the mother-language of French.

According to Faraco (2001) – well-known Brazilian linguist – these kinds of policies can never reverse the process of mixing languages. In fact, this process is a natural consequence of our globalized societies and a natural feature of languages themselves.

**The impact of a global language concept**

As seen earlier in the present paper, the idea of a global language is not new in history, having been given as an example the long period for which Latin was used in many territories. Currently, however, the concept of English as a global language has created, according to Crystal (1997),

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Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

contradictory feelings in both native and non-native communities. For those who have English as their mother tongue, there is a sense of pride, since they have at their disposal a widely-known asset; on the other hand, they may also feel concerned, for others might 'ruin their language'. For those who do not have English as their mother tongue, there is a feeling of strong motivation to learn it, but also a perception that native speakers will always be in a more privileged place.

Regarding the native speaker reaction mentioned by Crystal, two issues can be addressed from this point of view: first, there is the idea that a language belongs to a certain group of people; secondly, there is the concept that a language can be 'abused' by those who don't master the internal rules of it. Both issues represent a limited and prejudiced view of the language phenomenon. In practical terms, the essential goal of any language is communication, so defining 'legitimate owners' of it and classifying users as 'good' or 'bad tenants' do not help communication at all. As far as the non-native speakers' reaction commented by Crystal is concerned, an intercultural perspective may help to enlighten the situation:

> There can be debate about this view of the native speaker as an authority whom learners must try to imitate even though they can never quite reach the same level of intuitive knowledge. Whatever the merits of this view, however, it cannot be transferred to the culture(s) of a country. […] unlike language which is largely acquired by the age of 5, cultural learning goes on throughout life

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Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

> as individuals pass from one section of a society
> to another or from one social group to another, or
> as they move into new social groups each with their
> own beliefs, values and behaviours, i.e. their own
> culture. (BYRAM *et al.*, 2002, p. 17).

Considering the role of English as a global medium, non-native speakers should not only focus on their linguistic performance, but also, or even more, on their intercultural attitude, that is, being able to interact meaningfully and respectfully with others. Kalva and Ferreira (2011) mention non-native typical mistakes that are overrated in English classes when, actually, they do not impede communication: the 's' added in the Present Simple tense to verbs referring to third-person singular pronouns or the 'dreaded' tag questions. It seems that so much time is wasted addressing such topics, while they would be naturally internalized as the time studying the language passed by. In order to have English classes that really fit the current role of English as a global language, the linguistic competence should be hand-in-hand with intercultural competence.

**Teaching English as a global language**

According to Leffa (2006), English teachers are stereotyped as acritical, apolitical and conformists. This prejudiced view derives from the concept that, when using English, one is subjugating to another nation and rejecting his/her culture. As reported by Bakhtin (1981), the role played by foreign languages throughout history has associated them with

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Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

the idea of power, force, sanctity and truth; often, one can say, in an oppressive way. However, language teachers, as choosing the contents to address in their classes, are always making political and critical choices:

> The language teaching profession is realising the political nature of its work, particularly in the teaching of English […]. Whatever the situation and whatever the language(s), choices and educational aims are political and politically motivated. There can be no neutral choices. Furthermore, when the choices involve development of the individual learner's intercultural competence, that in itself pre-supposes a new kind of socialisation which in some circumstances can lead to new social identities. The choices and decisions here too cannot be shirked, but that is the responsibility of the teacher as educationist. (BYRAM, 1999, p. 99).

Thus, the language classroom can be a place to promote, on one hand, the access to globally-spread speeches and, on the other hand, a place to develop critical awareness about the role of languages in society. In this manner, English teachers will overcome the xenophobic notion that rejects the knowledge of a foreign culture, by presenting an intercultural and social-oriented attitude.

But even if the political position is accepted, Jordão (2009, p.95) reports that "the Americans and the English are still privileged in the collective imaginary of students and teachers", which does not match the current situation of the English language as a lingua franca for so many countries. In

IΦ-*Sophia*

Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

fact, even in places where it is the official language, it is suggested that effort should be made in order to facilitate the dialogue between native speakers and non-native speakers. Gradol (2006, p.87) points out that "research is also beginning to show how bad some native speakers are at using English for international communication" and suggests that "an ELF syllabus could usefully be taught within a mother tongue curriculum", drastically changing the status of the non-native speaker to a place of importance never seen before.

There was a very enlightening question regarding this issue in ENEM (2014)[4] – the Brazilian National High School Evaluation. The question presented the following situation: a Colombian, a Korean and a native English speaker were at the airport when the Korean and the Colombian started talking in what seemed to be English, but the native English speaker could not understand a word, because they were actually speaking Globish (abbreviation of Global English).

The example presented at ENEM is not to be taken as the sole goal for English teachers, of course, since we want our students to be able to communicate with both non-native and native speakers, but it illustrates the fact that the status English holds today is a challenge to everybody. Shoemaker (2011) states that having a clear pronunciation of the language

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4 ENEM stands, in Portuguese, for *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio*. The question presented a fragment from "If You Can't Master English, Try Globish", by M. Blume.

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Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

is far more important than having an 'authentic' accent, leaving no way out for teachers who insist on having a 'favorite' accent. Teaching English as a global language is teaching the 'real world', not a far-fetched idealization of how people should use the language.

Moita Lopes (2008) points out that English teachers can consider critically the globalization phenomenon – being and making students aware of the economic and political interests involved – but they can also help to build a different type of globalization, one that focuses on having access to others speeches not in order to copy them, but in order to engage actively in a democratic dialogue. Moita Lopes states that his position goes a step ahead from Crystal's (2005)[5]: while the latter emphasizes the benefits of globalization, the former takes into consideration the social-historical context of English as a language of domination and colonization, intending to use it to convey minorities' real interests and needs. The idea of using a language that is often associated with power and dominance to express minorities' points of view brings a new meaning to the globalization phenomenon, offering a more democratic alternative in the English teaching scenario.

## A democratic globalization through an Intercultural perspective

The concept of English as a global language matches

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5  Moita Lopes is referring to the book "The Language Revolution", by David Crystal (2005).

IΦ-*Sophia*

Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

perfectly with the principles of the Intercultural Approach, which views the English class as place to think about the other, but also about one's culture. The Intercultural Approach was initially proposed by Kramsch (1993), suggesting that there were four stages which should be dealt in class when presenting any text or piece of information:

1st – Reconstruct the foreign context of production and reception;

2nd – Construct a context of reception in the learners' native culture;

3rd – Compare how different cultures have different perceptions of contexts;

4th – Raise a discussion that may lead to a change on the perspectives about oneself and the others.

Those stages gradually build intercultural attitudes, which are defined by Scarino and Liddicoat (2009, p.22) as

> learning that all human beings are shaped by their cultures and that communicating across cultures involves accepting both one's own culturally conditioned nature and that of others and the ways in which these are at play in communication. Learning another language can be like placing a mirror up to one's own culture and one's own assumptions about how communication happens, what particular messages mean and what assumptions one makes in one's daily life. Effective intercultural learning therefore occurs as the student engages in the relationships between the cultures that are at play in the language classroom.

IΦ-*Sophia*

Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

Considering the classroom context itself, intercultural activities would involve critical thinking and relativist positions, such as debating "foreigners' views about the learners' country as represented in travel guides or in tourist brochures" (BYRAM et al., 2002, p.14) or reflecting on how

> grammatical exercises can reinforce prejudice and stereotypes, […] For instance female subjects may be linked to stereotypically female activities or actions (Mary likes cooking; John likes football); stereotyping generalisations may be encouraged about groups (The French like…; Germans are…..; Older people…..). (BYRAM et al., 2002, p. 21).

These kind of activities may encourage students to make their own uses of a foreign language, which is the core concept in teaching English as a global language. However, even the term 'foreign language' is currently being questioned. Santos (2013) explains that the term 'additional language' has been frequently used in scientific researches instead of the term 'foreign language'. This substitution is due to the fact that today's leaning goals are not related to being similar to a native speaker, but being able to relate critically to other speeches in the world.

Another term currently questioned is the actual idea of a native speaker. As presented in the introduction, the non-native speakers outnumber the native speakers by a ratio of three or four to one, "so it would be pointless to insist that

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Revista eletrônica de investigação filosófica, científica e tecnológica

25% of the total number of speakers must be considered the sole proprietors of the language." (RAJAGOPALAN, 2012, p. 383). Changes are bound to occur in living languages, according to their speakers' use of them. Moita Lopes (2008) presents many creative uses made by non-native speakers of English, such as the intentional inversion a Brazilian rap group included in their song "Viajando na balada": instead of saying "United States of America" they preferred "State United of America". It can be argued that such inversion aims to give local colors to a foreign language or, in other words, express one's identity even when not using one's mother tongue, as in Portuguese the adjective ('United', in this case) comes after the noun ('State'), and not before, as in English.

It seems that, nowadays, we are in a process in which many 'certainties' are being questioned, such as the examples discussed above. However, this process is taking place so that there is a global democracy regarding communication issues. Teaching English as a global language follows this trend, by using intercultural activities in order to promote a different type a globalization, one that can be called 'democratic' for having as its goal promoting possibilities for true interaction and integration among people, regardless their place of birth or mother tongue.

IΦ-*Sophia*

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**Final remarks**

English teachers have often been seen as not contributing to building up students' national pride and focusing only in foreign patterns or behaviors. Teaching English as a global language drastically changes this view, conceiving the English classroom as a place to get to know different cultures and perceptions, but also to express one's own point of view. The binomial 'democratic globalization' means empowering English learners as legitimate users of the language, having even the native speakers being advised to learn features of English as a lingua franca, in order to communicate better with people worldwide. The association of these principles with the Intercultural Approach reinforces the aim of transforming the English classroom into a place of diversity and dialogue.

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