

# Issues in Language Instruction

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## Breaking out of English Language Traps

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### Introduction

Teaching is one of the most challenging tasks a person might have; however, witnessing student development also makes it one of the most satisfying professions. Since language is much more than grammar and phonemes, every language teacher should have the opportunity to experience the language in its natural setting to learn the social and cultural aspects that can be missed in the teaching materials. Social and cultural nuances can be essential in understanding languages and recognizing this can shape language teaching.

### Professional Background

I am Raquel Ester Teixeira dos Santos, and I have a Bachelor's degree in Mass Communication and Advertisement and a bachelor's degree in Languages (English and Portuguese). I also received my Master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in 2020. I started teaching in 2012, and in 2014, I entered public service, teaching English and Portuguese in public schools for the state of Rio de Janeiro. Later I began teaching at municipal schools. By the time I was accepted as a candidate for the PDPI program, I taught 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders and young adults in high school. Since then, I have gotten a promotion, and I am currently working as an Educational Advisor and teaching children seven to eleven-years-old. In the PDPI program in 2023, I had the opportunity to learn and observe the English language, in a country where it is spoken natively, the U.S.

Every person should feel the necessity to improve herself in all fields of her life. Concerning my professional development, I used to feel uneasy because I thought I needed to improve my performance as a teacher and did not know how. In 2019, my school's former guidance counselor sent me an email explaining what PDPI was and how it could help me develop professionally. I had heard about Brazilian Government programs for English teachers but did not know how they worked. I started to apply nonetheless, but I could not continue due to the Pandemic.

In 2022, the Fulbright team sent me a message to retake the TOEFL test. At first, I thought I would not get the necessary score since I was experiencing COVID symptoms when I took the test. In the end, however, I did get an acceptable score. I applied for and was accepted to participate in the *Programa de Desenvolvimento Profissional para Professores de Língua Inglesa* in the United States of America, which, in English, is commonly called the PDPI Brazilian English Teachers program.

I participated in the program because I needed new strategies to teach my students who are educationally disadvantaged. I teach in two urban schools in different neighborhoods. English proficiency among students is low in Brazil for several reasons such as the absence of correct materials, lack of qualified teachers, low importance given to the subject, and other causes. Although they have studied English in early grades, many students still might be considered beginners even in high school.

## My Experience in the PDPI Program

I spent six weeks immersed in the US language and academic culture in Lawrence, Kansas with approximately 40 other English teachers from the state of Rio de Janeiro. I had the opportunity to observe actual English language use and reflect on the importance of fluency concerning accuracy. The program offered four related classes that focused on teaching the English language. Since language is living, it is impossible to consider every aspect of language pedagogy in six weeks; however, the courses allowed us to broaden our teaching knowledge and become more aware of how English is used. The subjects were *Pronunciation Enhancement*, *Communicating in English*, *Technology in EFL Classrooms*, and *Teaching Methods for the EFL Classroom*.

All subjects were important; nevertheless, the two that I thought were most relevant in my teaching reality were *Pronunciation Enhancement* and *Communicating in English*. I learned the importance of “good” pronunciation and the interference of L1 in speech. Indeed, the accent from L1 is part of one’s identity. However, it is unacceptable if it interferes with the other person’s comprehension since the responsibility to be understood is on the speaker.

My participation in the PDPI program helped me realize that pronunciation and communication are not straightforward or standardized, which I observed in the actual language use of English speakers in the U.S. I also changed my perception of the importance of fluency concerning accuracy. I discuss both points below.

### Actual Language Use

By coming to the US, I observed how English is used daily, in real life, which differs from the presentation of English in textbooks. Several aspects caught my attention during my time in Lawrence. For instance, seeing people responding to “thank you” with “sure,” “yes,” “no problem,” or just “ok” instead of “you’re welcome” gave me food for thought. I had been teaching that “you’re welcome” is the correct response to “thank you.” Other English courses and schools teach the same way; therefore, when I came across an answer that I had not expected, I realized other nuances I had missed all these years and responses and expressions that were socially different from what I was supposed to learn.

Giving me more food for thought was the actual pronunciation of the letters “t” and “th” in words such as “ten,” “button,” “mountain,” and “three.” Usually, Brazilians have difficulty pronouncing the number *three*. Still, I learned we also have problems pronouncing the allophone of the phoneme /t/ appearing in names and words such as “Burton” [ˈbɜːrtən] and “mountain” [ˈmaʊntən].

Some English phonemes do not exist in Portuguese; therefore, pronouncing those words remains difficult. As Cheung (2015) stated, “[t]he ‘th’ sounds /θ/ and /ð/ do not occur in Portuguese, which means that Portuguese speakers may commonly use /s/ or /z/ instead.” Brazilians also have problems with the North American English /r/, /l/, and schwa, which made me think we should care about being more precise and better understood to reach our audience. It should be noted that altering pronunciation in these ways to speak English is not a matter of losing identity. One’s identity is still expressed through other aspects of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary use, and cultural effects on discourse. The point here is to emphasize the necessity of clarifying yourself and avoiding misunderstandings. Although important, accuracy is not the only factor in speaking another language. In the next section, I discuss fluency.

While participating in the PDPI program, I also deepened my understanding of how language links to culture. You must know the link to explain it to the students. When studying another language, students must remember that they might learn specific grammar structures; however, people speak the way they want. They use their language and culture in creative ways to make meaning. It can be unpredictable, and the teachers sometimes do not prepare students to face these realities of a living language. No books explain every rule for how speakers use their language and culture for communication. Certain expressions can become conventional, but even these conventional expressions can surprisingly appear. For example, a person might greet someone with “have a good day” and receive the response “have a good one.” That collocation is not often taught at school or in English courses. The expression “have a good one” is informal and can refer not only to having a good day but also to a good morning, afternoon, and evening.

You can also hear short exchanges such as:

Person A: “We are going on vacation tonight.”

Person B: “Oh, that’s good. Have a good one”.

In this case, “have a good one” refers to vacation or a good time. At first, this may appear confusing, but one must be prepared not to understand the literal meaning and not get frustrated; we are not native speakers, and even native speakers might misunderstand some collocations and slang. The same happens in Portuguese. For example, senior citizens in Brazil usually struggle to understand what teenagers say.

When learning a new language, an overwhelming imaginary burden falls on one’s shoulders, which I am calling a *language trap*. I say it is unreal because there is no pressure in most cases, yet the learner feels obliged to understand and speak the target language appropriately. People will ask questions, and the person feels obliged to have the correct answer, primarily because of subtle social pressure. If you are learning English, you must understand and know everything; indeed, this may seem like common sense, yet this perception is a trap that might capture the student and create a lack of confidence. If someone is still facing the learning process and does not understand a word or utterance, that person may feel threatened by the language, understood as social pressure (such as by family, friends, and teachers), and freeze. Thinking carefully, listening to something, and not understanding happens in all languages, even the mother tongue. Several times you may hear something in your native language, but you might not comprehend it for several reasons, such as noise, poor diction, or lack of vocabulary, to name a few reasons.

To illustrate that even native speakers of English do not always understand every word, consider my experience at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball game. On February 6, 2023, the Kansas Jayhawks played against the Texas Longhorns. Before the match started, they played rap and hip-hop songs loudly. I could not understand all the lyrics. Therefore, I had the idea to ask native English speakers next to me whether they could understand all the lyrics. Many answered that they could not but liked the beat since it helped set a scene for the match. Even native speakers might not understand something in their language, so it is the teachers’ job to explain this phenomenon to the students to prevent future frustration and failure, in other words to prevent students from falling into the language trap.

### **Fluency, Not Just Accuracy**

While participating in the PDPI program, I also had the opportunity to reflect on the purpose of language. Language allows people to comprehend each other; therefore, we as teachers sometimes burden our students to be accurate in the target language instead of caring about fluency. The same phenomenon occurs in our native language. A swath of the Brazilian population makes some grammar mistakes, like “chegar em casa” (to get “in” home) instead of using the correct preposition “a” (to), “chegar a casa” (to get home or to arrive at home). This grammar mistake does not mean people are not fluent in Portuguese. Sometimes it even seems to be more natural to hear someone saying “em” (in) instead of “a.” Almost all Brazilians who read “chegar em casa” would translate it as “to get home” or “arrive at home.” Perhaps this grammar “mistake” is becoming conventional, supporting my earlier point that actual language use reveals creative ways native speakers use language to make meaning.

It does not just happen with Portuguese speakers. Native English speakers also vary their grammar and eventually make grammar mistakes, as in a sign that I saw “it is not *far* sale” instead of “it is not for sale.” To see more grammar mistakes native English speakers make, one only needs to google “common grammar mistakes native English Speakers make.” In our Teaching Methods for the EFL Classroom class, we learned the difference between fluency and accuracy. Indeed, precise grammar matters; however, it might also prevent English language learners from breaking out of the language trap and using the language freely.

## **Conclusion**

The PDPI program is designed to help Brazilian English teachers continue their professional development. While at the University of Kansas, I was exposed to English as North Americans use it. My observations affected my teaching ability. I used to emphasize writing and vocabulary in class and overestimated accuracy, sometimes correcting right on the spot; however, since I returned from the USA, I have been focusing on speaking and listening. I noticed more engagement and acceptance by the students, who may still feel challenged in comprehension, but now engage in healthy competition in the classroom.

Since the PDPI program, I have created a warm environment for learning, and in my first classes, I avoid feedback or checking mistakes. I divide my class into modules. I present the content using audio, texts, or pictures to the students; after that, I give some exercises referring to the previous activity to engage the students. When they are ready to answer, I encourage them to speak in English although they still mix Portuguese with English due to a lack of vocabulary. However, that is my checkpoint. I do not correct everyone, but I correct some mistakes I hear. I write on the board and explain the content using what I heard as a hook and compass. Also, I have been sharing what I learned and exercises I create with my coworkers.

In my personal life, my observations affected my ability to use English. I feel more confident than before. No one knows everything, especially when this “everything” relates to language. Imagine someone from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a native English speaker, contacting an English native speaker from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both would have hindrances in understanding each other. Non-native speakers should not feel anguish for lapsing in their language skills. Language exists to bridge, not set us apart.

## References

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