Antares
Letras e Humanidades
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, Cultura e Regionalidade
ISSN 1984-4921

Regionalism and Cultural Identity: English as the International Language

Adam Shoemaker[*]

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore a "common-sense" model for the effective learning and teaching of English as a foreign language in Brazil and how this model relates to the expanding role of English as a global lingua franca. I will offer reflections for Brazilian learners and teachers of English concerning how this common-sense model might not best fit the reality of learning and teaching English in Brazil for use as a lingua franca.

Keywords

Cultural identity; ethnocentrism; hegemony; proxemics.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é discutir um certo modelo "de senso comum" para o aprendizado e o ensino efetivos de inglês como língua estrangeira no Brasil e como esse modelo se relaciona com o crescente papel do inglês como uma língua franca global. Faço reflexões para aprendizes e professores brasileiros de inglês em relação a como esse modelo "de senso comum" talvez não seja o melhor para a realidade de ensino e aprendizagem do inglês no Brasil, para uso como língua franca.

Palavras-chave

Identidade cultural; etnocentrismo; hegemonia; proxêmica.

* Adam Shoemaker (Applied Language Institute - University of Missouri-Kansas City) has studied in Brazil, Chile and Germany. He was a guest professor/teacher-trainer at Harbin Medical University in Harbin, China.

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.

Albert Einstein

I SHOULD STATE AT THE OUTSET THAT THIS PAPER does not necessarily follow the well-worn path of the rigorous academic style both accepted and expected in scholarly journal writing. Rather, my style here will follow more closely the form of a literary reaction paper, but instead of responding to literature, it will be a response to a question concerning how Brazilian EFL students and non-native English-speaking teachers could most effectively approach the study of English.

I had been invited this past November to Universidade de Caxias do Sul as a guest American professor of English as a foreign language. I was, in effect, a bit of a curiosity, the first American-born, native-English speaking Professor to be invited to UCS. The general atmosphere surrounding my time at UCS was one of excitement. A collective paraphrase of one particular theme of several comments I heard was, "Your being here is inspiring for us and the students – it makes English real for the students, that what we have tried to teach them about English is the way English actually is." Apparently, the students had the chance to see that yes, here is a native speaker who really uses English the way that those students were learning to use English in their classes and yes, the professors were actually explaining and teaching English to their students in the right way. In this respect, my visit seemed to bring a collective sigh of relief.

This collective sigh also brought insight to another side of this feeling of affirmation. It seemed to reveal one reality of learning English, at least a reality for the English students and English teachers at UCS, and one, I must admit, I was not surprised to find as it merely reflected what I dare say has been traditionally accepted in the field of EFL professionals as a self-evident truth, and a foregone conclusion in the mind of many an EFL student whom I have met in my twelve years of teaching ESL in the United States. The prevailing accepted truth is this: authentic, "real" English is best learned in a country where "real" English is spoken, and the most qualified and effective teachers are "real" native speakers of English. In this way, then, it seemed that my presence for three weeks at UCS offered a side benefit for both the English professors and students with whom I interacted of serving as a linguistic gauge for

Brazilian English users to compare their English against, to see how close to or how far from "real" English their English was.

Now considering the comments I heard about how important it was for me to be at UCS, and how my presence helped make English more real and tangible for the English students, I would conjecture that this 'prevailing truth' about English learning and teaching is possibly widely accepted at UCS, or at least widely considered as possibly true. It seems, in essence, to simply reflect what students and teachers hold as common sense. "I mean, doesn't it just make sense?" someone could argue. I would like to explore this prevailing-truth thinking in some detail, and so a name is needed for this concept. For lack of a better term, I will refer to this prevailing-truth model as the "common-sense model" of learning English.

Considering the prevalence of this model, not just in perhaps the field of Brazilian EFL but also in American ESL circles, I will admit that it was not a surprise to find here and there a current of doubt about the efficacy of the English program at the Programas de Línguas Estrangeiras (PLE) as compared to what both Brazilian students and professors alike assumed about American ESL programs such as the one where I teach in Kansas City. What turned out to be perplexing, then – if we assume that the common-sense model accurately represents reality – was that the English language program at PLE was, in my estimation as an American professor of English, highly successful, in fact more effective in certain pedagogical aspects of language teaching and learning than programs I have seen in the United States: PLE English instructors displayed a depth of knowledge of English which permitted elucidation of grammar and usage; instructors' explanations anticipated and addressed questions from the student perspective as a language learner; methodology maintained a student-centered 'language-production' environment. The empirical reality of the PLE English program simply contradicted what the common-sense model would have us predict. The majority of students I met were exceptions to the common-sense model as well: I heard many students expressing in very clear, beautiful English that they were shy about their English, and they wished they could speak better English. Something at the PLE was ironic indeed.

The hazy beginnings of a possible explanation for this apparent contradiction came up in one particular class at UCS, in discussing the role of English in the world, and how best to approach the language. The students were curious about what they, as

L2 learners of English, studying English in Brazil, could do to move toward a fluency in English such as I had as an L1 speaker. In one way, the students seemed to be asking how to gain possession of something that I as a native speaker owned. Had I been German, and the question were about learning German, I likely would have considered giving the "common-sense model" answer. But this was a question about English, and I felt that the question itself was a clue that the students, specifically as English students, were looking at English from the wrong direction, filtering their ideas about it through the wrong pedagogical model. English no longer fits the mold of other languages. English was already their language; they just hadn't realized it yet. "English," I started to explain, "does not belong to America anymore, no more than it belongs to England or Australia or New Zealand. English now belongs to the world." Now the class ended shortly after this point, but the statement had been made, and I was later asked if I could explain what I had meant. I think that was a more than fair request; as I look back on my statement made in that particular class, I agree that it might be in need of some elucidation. This paper, thus, is dedicated toward exploring that statement. To start off on the right foot, I think it will be useful to begin by focusing quickly again on the common-sense model, and then explore how it might not be the best model for Brazilian students learning English.

The common-sense model, most simply stated, avers that the most effectual learning of authentic language occurs when taught by native-speaking teachers, and more so when this occurs in a country of the target language community. Here, in my estimation, is one hypothetical danger of the common-sense model when applied to English. By promoting the idea that the best English is one which reflects an "authentic" regional and cultural English context, the model has in effect implied that the target language culture is in some way more valuable than a non-native English speaker's own culture and identity. If one requirement of learning English is to defer one's own national, regional, or cultural identity to another cultural identity while using English, then English cannot be said to truly be a global language. If English is to become the language of global communication, a language which speaks across cultures, then perhaps the traditional common-sense model of languages does not serve the best interests of non-native speakers of English. Paulo Freire cautioned against embracing a pedagogical model which may not be egalitarian:

> No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (FREIRE, 1970, p.54)

The common-sense model essentially functions as a pedagogical model for learning languages. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that this model definitely has tremendous pedagogical attraction. Spending significant time enveloped in the socio-cultural milieu of the target language, communicating and interacting with native users of the target language, will allow the diligent student to develop a profoundly authentic, accurate fluency in the language. Such a linguistic fluency in certain languages can be vital and very psychologically rewarding. This psychological aspect is, however, is precisely why I would suggest caution in unquestionably embracing the common-sense model in relation to learning English. The common-sense model implies that the English used in the socio-cultural context of the country where it is spoken by native speakers of the language is a paradigm of English to be emulated. This can lead students of English to erroneously extend this implication one unfortunate step further: that this paradigm of native English is a correct-use paradigm, and insofar as a non-native speaker's use of English deviates from this native paradigm, the non-native model is incorrect.

This argument, this common-sense model argument, is ostensibly difficult to refute. The argument is, though, a circular one: it insinuates that the best way to learn authentic, correct English is to learn English with native speakers in a country where it is authentically and correctly used. Nevertheless, the fallacy of this conclusion is often overlooked because this common-sense viewpoint of English is located within the argument itself. As I suggested earlier, what students need to do is learn to look at English from a different perspective – in this case, from a different point of reference, one outside the common-sense argument. The common-sense model for learning English will indeed expose a student to an authentic, correct English language paradigm. This paradigm, however, is not an absolute paradigm; it is a context-dependent paradigm. The authentic, correct English which non-native students can learn by studying among native speakers within the language's natural socio-cultural context is a paradigm which is potentially only correct within the very socio-cultural context where

the language paradigm exists. In other words, the common-sense model of English is necessarily an ethnocentric model, not a universal model.

Let's take for instance an American native English speaker and a British native English speaker having a conversation. As the conversation runs on, each notices differences in each other's uses of English. If each speaker happens to filter language use through the common-sense model, the American and Briton would likely both interpret the differences as simply peculiarities of the other's language and culture. The differences in language might cause some misunderstanding or difficulty, but both speakers are aware that each person comes from English-speaking countries. Neither person is wrong; each simply has her own cultural or regional manner of using English.

Now let us imagine that we have the same American native speaker of English involved in conversation with a Brazilian speaker of English who has learned English in Brazil with non-native speaking teachers of English. As the conversation runs on, the American and Brazilian both notice differences in their uses of English. If each speaker happens to filter language use through the common-sense model, the American would ethnocentrically interpret the Brazilian's differences of use as mistakes, and the Brazilian would arrive at the same conclusion, but unfortunately about her own English, not about the American's English.

Is it possible that what the Brazilian speaker perceived as mistakes are merely differences of use based on differing social-cultural contextual uses of English? If the Brazilian is able to have a clear conversation in English with other Brazilian non-native speakers of English within a Brazilian socio-cultural context, is it not possible to say that their English is correct for the socio-cultural context within which it is being used? English is, after all, a language at heart, and the purpose of language is communication. Let us explore the common-sense model in relation to Brazilian learners of English, and begin by looking at English pronunciation, and the implication of the common-sense model that students will learn and develop a pronunciation of English which is clearer and more authentic than students would likely learn while studying English with non-native English speakers in Brazil.

The Common-Sense Model of English Pronunciation

Most immediately, my statement that "English belongs to the World" was meant to relieve Brazilian students of what I felt is the discouraging assumption created by the

common-sense model that having a clear, fluent command of spoken English is equivalent to having, for instance, an authentic "British English" or "American English" pronunciation. Nevertheless, for students who are looking to achieve a fluency of English that will permit them membership into an "English language community" and help them be accepted by native speakers as belonging linguistically to that community, the common-sense model does work quite well. It is a visceral thrill, admittedly, to achieve a level of language proficiency that allows one to visit or work in the target language country and not be instantly identified as a non-native speaker. What I would guess that many a Brazilian student of English strives for is a fluency of English pronunciation that doesn't instantly elicit the question, "Oh, where are you from?" From my perspective, however, as a fluent native speaker of American English, I would counter that I would likely have more difficulty avoiding this question just traveling around the United States than a Brazilian potentially would while traveling around the world. To understand why, however, we need to look at the nature of English from a different perspective.

English, I would offer, has historically belonged to certain countries and cultures – by this I mean that English has been, and is, a core identifying aspect of regionalism. English speakers' use of their regional dialect of English is often the most immediately recognizable cue to an individual's regional identity – often through the pronunciation alone. English has through use and time differentiated into languages[1] easily identified with each country or territory which has English as the primary tongue, and these languages have further diversified into regional and cultural dialects which reflect and give identity to the distinct regions and cultures within countries where these dialects can be found. American English[2] and Australian English, though offspring of the same 'family', are as distinct from each other in pronunciation as the countries and cultures where they reside, and even the term "American English pronunciation" is an oversimplification; within what we can refer to as American English are clearly distinct

[1] Some consider "American English" a language in its own right, differentiated enough from its English ancestry to be labeled "language"; others might call it a "branch", "category" or "set of dialects" of English. I have chosen to use the term "language" to leave available the sub-category possibility of "dialect" for regional and cultural forms of, for example, American English.

[2] Again, clarity through simplification is being employed; no offense is intended here by leaving Canada out of the picture. Technically, "American English" is "North American English", which includes Canada and the United States; by using the term "American English", I am narrowing our linguistic focus to cultural territory and not geographical area.

regional American English dialects: Midland, South, North, Mid-Atlantic, West, and New England accents – and within these regional pronunciations are often further subsets which can be matched by a careful ear to the region of origin, such as the Boston or New York accent. Much the same can be said, of course, of Portuguese, Spanish and French, for example, which also have migrated and dispersed globally and eventually developed into regionally distinct dialects, some having become so distinct as to make one wonder if one is listening to the same language. This regionalism of language - of languages within a language - is a central source of identity for the people within these regions.

For Brazilian students interested in learning a less "L2-accented," more native pronunciation of English, what regional pronunciation should these students strive for? This issue of English regionalism and dialect, when a student is operating under the assumption of the validity of the common-sense model, poses a problem that students of other languages do not necessarily need to worry about to the same degree. It is a commonly-voiced goal on the part of language students that they would love to be fluent in their target language, and one schema for approaching such a lofty accomplishment is to aim for a pronunciation accepted as "correct", or standard, or what some students erroneously believe to be a pronunciation without accent. This in practice works fairly well for certain languages which tend to be somewhat localized: the Parisian dialect, for example, if French is the language, or perhaps Hochdeutsch for students of German. For many languages a person might study, there is a regional dialect which serves as a model for pronunciation. I would venture, however, that English finds itself at the opposite extreme: English is a highly regionalized language in the form of identifiably diverse pronunciations throughout the world; in seeking a native fluency, which pronunciation of English should a student choose? In the United Kingdom, "Standard English" is referred to as RP, or Received Pronunciation, and within England, RP is generally accepted as "Standard English". Yet this Standard English in England is, to an American ear, a quite regionalized dialect – "Oh, you're from England, aren't you?" an American would respond. English, like Parisian French, is inextricably tied to region and culture, yet for English, no one dialect seems to stand out linguistically, from a global perspective at least, as more correct or proper than another in any objective, quantifiable manner. They simply reflect the regionalism of the culture in which they are steeped. Ironically, a Brazilian student who manages to

remove her Brazilian accent from her English will likely have simply replaced it with the accent of a particular regional dialect of English in the process. The irony of trying to attain an accent-free pronunciation of English is simply this: no one has an accent in English – as long as he remains in the region where that accent is used. Travel to another regional dialect area, and suddenly everyone around that person has an accent – including the person traveling. For a student who is learning German, the common-sense model fits nicely for developing a clear authentic accent which the student can use very effectively while in Germany if they plan to speak German mostly there. Even still, when the student travels to Switzerland, Austria or Liechtenstein, using and understanding the Hochdeutsch accent will be helpful, but it will begin to show its limitations the further the student moves away from the regions where that particular accent is prevalent.

English presents an even greater challenge for the student looking for the "best" accent. Our example of German, in comparison to English, is for the most part fairly geographically localized as a language. English, in contrast, is either the first or the official language in nearly sixty countries or territories spread around the globe. And yet English, while belonging as it does to so many countries and cultures, is no longer the sole property of these geographic places and regional cultures. English seems now to find itself in a peculiar position. Though it is tied inextricably to geographical location and culture in its many current regional guises, English - in contrast to other languages which have moved beyond their original cultural and regional beginnings only to eventually become new geographically-regionalized dialects - is now moving beyond geography and culture.

If we turn to the ever-expanding use of English as a lingua franca, where perhaps more important than an "authentic" regional pronunciation is a clear pronunciation of English which facilitates communication across cultural and regional differences, then attaining an American regional accent in English might not be as valuable in Brazil's future as it may have been historically, or as the common-sense model would have Brazilians believe. Certainly, fluency in American English will be highly effective for students who plan to work or live in America or who plan to work with American businesses, but perhaps a regional American English is not so valuable outside the United States.

Or is it? One can ostensibly effectively counter that American English is statistically favored over other dialects, such as British English or Australian English, if only based on a comparative ranking of the number of international English students who travel to English-speaking countries to study. Here, opinion comes into play, but opinion held widely enough by enough people to give it considerable weight. International students of mine from China, Taiwan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Brazil have consistently shared that in their respective countries, speaking an American English dialect is highly prized, for example, in the job market. In their cultures, American English is "better" for these students from a pragmatic, or real-world advantage, standpoint. American English has for these students and their cultures what seems to be a linguistic prestige, but a prestige that the language receives by virtue of the country or culture the language represents.

Language naturally gravitates through use and time to a form which most clearly and effectively facilitates communication of what is most valuable for those who share that language, and American English is certainly the best form for expressing what American culture values. American English, as a living language, is imbued with American culture: there are words, phrases and idioms full of cultural values, norms, ideals and ethnocentric views. English in general has historically received its impetus toward becoming globalized through hegemonic influences: initially through the expanding of England's sphere of influence, but now more historically recently, American English seems to be taking center stage as the language which represents the political, economic and cultural power and perceived cultural prestige of the United States.

Here I will move into pure speculation but to meditate on a point I think is worth sharing, especially concerning Brazil. English did not rise to its current status as a global language on linguistic merit alone. There is little inherent in the language itself, save the extent of the lexis, perhaps, to single it out as the best linguistic candidate for an international language. English has arrived at its current position as the language of certain nations which have had a majority share of economic, cultural and political influence, prestige, and/or power in the world. Hegemony has brought English to the forefront, and other cultures and nations have either acceded to or embraced the undeniable value or necessity of learning and using the language of those English-speaking nations. Each person who learns English becomes part of the global English

speech community, but a speech community which still presently finds at its center mostly those original hegemonic cultures. English, however, no longer belongs only to certain countries, cultures or territories. Yet, if it is thought of as such, and it is promoted as such yet concomitantly accepted as the language of the world, this assigns a disproportionate value of ownership to those countries and cultures which are perceived as having original or exclusive rights of identity to the language.

An Alternative Model of English Pronunciation

One could argue, still, that in spite of the caution against the common-sense model, we cannot get around the reality of English being the language of real-world communication, and thus a non-native speaker simply must have a clear pronunciation. Whatever the accent, regional or otherwise, communication needs to be intelligible. Again I would suggest that the common-sense model will work, but it might not work in the manner which is most effective for everyone, especially for people who hold their own unique cultural, national or regional identity to be worthy and valuable in its own right.

It would seem perchance that an alternative, cross-cultural model is needed in place of the current common-sense model then, at least in terms of promoting the development of a clear, less regionally-restricted pronunciation. I propose that in order for students to develop a pronunciation which is more flexible across cultures and regions as well as an aural comprehension which is equally accustomed to a wider variety of regional English pronunciations, students should be exposed to a variety of regional dialects in their studies. I would further propose that the model exists already, and seems to me to be working very effectively and will, I think, only more effectively work when it is recognized more directly as an acceptable model. The model, coincidentally, is the model I observed at the PLE. The PLE has a group of English professors who are fluent in diverse regionalisms of English. While talking to the different professors in the program, I heard a wonderful variety of British, South African and American English dialects, and among the teachers collectively, they held a much wider, less regionally restricted knowledge of English regional usage than the typical American L1 English professor. This is an important advantage for students who can let go of the common-sense model of learning English, because the students will

begin to realize that they have the opportunity to develop a more cross-cultural, less regionally restricted understanding of English.

Exposure to this variety of regional dialects and usages has very practical, but also very subjective results for the students. During my time at the PLE, the English I heard from many students was beautiful, alluring, melodious English, and very clear and easy to understand. The pronunciation was distinctive - it was uniquely Brazilian - and yet as clear and intelligible for me as any American regional pronunciation. And yet there were students I met who excused themselves for this wonderful accent, and other students who felt shy or embarrassed about not having what they perceived as the right or best pronunciation of English.

For Brazilians who hold their own culture to be equally valuable, and for Brazilians who are proud of their own identity as Brazilians, one possible first step toward validating this identity would be for Brazilians to begin to accept that the English they speak is their English, and not an English that belongs to someone else. The common-sense model deftly encourages an ethnocentric model of correct English to be extended erroneously to a universal model; I would suggest that the only universal requirement that can legitimately and respectfully be asked of any dialect or pronunciation of English, in light of the expanding global responsibility that English as a language is assuming, is that it be conducive to clear, intelligible and effective communication. From this alternate viewpoint outside the ethnocentric model of English, I think it follows that Brazilians' own unique pronunciation of English is equally authentic.

Proxemics of Culture, Proxemics of Language

Pronunciation perhaps is a quality of English which most easily empowers the non-native English speaker to take personal ownership of English. Yet pronunciation is but one aspect of language which falls under the influence of the common-sense model. How about grammar in English? Arguably, pronunciation is less a centrally important premise of the common-sense model than is grammar of language. One can argue that the common-sense model is clearly the most effective avenue for learning the pragmatic uses of grammar of English – that is, the grammar of English can be most fluently understood and learned when studied within an authentic socio-cultural context. We should inquire whether the grammar of English is also a potential medium of expressing

diverse cultural values and identity. English and culture are after all deeply intertwined; perhaps culture is woven into the very fabric of English grammar as well. To see whether the common-sense model should be viewed with the same critical eye for ethnocentrism in relation to grammar, let us move outside linguistics for a moment to the socio-culturally-steeped field of anthropology, and look into the theme of Proxemics.

Proxemics[3] as a field of study saw its genesis in the cross-cultural studies of Edward T. Hall, as the codification of physical, quantifiable distances between people as they interact with each other. Hall observed and measured the physical distances between people in differing social situations, and he identified a clear correlation between physical distance and social distance. That is to say, Hall noted that the physical distance that could be measured between two particular people in a particular social interaction served as an empirically observable, quantifiable indicator of the two people's subjective, conceptual, socio-culturally shared interpretation of the social relationship between them: two people who regarded each other as friends manifested a closer physical distance, what Hall referred to as "personal space", than either person demonstrated while interacting with a casual or professional acquaintance, what Hall called "social distance". Friends, Hall observed, interacted with measurably greater proximity compared to the space observed while interacting with a stranger. The physical distances related to distinct social spaces delineate fairly stable boundaries; if a person approaches a distance closer than culturally expected for a certain social interaction, his behavior can be interpreted as 'too friendly' or intrusive; if he is outside the distance norm, this person can be perceived as reserved or cold.

This anthropological topic begins to shed light on our discussion of English and cultural identity hopefully upon mentioning that Hall further observed that the measurements of proxemics were not at all homogeneous across cultures. The figures established for physical distances as related to social distance in, let us say, England, were greater than the measurements, for example, as observed in Brazil. In effect, what would seem to be appropriate for "personal space" interactions in one culture might more comfortably coincide with what a different culture would interpret as "social distance". In a cross-cultural business meeting, for example, a Brazilian and a British

[3] Proxemics is of course an area of much greater depth and breadth than what I have shared; my narrow treatment of the topic here is to keep the focus on our own topic at hand. Hall's 1966 book, The Hidden Dimension, delves into issues and problems of the meta-language of space in cross-cultural communication (especially chapters 10 – 12).

associate could each find himself curiously ill at ease; one wondering why his meeting partner is so uncomfortably close to him, while the other feels that his associate is not very interested in the topic at hand. For most anyone who has had the occasion to travel from one of the aforementioned cultures to the other; this is one of the most immediately noticeable – and thus most commonly noted – differences between Britons and Brazilians for travelers: "Brazilians are so warm and friendly," an Englishman might remark, while a Brazilian could think, "The British seem rather distant, a little cold."

Let me propose that we humans perchance have more than the singular avenue of Proxemics, that of using physical personal space, for communicating a culturally-determined message of social distance. I would offer that we can also find distinct cultural interpretations of social relationships in language as well.

Lacking as languages do the dimension of physical space, I would contend that languages have their own unique capacity to communicate social distance through the dimension of time – specifically, through use of tense. Considering that the common noun "proximity" encompasses not only nearness in physical space but also nearness in time, tense in grammar, interestingly, also serves to communicate feelings of closeness or distance in social relationships. Though the word "Proxemics" never comes up in my ESL lessons per se, I find it is necessary to teach this "linguistic proxemics" quite often to students of English studying in the United States. Take, for example, a student from Saudi Arabia in lower-intermediate grammar class one morning:

> Teacher, I need a worksheet - give me a worksheet.
> Sure, but can you ask in a different way?
> Yes - I want another copy of the worksheet. Please give me a worksheet.
> Oh, "Please" is good – can you ask? Can you think of a nicer way to ask?
> …?

Now the student was convinced that his sentence was grammatically accurate – and syntactically it is, and so justifiably he was perplexed by why he still had not received his worksheet. He got an inkling that something else must be missing. What follows classroom moments like these are lively discussions about the curious linguistic culture of Americans: something I have come to label the "grammar of politeness"[4].

[4] These two ideas - linguistic proxemics and grammar of politeness - would likely fit within the linguistic concept of social deixis. For English, however, literature on social deixis seems limited to honorifics (Sir, Mrs., Your Honor). If terms already exist for either or both concepts discussed, I offer apologies in

What students discover is that learning English in America means learning the American culture of English as well. Learning American English entails becoming sensitive to the American culture in which that language is saturated. In American culture, it is too direct - dare I say rude – for a student to say "Give me" to a professor at the university; Softer phrases such as "Can I", or "Could I" are expected. The non-native English user, then, needs to develop a pragmatic awareness: an ability to see that English answers not only to rules of grammar, but also to rules of culture, situation and purpose. What is communicated cannot make sense only inside the head of the speaker; it must also answer to what the listener expects to hear. What would have happened, for example, if the aforementioned student had been in a restaurant instead of my class, and had said to a waiter, "Give me a Coke"? In fact, it coincidentally turned out that the Saudi Arabian student had actually said this in a restaurant the week before, and after our discussion in class about why we should not say, "Give me" to certain people in certain situations, the proverbial light bulb turned on for that student. He had gotten his Coke in the restaurant the week before, but he had also been confused by the irritated reaction of the waiter.

And yet, it is only fair to admit that I myself had to learn this very lesson, that what a language learner might assume as a universal of language is perhaps an ethnocentric view of language which finds its center in one's own socio-cultural background. In fall of 1999 I requested a semester sabbatical to travel to Brazil with the purpose of studying Portuguese. My goal for spending a semester in Brazil was to develop a better empathy for the student perspective of what is involved in learning a new language, and so I thought the best way to do this was to be a student myself. A month after I arrived I had luckily met a very warm Brazilian family who offered me a homestay for several weeks during my time in Brazil. One particular evening, the mother was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a beer. She knew I wanted a beer too, but she also knew I was in Brazil to learn the language, so this night she waited for me to figure out how to ask. That would be easy enough, I thought, and I had by that time collected quite a bit of vocabulary in my head. That night I made what I thought was an excellent sentence for getting my beer:

Eu gostaria de uma cerveja, por favor.

---

advance; I have simply not yet run across already-established terms for either concept, and so I have used my own names.

Hmm?
Eu, eu gostaria de uma cerveja.
Nao entendo. O que voce quer?
Uma cerveja – eu queria ter uma cerveja, por favor.
Voce esta imaginando uma cerveja? Voce quer ou nao quer?

Now I knew – or at least I was sure – that I had made a perfectly sensible, understandable request. After all, it was a nearly direct translation of what I would have said in English, which I knew from experience would get me a beer: "I would like a beer, please." For a minute I was lost. Eventually the host mother and I worked our way through the issue, and I did get my beer, but I also began to see that my concept of correct grammar was a culturally specific concept, an ethnocentric concept of grammar. I had already noticed the more tangible, commonly-perceived differences of Brazilians, such as the greater warmth and closeness of the Brazilians I had met. It began to become clearer that this closeness was possibly in the language as well.

In American culture, we tend to keep greater physical distance between us in social interactions, and it would seem that our language reflects grammatically what happens physically. In American English, we tend to create distance with time – with tense – to reflect in language what we also manifest in physical space. It is quite normal for Americans to talk about the present time by using the past tense. For example, an American who is looking to mail a package might approach a stranger by saying, "Excuse me, but I was wondering if you knew where the closest post office was."

Why do Americans commonly put a present, real situation into the realm of the grammatical past tenses? We do this as a way to create polite distance, to show the stranger that we recognize their personal space. It acts as a test of the social waters, so to speak, to see if the stranger will invite us into his social space. We communicate this through language, this culture of respecting this quality of individuality which pervades our American culture.

When in Rome, Do as the Romans Do

If we return to our common-sense model, and we look from its perspective at what happened not only to the Saudi-Arabian student in America but also to me in Brazil, we see that both the student and I used our new languages incorrectly. I would have been within my 'common-sense perspective' right as a native-speaking English teacher to tell my student, "No, that is not correct," and that would have been an accurate statement

within that common-sense model. What I decided to say, however, was that what the student said was grammatically accurate; it was, however, simply not the form of request that an American professor is culturally accustomed to hear. I asked him to save his original request for using with close friends, and to include the grammar of social politeness when talking to American professional acquaintances and strangers.

The common-sense model has great validity and outlines a model for learning pragmatically accurate, fluent English. A student studying with an American teacher in an American ESL program will learn, for example, that it typically is not good to say to a stranger, "Excuse me, what time is it?" Rather, it is much better to say, "Excuse me, could you tell me what time it is?" Here I will split hairs, as they say, but I will do so with a purpose in mind: the American teacher has given the student a perfectly accurate description of American English use. This is in synch with American regional and cultural identity. The problem arises, however, when the teacher does not point out, or the student does not realize, that it is an ethnocentric American-culture description, and the student interprets this description to mean that "in English, it typically is not good to say to a stranger, 'Excuse me, what time is it?' Rather, it is much better to say, 'Excuse me, could you tell me what time it is?'" By doing so, the student has just conceptually expanded an ethnocentrically accurate American English model into a universal model of English.

But where is the harm in this? It is important, and very rewarding, as I have mentioned before, to be able to use a language in a manner that allows one to slip into a culture and language community and be accepted as a member, and to be able to communicate effectively with native English speakers. I think this is perfectly admirable, so long as the non-native user consciously realizes that the "correct" English she chooses to use while in a particular English-speaking region or culture is ethnocentrically correct English, and as such is in no way ideologically better or superior to any other English; it is merely different, and a form which happens to answer best to the culture in which it is used. Brazilians using English in Brazil, should they choose to do so, are perfectly accurate to say to a stranger, "Excuse me, what time is it?" if this is acceptable to the Brazilian stranger who hears it.

English, as it continues to grow and develop as our lingua franca, should also be allowed to speak for new cultural identities as it historically has come to do. I would suggest that the common-sense model of languages has its value, as long as it is

understood from the proper perspective, a global perspective. Identity of language is identity of culture; if all cultures are to be valued, then all identities of language should also come to be valued as well. English as a language of the world cannot belong to everyone if it is believed to belong to only a few.

References

FREIRE, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970. Print.

HALL, Edward T. *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990. Print.