

Gravely Pregnant with Freireian Alternativity: Can Foreign Language Learning Avoid Reinforcing Cultural and Social Hegemony?

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In this paper, I will discuss the experiences of a group of teachers in producing foreign language material, in this case English, for use in classes attended by young adult school dropouts. I will contrast hegemonic and liberatory pedagogies and reflect on their potential for closing down or opening up the potential of learners to take their part in the transformation of the world. I will provide examples of why foreign language learning and use is intrinsically hegemonic and how we have tried to counter this in the material we have produced. I will attempt to demonstrate what Freire's *inédito viável*, roughly translated into English as *untested hypothesis*, looks like in our practice. I will describe some problems we have not been able to solve to our satisfaction. Finally I will reflect on this question: If young adult school dropouts cannot manage their own language well, why learn a foreign language?

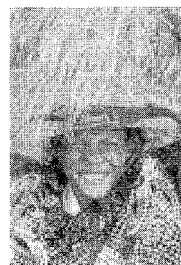
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Este artículo presenta las experiencias de un grupo de profesores en la producción de material para el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, el inglés en este caso, para el uso en clases con jóvenes adultos que han dejado la escuela secundaria. Se hace un contraste entre pedagogías hegemónicas y liberadoras y una reflexión sobre su potencial para limitar o expandir la capacidad de los estudiantes para transformar el mundo. Se presentan ejemplos acerca del por qué el uso y el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera es intrínsecamente hegemónico y acerca de cómo este grupo de profesores han tratado de contrarrestar esta hegemonía en el material producido. Adicionalmente, se expone cómo se ve en la práctica el *inédito viável* de Freire, traducido al inglés como *untested theory* y se describen algunos problemas que aún no se han podido resolver satisfactoriamente. Finalmente, se hace una reflexión sobre esta pregunta: Si estos estudiantes no manejan apropiadamente su lengua nativa, ¿Para qué aprender una lengua extranjera?

Palabras clave: EJA, Material Didáctico, Freire

We have recently published the first book in a series of four, aimed at young adult school dropouts who are now being enticed to return and finish up their schooling. The book is authored by five teachers from the public school system in Brazil – that means the system administered by the state or municipal governments; it means the schools where the poorest students go. These authors worked on the book on their own time. I prodded and poked and shook them up once in a while and generally coordinated the efforts and sometimes did a little shadow writing. The production of this book, titled *English for Brazilian Adults: passport to social inclusion*, has created a dialogical space among us and between the producers of the book and the teachers who might use it, a space that has forced us to think about how we can use the reality of the book's potential users, teachers and learners, to create a space for dialogue and critical thinking. Here, I invite you to accompany some of our thinking.

Just as a way of codifying the situation, I want to show you two sets of pictures:



What I am showing you is a representation of the poles in two very different debates: The first one, Guaraná and Coca Cola, can be about a number of things: commercial hegemony (Coca Cola has a brand name that is international, a global network, and lots of money to promote their product and/or to lower prices so as to give their product an edge on the market.); political hegemony (control of patents, trade agreements, decisions to locate their factories in one municipality or another); cultural hegemony (something foreign is better than something national); and the questions of both nutrition and personal taste.

The second representation is of Brazilian national things, representing types of popular music, each being representative of a particular region. None of them are foreign to Brazil. But, several years ago, the playing of the Axé music at Carnival in Recife and Olinda, in place of local Frevo or Maracatú, raised the same sort of issues that appear in the national/international soft drink discussion. This suggests

that the basic issue of hegemony is not its *foreign-ness*, but rather its limitation on the potential for local and personal representation and social inclusion that makes possible the liberation that leads to transformation.

I would like to take a moment to review what I am thinking of when I use these words:

HEGEMONIC

- Oppressive/dominating
- Exclusive
- Monological
- Banking
- Closes down the questions
- No allowance for controversy
- Authority comes from outside
- Responsive and passive
(information/action without reflection)

LIBERATORY

- Problem-posing
- Inclusive
- Dialogical
- Reflective
- Opens up the question
- Potentially controversial
- Authority comes from inside
- Exploratory and active
(action/reflection/action)

Foreign language learning and the use of foreign languages in Brazil is intrinsically hegemonic. To see how this is, let us look at four areas: product names and labels; use of language teaching as bait; language teaching and materials pedagogies; and ideological control.

Brand names, in this global world, are accepted as product identifiers: Ford, Coca-Cola, IBM, etc. These are not real words and not at issue here. What is at issue is the number of English words that have entered the Brazilian vocabulary related to products, words such as *sale*, *light*, *diet*, *ice tea*, *hot-dog*. As well as serving as a sort of designer label (*grief*) for a product, their use enhances the market value for the product by lowering the cost (the product can be sold with the same label in many countries), and increasing the benefits (Customers will recognize the product wherever they go.).

I used the word “designer label” (*grief*) and this is sort of bait for the consumer, in this case, the foreign language learner. Two examples: the use of language classes to promote ideologies, for example, by religious groups to attract members (In Fortaleza, we have “Surfers for Christ” learning English.); the other example, the selling of learning a foreign language as a means to better employment. The third hegemonic use of foreign languages is in the very teaching of them, both methodologically and culturally. Foreign language teachers tend to teach as they

were taught – grammar and vocabulary, text translation. The introduction of the Parameters, and more recently of competencies applied to learning language, has not translated yet into language learning as a means of critical thinking. Finally, the hegemony of foreign languages, particularly English, is maintained by the fact that it keeps most other language users at a linguistic disadvantage. You just can't defend yourself as well in a debate, read between the lines in a discussion, and raise your own ideas to give an option as well in a foreign language as in your own, unless you are good at the language.

That being said, we would not be in the business of foreign language teaching and materials producing if we did not think that it is possible to deal with the problems of hegemony and develop a practice that is liberatory.

The first thing we had to do was to turn around the basic question “For what reason is a person learning a foreign language?” Instead of “to do things like travel, use the internet, read technical instructions”, we understand the foreign language learning task in terms of using English language tasks to do things in Portuguese – for example, to gather information, compare things, to transmit to others what we have found.

Here is an example of how we have done this:

Image 1.

Moment ONE **THE WORK PEOPLE DO**

1. Do you know who this person is?
 Conhece este profissional. Você sabe qual é o nome português?

• He or she visits your house once a month.
 Ele ou ela visita sua casa uma vez por mês.

• He or she wears a uniform and a badge.
 Ele ou ela usa uma roupa especial e crachá.

• He or she writes down numbers, or punches them into a special machine.
 Ele ou ela registra números ou os digita numa máquina.

Who do you think it is?
 Quem você acha que é?

Read the poem below and see if you can find out.
 Leia o poema abaixo e descubra quem é.

1.1. Poem in Portuguese

Leiturista

Leturista
 Homem de povo
 Trabalhadores das ruas
 Nos dias de Sol e de chuva
 A tarefa continua
 Ora nos manda os cartões
 Ora nos manda o postal
 Conhecê-lo nos ajudará
 Nos chamando de letrão.

*Author: Nelson Barbosa do Rio de Janeiro
 Published in 1985 by UNICamp, Brazil*

Image 2.

1100 PEOPLE WHO WORK ON THE STREET

Speaking

2. Who visits your house as part of their job? Circle the people:
 Quem visita sua casa a serviço?

Postal carrier Health agent Manicurist
Garbage collector Cosmetic saleslady Handyman

2.1. Ask your partner who visits his/her home to work.

Student A: Does _____ visit your home?
 Student B: Yes, he (or she) does. No, he (or she) doesn't.

	Does this person visit your house?	
	YES	NO
Postal carrier		
Cosmetic saleslady: (Aven, Natura, Taggareware, Dermiliss, etc.)		
Health Agent (Dengue)		
Garbage collector		
News carrier		
Person who does your nails - manicurist		
Handyman		

LINKS • WORK **120**

Image 3.

2.2. Interview someone who comes to work in your house or apartment.

Entreviste alguém que vem a sua casa a serviço. Use estas perguntas.

- Qual é seu emprego? What do you do?
- Há quanto tempo você faz isto? How long have you been doing this?
- Você trabalha para uma empresa ou é autônomo?
 Do you work for a company or for yourself?
- Você tem carteira assinada? Do you have working papers?
- Você usa farda? Do you wear a uniform?
- Além do salário, quais são os benefícios que você recebe?
 Besides your salary, do you get other benefits?
- Em geral, quantas horas você trabalha cada semana?
 How many hours a week do you usually work?
- Quantos km você precisa andar por dia no seu trabalho?
 How many kilometres do you need to walk a day in your job?
- Aproximadamente, quanto você ganha por mês?
 About how much money do you make a month?

2.3. Name of the person you interviewed _____

(nome da pessoa que você entrevistou)

Job (o que faz) _____

Image 4

1.5. How many types of numbers can you identify on the light bill?
Fill in the table with these number.
 Quantos tipos de números você pode identificar na conta de luz?
 Complete a tabela com os números que você identificou.

House address	
Date due	
Total to pay	
Month's consumption	153 kWh

You can see that the first work was done in Portuguese. Learners are invited to look at an image and guess what work the person does (Image 1). As this activity is near the end of Book 1, the questions are put first in English, then (in blue letters) in Portuguese. After reading a poem about a meter reader in Portuguese and discussing the problems raised in the poem, learners are invited to think about other people who have jobs which entail walking the streets and coming into people's homes (Image 2). Seven of these jobs are listed in the book (Image 2), chosen for their cognate potential – the learners have a good chance at guessing what the occupation is in Portuguese. At the bottom of image 2, you can see a simple table, where, in English, the learner is invited to check off those workers who visit their house. In the third image, you can see that the learner is encouraged to interview someone who visits his or her house as part of their work. Clearly, the interview would be in Portuguese, so the Portuguese question comes first, in blue, followed by the English translation (Image 3). Learners are given a table on which to record their answers, in Portuguese first, with the key words in Portuguese. Following this activity, learners pool their findings and tabulate them on another table in English, with the key words in blue in Portuguese. At this point, learners have information about a number of different occupations and they can now discuss or debate issues like what rights and benefits workers have, or the advantages and disadvantages of formal and informal employment. Later in the unit, the meter reader occupation is visited again, this

time in terms of a light bill (Image 4), where learners are invited to think about such things as the kinds of numbers that are found on a light bill, how energy consumption is measured, and how to understand a graph.

In general, how have we tried to counter the implicit hegemony of language learning in these activities?

- We have tried to use material that students recognize (light bill, meter reader) – material that is authentic, universal and problematizing;
- We have played on the generative potential of the material (meter reader – people who come to your house – work on the streets – types of work that people in your family do);
- We have tried to codify a problem (uniform representing formal employment; light bill representing consumer use, public companies and pricing);
- And we have tried to promote reflection (formal/informal employment, rights/benefits, energy consumption).

This leads us to the question of the *inédito viável*, the untested hypothesis, linked in the call for papers of this colloquium to the notion of pregnancy. Pregnant: that is, generative, full of potential, risky, transformational ---- often entered into without meaning to or knowing what it is about: and thus, us and our work. We are not applied linguists, none of us have degrees in linguistics, and some of us don't speak English terribly well. Encouraged by knowing about and working with Freire's ideas, we have trusted our experience and the dialogue among us, five public school teachers and myself, to go out on a limb, to risk, to try to produce material that is both interesting, transformational, and useful for dealing with English rather than learning to use it. What is important is how the material generates in the learner a desire to go beyond the material, into English or into anything else, to continue learning, questioning and risk-taking. What is important is that the material generates in the teacher a reflection on the construction of the knowledge, of the right to assume authority in the choice and use of material, of the concomitant duty to "open the Venetian blinds of their minds and let the sun come in", as a very beloved dean of my college said to me many years ago.

This does not mean that our work is complete. There are a number of problems that we have not solved yet. Many of these spring from the physical situation of schools and classrooms: for example, the need to move students along a continuum, the time allotted for classroom work, the little time that working students have to do things outside of the classroom. An important question is the one of evaluation

– What tool can we put in the hands of the teacher to use to know if the students can deal with English – how do you evaluate risk-taking, “*garra*”? Another problem is that of classroom time, the demand of the consumer for information (question by a student: “When do we start learning English?”), and of the teacher for specific direction.

Finally, there is the question “Why offer a foreign language to learners who are barely mastering their native one.” I feel a dichotomy here. On the one hand, there is the attitude of teachers who feel that adult night school students are inherently weak and unable to learn Portuguese adequately, much less English, so that more time should be spent on the native language than on the foreign. This attitude, in my opinion, not only flies in the face of research (Moita Lopes, 67-8), but also reflects a bias based on social and economic class. On the other hand, the teaching of both languages often happens in such a way that neither one is particularly learnable nor relevant to the everyday lives of the learners, partly owing to the preparation of language teachers as purveyors of linguistic information rather than generators of cultural and linguistic interest and criticism.

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