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Teaching about Brazilian and American Stereotypes in a High School English Class

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Introduction

I am Francileide Santos, and I teach English at a public high school in a city called Nova Iguaçu, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I graduated in Letras-Português/Inglês (Portuguese and English Language and Literature) in 2007 from the now defunct *Universidade Gama Filho*. I am currently attending a specialization course in Applied Linguistics—English as a Foreign Language at *Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* (The State University of Rio de Janeiro), which is a great opportunity to improve my knowledge in the field of second language teaching, and it also will help me analyze my teaching methods, making learning easier for my students.

After graduating in 2007, I taught English at private language schools for students of all ages and levels. Since 2010, I have been teaching English to high school students. I went from working at language schools, which students attend because they want or need to know the language, to teaching in public schools, where it has always been difficult to teach English because the majority of students are not interested in learning the language. They always ask why they must study English since they believe they are not going to travel anywhere because they are poor and come from a public-school background. This has been so frustrating! I have always thought about what I could do so my students could be more interested in my classes, learn a new language, and be curious not only about countries such as the United States or England, but the whole world.

In 2019, I started working at an intercultural school called CIEP 117 Carlos Drummond de Andrade Brasil – Estados Unidos (United States), in Comendador Soares, Nova Iguaçu in the state of Rio de Janeiro, which is a full-time bilingual public school. In this high school, students are taught in two languages, a native one and English. In contrast to other public schools in the state of Rio de Janeiro, it is a full-time school where students have twelve English classes a week, along with some other school subjects in English such as mathematics and geography. They also have a subject in English called ‘Projeto de Integração Global’ (Global Integration Project), in which the students are expected to discuss various topics and present speeches in English. Additionally, the students are supposed to have all four English skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and at the end of the course students take a test that corresponds to level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR).

Working in education, I must continue to stay in touch with whatever could interest my students to keep them motivated to learn a new language and different cultures. That is why I decided to apply for the PDPI Program (Programa de Desenvolvimento Profissional para Professores de Língua Inglesa nos EUA), which is a six-week program for English teachers who work at public schools from all over the country, sponsored by the Government of Brazil - Ministry of Education, Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Coordination of Higher Education Personnel Improvement) and the Comissão para o Intercâmbio Educacional entre os Estados Unidos da América e o Brasil (Fulbright Commission for Educational Exchange between the United States of America and Brazil), with funding for administration provided by the U.S. Embassy in Brazil.

To apply for the program, teachers must first be civil/public servants and have worked at public schools for at least three years. Then, we must send all required documents for analysis and, finally, we must take an English proficiency

exam. Depending on our score, we can attend courses at an intermediate level to improve English proficiency or advanced level to continue to develop pedagogical methodologies. After going through the whole process, I was able to attend the advanced level course. And so my adventure began.

My Experience in the PDPI Program at the University of Kansas

I went to the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence, Kansas, which is located in the middle of the United States, where I took a six-week course in the PDPI program along with 42 other teachers who work in public schools in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The 2023 PDPI program at KU consisted of four classes: *Teaching Methods*, *Technology in the Classroom*, *Pronunciation Lab*, and *Communicating in English*. All classes were very helpful and inspiring. During the classes, we were able to learn different tools to implement in our work as teachers and share our experiences with our colleagues.

In the teaching methods class with instructor Carolyn Heacock, for instance, we focused on different aspects of teaching English as a second language and the problems faced by teachers of English, such as managing large class sizes, lack of resources, and a lack of student motivation. In addition, it was a great opportunity to review and discuss some topics related to the course, receive lessons and activities that can be adapted to our contexts, and develop a portfolio of lesson plans to be used in our classrooms. See Appendix I for a description of a lesson plan.

In another class, *Technology in the Classroom* with instructor Marina Greene, we were introduced to different types of educational technology. For instance, we learned about quizzes and game apps, resource sites for teachers, and presentation technology like podcasting, which was one of our assignments during the PDPI program. During classes, we could share the technological resources we already used with our colleagues, as well as practice using them to check which ones can be applied to our teaching contexts. Moreover, we had the opportunity to present pros, cons, and applications of apps and other resource sites for English classes.

The pronunciation lab classes with Dr. Marcellino Berardo were focused on Brazilian teachers' English pronunciation where we had some exercises to increase awareness of American English pronunciation. It was important to recognize some difficulties that we teachers may have in pronouncing certain sounds such as the vowel sounds in the words *bad* and *bed* and how difficult it can be to teach these types of sounds to our students. During classes, we also discussed how to adapt what we learned to our own teaching context.

We also took a course called *Communicating in English* with Dr. Marta Carvajal Regidor, where we focused on increasing our communication fluency in English through the lens of American culture. During classes, we were able to practice the target language in conversations in English, including some techniques such as turn-taking, giving opinions, agreeing/disagreeing, and interrupting. We also learned and discussed different aspects of American culture, contrasting and comparing them with Brazilian culture.

Furthermore, there were many other different PDPI program components such as lectures, local school observations, KU class visits, volunteer work (which was mandatory), a basketball game, dinner with an American family, mentoring, and two school trips. Although these activities were important to improving as a teacher, there was no time to explore, go further and try to make friends and connections. For example, if I had the time, I would have gone to Ecumenical Campus Ministries more frequently. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to serving KU students and the Lawrence community that offers a number of programs such as Tai Chi and kickboxing classes.

Before arriving at KU, I had some information about the university and the city through websites. But when I got there, I noticed how different it was from what I had imagined it would be. I had the idea that I would work a lot, of course, but I had no idea how it would go. I did not even think about the weather, for example. It was winter, and I was coming from summer in a hot city. I did not realize how the cold might impact my studies. I can say it was hard to get used to the weather, but I managed well. I already had some idea about what kind of classes I would attend, but it was a surprise when I heard from Marina Greene that I would have to produce a podcast. I was worried about it because I had never thought I would do something like this, but it was a great experience, indeed.

While working on all the classes, one class in particular, *Communicating in English*, interested me. We had a final presentation on any aspect of American culture, and I was inspired to do some research into Brazilian and American stereotypes along with my classmate and coworker Julio César de Moraes Alves, who works at *Colégio Estadual Gua-*

dalajara (Guadalajara State Middle/High School), in Duque de Caxias in the state of Rio de Janeiro. This project, to create a unit to teach culture in my English language classes, was an important experience I had in the PDPI program.

During one of Dr. Carvajal Regidor's classes, we discussed differences and similarities between Brazil and the U.S., comparing and contrasting, agreeing, and disagreeing with each other. Then, Dr. Carvajal Regidor gave us a survey asking for our opinions about Americans and Brazilians. While I was answering it, I thought how interested in that topic my students would be. In particular, Brazilian high school students are curious about how different Americans and Brazilians can be. Moreover, they think of Americans, for instance, as only eating junk food, all being rich, and not being friendly. For this reason, having a class about stereotypes would be interesting to my students.

With this in mind, a lesson about stereotypes will help students understand how stereotypes can lead to prejudice in individuals and groups, as well as help them recognize stereotypical attitudes in themselves and others. The lesson would also help students become aware of the negative consequences of prejudice and stereotypes. This type of unit content is very important for teenagers, so they can become critical thinkers and respectful to people in general. For this reason, I spent time working on lessons about stereotypes during the PDPI program.

A Description of a Lesson on Stereotypes

This sample lesson on stereotypes can be taught in one class, depending on how much time and how many students the instructor has to work with. First, have students think about how Americans are seen culturally. Then, ask your students to answer prepared questions about American people with just one word. They should complete sentences such as "Americans are...", "Americans like...", "Americans don't like...", as well as indicating what they think Americans believe, worry about, and value the most. This activity can be adapted and done in many different ways (See Appendices I & II). Next, ask your students to do the same thing but now about Brazilians. When they are done, collect the surveys and keep them.

After that, explain what a stereotype is, show the video *The Simpsons Travel to Rio*¹, which is available on YouTube, and have students discuss it. This episode is full of stereotypes about Brazilians. It is important to ask them how they feel about it and show that some attitudes can be hurtful. Even if some say that stereotypes are just a joke and others do not say anything at all, students should understand and be aware that they are being stereotyped.

To conclude the lesson, have students brainstorm ways to avoid stereotypes. If the class is more advanced and more time is available, you can scaffold and ask students to prepare presentations about how to avoid stereotypes. Also, the surveys can be used for students to discuss the results. The results can be shown visually in charts or numerically as percentages to allow students to work on ways to present data.

How the PDPI Program Influenced My English Language Instruction at My Home Institution

While studying and immersing myself in the English language in the United States and since returning to Brazil, I have been thinking a lot about how I can improve my classes and get more student engagement. The unit on American and Brazilian stereotypes is one example. Another way to achieve this is to share with my students what life in the U.S. is *really* like and if North Americans in fact speak English as shown in the textbooks.

One aspect about life in the U.S. that would interest my students is how teenagers can be independent at a very young age. They can drive to school by themselves as well as live with roommates. These things do not happen with Brazilian teenagers. In addition, Brazilian students are always interested in actual spoken English in the U.S. One example that we often hear is, "have a good one." This expression is not found in textbooks.

Therefore, experiencing life at KU in Lawrence, Kansas gave me tools to plan my classes in an appropriate way, teach vocabulary as it is used in a real-life environment, help students with the correct pronunciation of the words, and master the most important aspect of teaching, lesson planning. Since we worked with great teachers, we had the opportunity to share ideas of classes and activities to adapt to our context.

Another aspect from the PDPI program that inspired me to work with my students was a school visit. I had the opportunity to be in a public high school in Lawrence, Kansas and learn how the school operates. I also had the opportunity to observe a creative writing class. There were about 20 students in the classroom. I noticed that there was a lot

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XoBU_raFXs&t=28s

of information about the teacher on the classroom walls and on the bulletin board. It made me realize that displaying information around the classroom was a good way to gain my students' trust in me and have a friendly class environment.

Unfortunately, I do not have my own classroom in the school where I work, but upon returning home, I had a class in which I introduced myself and shared with my students a little about my life and interests. I showed them they can trust me, and I think it worked. They were comfortable talking about themselves, it helps to have a good and respectful environment. In addition, telling students about the differences between the North American and Brazilian public schools made them try harder and consider a better future.

Improvements or Changes to the Program

Without a doubt, PDPI is a great program for Brazilian teachers, and it would be wonderful if all the teachers had the opportunity to improve their language skills, learn and experience American culture, review interesting pedagogical topics, and exchange ideas with colleagues. Unfortunately, it was a short period of time and there were so many program commitments.

Six weeks is simply not enough time to attend four different classes, all day long. The one afternoon when we did not have classes, we attended lectures. Even though the professors said they would not assign much homework, there was always something to prepare or read. Of course, it is important to acquire more knowledge, but one of the most important aspects when living in another country for a short time is exploring places and being in touch with local people whenever possible.

It is a shame that I missed some cultural aspects that I could have experienced and shared with my students. For example, I unfortunately had to miss a Mardi Gras parade that I wanted to see. In my opinion, the schedule should be organized according to cultural aspects. One suggestion is for classes to be from 8:00am to 2:00pm. Thus, we could have enough time for assignments and exploring. It is something to think about, so teachers can work beyond books.

Simple changes to the program can benefit teachers to take better advantage of opportunities to learn about the culture and interact not only in the classroom but also outside of it. I actually missed interacting outside the classroom, trying to talk to local people, not only when buying something, but trying to make friends to practice speaking the language as it really is used.

My comments are about the amount of time we had. My overall opinion of the PDPI program, again, is that it was an excellent opportunity to engage with American culture, the English language, and to enhance teachers' careers.

Conclusion

Having this experience in the PDPI program made me think about how I can further improve my career and help my students be more involved in my classes. Studying, engaging in professional development, and being in contact with North American language and culture are some examples of what teachers must continue to do in order to develop themselves professionally. Teachers must always look for some new tools to embrace our work.

I intend to follow up on what I learned from my experience in the PDPI program. I was exposed to many different technological tools. There were also amazing lesson plans shared during our classes, and I gained much from the lectures and presentations. I now feel I have many resources to use in my classes, and I am sure my students will benefit from all this content.

Recently back from the PDPI program, I am currently attending a Specialization Course in Applied Linguistics – *English as a Foreign Language* at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) for my professional enrichment in the second language. Later, I intend to enroll in master's and doctoral courses. It would be great if I could take these courses in the US because of the importance of immersion in the language and culture when it comes to studying the English language.

Appendix I: A Description of a Lesson on Stereotypes

This sample lesson on stereotypes can be taught in one class depending on how much time and how many students the instructor has to work with. The lesson is outlined below.

Step 1: Have students think about how Americans are seen culturally. Ask students to give one-word answers to the series of questions about Americans (See Appendix II). This activity can be adapted and done in many different ways.

Step 2: Ask your students to answer the same series of questions about Brazilians (Appendix II). When they are done, collect the surveys, and keep them.

Step 3: Explain what a stereotype is.

Step 4: Show the video *The Simpsons Travel to Rio*² that is available on YouTube, and have students discuss it. This episode is full of stereotypes about Brazilians. It is important to ask students how they feel about the stereotypes and to point out that some attitudes can be hurtful.

Step 5: To conclude the lesson, have students brainstorm ways to avoid stereotypes. If the class is more advanced and more time is available, you can scaffold activities to help students prepare presentations about how to avoid stereotypes. Also, the results of the surveys can serve as discussion points. The results can be shown as charts or percentages to give students an opportunity to work with data in English.

Step 5 (Variation): Distribute the survey results from the beginning of the lesson to the students. Allow time to discuss the results. Do students see evidence of stereotyping? Ask students to brainstorm ways to avoid stereotypes and have them present their ideas to the class.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XoBU_raFXs&t=28s

Appendix II: Questions about American and Brazilian People

Directions: Think about how Americans and Brazilians are portrayed through media and complete the statements with one word.

- Americans are _____.
- They like _____.
- They don't like _____.
- Americans are worried about _____.
- The most important thing to most Americans is _____.
- Brazilians are _____.
- They like _____.
- They don't like _____.
- Brazilians are worried about _____.
- The most important thing to most Brazilians is _____.