Language choice and identity negotiations in a Brazilian Portuguese community school

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Introduction

This chapter tells the story of three mixed-heritage children, a girl, Josefa, and two boys, Benedito and Antônio. Taking a social constructionist view of identity (Rao, 1999), it explores the multiple ways they draw on different sets of linguistic resources (Portuguese and English) to negotiate aspects of their learner identities in a Brazilian Portuguese community language school. The data discussed here are part of a larger study which focused on language and identity issues from the perspective of a group of Brazilian mothers married to men of another nationality, and their mixed-heritage children (Souza, 2006). The children's views on their identities were explored through interviews and their actual identity negotiations were investigated through observations and audio recordings of teacher-pupil exchanges and informal peer talk during the lesson.

Identity and language choice

Creese et al (2006) explore the links between language and identity among children of Gujarati heritage in complementary schools in Leicester, UK. They identify three identity positionings available to the children: heritage, multicultural and learner identities. The first two identities are associated with ethnic group belonging, whereas the third refers to how the complementary school contributes to the development of a successful learner identity across learning contexts. The children in my study also show that they value their learner identities. However, the learner identities they develop in the context
of the Brazilian Portuguese community schools seem to differ in important ways from those developed by the aforementioned Gujarati heritage children. In the case of the Gujarati heritage children, their learner identities were closely connected to obtaining mainstream qualifications and being successful in the mainstream school. Such a focus seems to be absent in the Brazilian Portuguese school in this study. This may be because the children studied were aged 5 to 12 years and therefore too young to sit for mainstream examinations. In addition, the school had no links with the mainstream educational system and the teachers did not try to make any connections between learning Portuguese and the instrumental value of becoming bilingual and biliterate more generally. Instead, the teachers and parents involved in the school focused on promoting connections between the children's heritage language and their ethnic (Brazilian Portuguese) identities.

Mills (2001) focuses on the importance of language in the maintenance of a group of children's sense of identity as being both British and Pakistani. These children, like the ones in this study, emphasise the importance of their linguistic repertoire in linking it to their heritage, family and community. In this sense, they experience multiple identities. The concept of multiple identities is based on the assumption that identities are not fixed but socially constructed (Rao, 1999). A Brazilian in London, for instance, may have any of the following identity options at his/her disposal: South American, Brazilian, Catholic, mixed-heritage, middle-class, female, wife, mother, language learner, professional, amongst others. One could see identity as a big box full of cards representing many different options. Some may be negotiable, others contested and others may be found to be non-negotiable. Although the cards are interconnected, only the relevant ones are taken out of the box according to context and participants.

**The community and the school**

England has become one of the countries in Europe with a high concentration of Brazilian immigrants. The estimated number of Brazilians in the UK is about 200,000 (Evans et al., 2007). The community makes itself present in England through cultural events which include artists who come from Brazil to perform as well as from groups who have settled in England and elsewhere. It is possible to attend religious services held by the Catholic and Protestant churches as well as other religions which have mainly developed in Brazil, such as Kardecism and Afro-Brazilian cults. Moreover, services ranging from tarot reading to legal services can be accessed in Portuguese. The Brazilian community has also shown interest in maintaining Portuguese language and
culture through children's groups organised by Brazilian mothers. The number of groups changes constantly but according to the Brazilian Association of Educational Projects in the UK, four are active in London at time of writing, one of which offers literacy classes in Portuguese. It is this which is the focus of my chapter.

The Brazilian Portuguese school in this study is the only one which focuses on developing the children's oral as well as literacy skills in Portuguese. The school was founded by a group of mothers and was organised according to three different levels at the time of the data collection: level 1 for children aged 5-8 whose purpose was to develop the children's oral skills; level 2 for children aged 5-8 who had already acquired oral competence and were developing their literacy skills; and level 3 for children aged 8-12 who wanted to develop their literacy skills even further. The lessons at the school took place on Saturdays and were two hours long with a break for a snack. There were about ten children in each level.

**Three mixed-heritage children**

In this chapter, I focus on three children, Josefa, Benedito and Antôonio, who attended the Brazilian Portuguese school over many years. Josefa and Benedito were in level 2 while Antônio was in level 3. In both levels, the teachers worked with the children to develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills but used a different curriculum and teaching materials reflecting their age and competence in Portuguese.

Josefa was enrolled in the school at the age of 4 and was 8 years old at the time of the field work. Her mother reported speaking to her only in Portuguese and taking her to Brazil once a year. The sustained home and school input in Portuguese had enabled Josefa to be competent in Portuguese. She reported enjoying travelling to Brazil as well as being part of the Brazilian community in London, interacting in Portuguese and attending the Brazilian school. Although Josefa appeared to consider Brazil her place of birth and Portuguese as definer of her identity, she also acknowledged the influence of English and British culture in her life.

Although born and raised in England, Benedito was used to being addressed in Portuguese by his mother as well as many other Brazilians with whom his family had shared accommodation over the years. This experience had equipped Benedito with a good passive command of Portuguese. However, his active competence was almost none before starting the school at the age of 6. The school input has enabled Benedito to be actively competent in
5J: Ana.

6T: Josefa, explica pra Ana como é o Adivinha O Que É
[Josefa, explain the riddles activity to Ana.]

7J: Ela tem que falar um monte de coisa e você tem que adivinhar o que é.
[She (the teacher) has to say a lot of things and you have to guess what it is.]

8R: Como é que eu adivinho?
[How do I guess?]

9T: XXXX tem que falar o nome de coisa.
[XXXX (the teacher) has to say the name of the thing.]

10T: O que é o que é?
[What is ... ?]

The teacher addresses the students informally Quem gosta de pipoca? [Who likes popcorn?] (line 1) illustrating that Portuguese is the default language of classroom interaction. Josefa only starts to participate from line 2 onwards, when she is addressed by the teacher. The teacher notices that and starts to direct her questions to Josefa Josefa, explica pra Ana como é o Adivinha O Que É [Josefa, explain the riddles activity to Ana] (line 6). Having ensured Josefa's participation, the teacher continues with the guessing activity O que é o que é? [What is ... ?] (line 10) with the whole group. As mentioned earlier, Josefa's linguistic repertoire is composed of both English and Portuguese as a result of being born and raised in England and being exposed to Portuguese by her mother from a young age. In addition, Josefa has experienced the unspoken rule of the no-English policy where Portuguese is the main and most valued language in the school. Therefore, it is not surprising that Josefa responds to the teacher's requests in Portuguese in an attempt to present herself as a good learner to her teacher.

In the next example, the teacher (T) starts the riddles game which is open to all the students (Ss). Josefa (J) tries to be first to answer almost all the riddles.

Example 2

1T: O que é o que é que tem uma casa mas não paga aluguel?
[What is it that has a house but does not pay rent?]

2J: Eu sei, eu sei. A coisa que tem uma coisa (inaudible)
[I know, I know. The thing that has a thing (inaudible)]
(many children shouting at the same time)
Portuguese and he is now fluent in both Portuguese and English, as revealed in the classroom recordings when he was 8. Benedito self-identifies as English because he was born in England.

Although born and raised in London, Antônio lived in Brazil, where he attended nursery. He understands, speaks, reads and writes in both Portuguese and English. Antônio started attending the Brazilian school when it first opened at the age of 7 and was 11 at the time of the classroom recordings. Antônio self-identifies as being both English and Brazilian and identifies his parents’ place of birth and their background as salient features of his ethnic identity. Nonetheless, Antônio seems to have more cultural links to the Brazilian culture than to the Portuguese language. It appears that English is not only his preferred language but also the one he uses more often.

**The children’s language choice and identity negotiations**
Below I discuss aspects of the children’s language choices and identity negotiations as they interact with their teachers and peers in the Brazilian Portuguese school and probe into the motivations for their choices.

When at school, I observed that Josefa only speaks Portuguese, perhaps reflecting her reported pride in her linguistic skill. As in other chapters in this book (eg Chapters 1-4) much of the lessons in school are teacher-centred and teacher-controlled, which does not allow for many pupil-initiated interactions. In the following example, we see this teacher-controlled interaction as Josefa (J) is called upon by the teacher (T) to explain a whole class activity to a newcomer.

**Example 1**

1T: *Quem gosta de pipoca?*  
[Who likes popcorn?]

(Josefa is not answering any of the questions, which are asked to the whole group. The teacher then shows on the board that Josefa’s name and the new student’s name, although pronounced in the same way, are spelled differently. The teacher then addresses Josefa directly.)

2T: *A Josefa t’aqui?*  
[Is Josefa here?]

3J: *Sim.*  
[Yes.]

4T: *Qual o nome dela?*  
[What’s her name?]
3T: *O que é que o pai e a mãe têm, mas os filhos não têm?*  
[What is it that the father and the mother have but the children don’t?]  

4J: *Trabalho.*  
[Work]  

5T: *O que é que o pai e a mãe têm mas os filhos não têm?*  
[What is it that the father and the mother have but the children don’t?]  

6J: *Casa.*  
[House]  

7T: *O que é que tem na mãe, no pai que não tem no filho? Vou escrever aqui, ó, vou dar uma dica bem grande.*  
[What is it that there is in the mother, in the father which there isn’t in the son? I’ll write here. Look, I’ll give you a big clue.]  

8J: *Orelha* (laughs)  
[Ear]  

9S: *Cabelo.*  
[Hair]  

10T: *O quê que tem nessa palavrinha que tem nessa e não tem nessa?*  
[What is there in this word which the other word doesn’t have?]  

11J: *A.*  

12T: *A letra ‘a’!* Muito bem, Josefa. Mais um ponto pra você. Uh, Josefa está ganhando com 3 pontos!  
[Letter A! Well done, Josefa. One more point for you. Ooh, Josefa is winning with 3 points!]  

The teacher again establishes that Portuguese is the language of the classroom activity by using it in her initial question *O que é o que é que tem uma casa mas não paga aluguel?* [What is it that has a house but does not pay rent?] (line 1). Although it is an open question addressed to the whole class, Josefa tries to answer it immediately *Eu sei, eu sei. A coisa que tem uma coisa* [I know, I know. The thing that has a thing] (line 2). She seems to be trying to ensure that nobody else answers before her and perhaps jeopardises her identity as a good learner. On this occasion, Josefa does not seem to have taken the time to think about her answer and tries to describe the object she has in mind. It is also possible that Josefa does not know the word she is looking for in Portuguese and tries to provide the teacher with the description instead. Moore (2002) discusses how descriptions can be a difficult task for young children and Josefa is not successful in her effort to negotiate meaning in Portuguese. What is interesting on this occasion is that Josefa does not
switch to English but sticks to Portuguese in accordance with the teacher's expectations. Her language choice on this occasion serves to reinforce her good learner identity and enhance her positive relationship with the teacher.

Unlike Josefa who is focused on the lesson and eager to use Portuguese with her teacher and classmates, Benedito creates opportunities to have parallel interactions with his best friend during the lesson, situations in which he speaks English (cf Creese et al, 2008). In classroom interactions with his teacher and classmates, however, he uses Portuguese, as the next example (3) illustrates.

Example 3

1T: *O Benedito vai falar pra mim como é que eu escrevo abacaxi.*
   [Benedito is going to tell me how I spell pineapple.]

   2B: *Eu não quero.*
      [I don't want to]

   3T: *Vamo, Benedito!*
      [Come on, Benedito]

   4B: *Não!*
      [No!]

   5T: *Eu sei que você sabe.*
      [I know you know]

   6B: *Não!*
      [No!]
      (The teacher moves close to him and seems to be whispering to him.)

   7T: *Qual é a outra letrinha? ‘a’*
      [Which is the other letter? ‘a’]

   8B: ‘t’

   9T: *Não. Abacaxi.*
      [No. Pineapple]

  10B: ‘b’

  11T: *Isso! Muito bem.*
      [Yes! Well done]
      (The teacher goes back to the board and speaks to the whole class.)

  12T: *a-ba...e depois, Benedito?*
      [pine ... and after, Benedito?]
      (Other children volunteer to help out. Benedito keeps silent.)
I observed that Benedito was generally keen to participate in the learning activities. In this extract, however, he refuses to spell the word ‘pineapple’ in Portuguese to the group. When invited by the teacher (line 1), Benedito refuses to take part, *Eu não quero* [I don’t want to] (line 2). Benedito’s forceful refusals to spell in public *Não!* [No!] (lines 4 and 6) are in Portuguese. In other words, while Benedito is not being cooperative he is trying to save face and preserve his image as a good learner by using Portuguese. By choosing to speak Portuguese while refusing to participate in the activity Benedito also signals that he is only uncomfortable with the spelling activity, not with speaking Portuguese itself. The teacher seems to understand this and tries to help him: she approaches Benedito and prompts him by whispering the next letter in his ear (line 7). The teacher’s strategy seems to work as Benedito tries to spell the word himself (line 8). As Benedito’s answer is wrong, the teacher stays by him and prompts him with the whole word again (line 9). The fact that the teacher is standing close to Benedito seems to make him believe that this is a private exchange as his mistake does not seem to deter him from trying again (line 10). He is then successful in his attempt to spell the word given by the teacher and is praised for his effort (line 11). One would expect Benedito’s achievement to motivate him to try to finish spelling the word. However, this does not seem to be the case. As the teacher moves back to the board and asks Benedito to spell the whole word (line 12) he resorts to silence, perhaps in an attempt to protect his image as a good learner by avoiding a situation which could lead him to make mistakes.

The children often participated in speaking activities about typical Brazilian animals and their eating habits, and were then given pictures of animals to colour in. The teacher and the assistant went around and interacted with each child individually in Portuguese. The teacher-pupil interaction was based on the children’s colouring activity but triggered other topics too.

Benedito used these activities as an opportunity to interact privately with his classmates in English. The following example is a case in point. On this occasion, one of the boys was throwing his pencils at the other children. The third time this happened, the teacher asked the boy to stop his task and sit on the sofa alone instead of at the table with the other students. The boy obeyed the teacher initially but started to disturb the other children again as soon as the teacher was busy giving individual help to other children. Benedito, however, spots his classmate’s conduct and indirectly alerts the teacher.
Example 4

1B: I hate this. What about you?

2S: (inaudible)

3B: No, up here. Question, question, question.

4B: (singing aloud) YYYY tá debaixo da mesa
   [Y is under the table.]

5T: YYYY, vai pro sofá!
   [Y, go to the sofa!]

In line 1, Benedito addresses one of his classmates in English, the language he considers appropriate for his private conversation with peers, as stated in his interview. This interaction is continued in English (lines 2, 3). However, in line 4, Benedito sings aloud in Portuguese describing what another classmate is doing, Y tá debaixo da mesa. [Y is under the table.] It appears that Benedito is making a public statement and, indirectly, directing his utterance at the teacher. Benedito’s choice of language proves him right in relation to the appropriateness of his use of Portuguese: he is successful in catching the teacher’s attention while presenting himself as a good learner who uses Portuguese appropriately in the classroom. The teacher hears him and reprimands the student who is misbehaving (line 5).

Benedito is not only aware of the difference in status of the two languages in the classroom but he also uses their status difference to achieve his interactional goals. Benedito’s goals vary but it can be said that in general he makes language choices depending on whether he considers his conversations to be public or private. He addresses his teacher in Portuguese and his peers in English when in private and in Portuguese when in public interactions, such as whole group activities which involve his teacher or the teacher assistant.

Like Benedito, António, who is older than the other two children and attends level 3, uses Portuguese and English depending on context and participants. However, his language choices do not seem to be as neatly separated as Benedito’s. In the example below, António addresses his teacher in English. On this occasion, the teacher has put the lesson on hold because the children have been disruptive and kept talking to each other. The teacher addresses the whole class to point out that their disruptive behaviour will probably affect her intention to allow the children to play outdoors. António attempts to turn the tables by pointing out that although the children were at school on time, they had to wait for about half an hour for the lesson to begin, implying that the teacher was late.
Example 5

1T: A gente ia fazer uma atividade lá fora, mas acho que não vamos mais ter tempo.
   [We were going to have an outdoors activity but I don’t think we are going to have any time for that.]

2A: Yeah, but that was only because we started at twenty-five to ...

3T: Não entendi nada.
   [I didn’t understand anything.]

4S1: Ele disse ...
   [He (Antônio) said ...]

5T: Ele vai falar pra mim.
   [He (Antônio) is going to say it to me.]

6A: Porque nós ... nós ... ah ... vinte e cinco pras duas.
   [Because we ... we ... ah ... twenty-five to two.]

7T: Por que?
   [Why?]

Although the teacher uses Portuguese in addressing the whole group, Antônio chooses to speak to her in English when indirectly accusing her of starting the lesson late (line 2). His challenge expressed in English could be seen as particularly risky as the content of his utterance is already loaded. Indeed, the teacher seems to be offended by the remark and particularly by the use of English. Thus, she exercises her authority by feigning lack of understanding and demanding that he repeats his utterance in Portuguese Não entendi nada [I didn’t understand anything] (line 3), Ele vai falar pra mim [He is going to say it to me] (line 5). The teacher’s use of Portuguese reminds Antônio of the appropriate language to be used in classroom talk. In an attempt perhaps to mitigate the force of his utterance, Antônio decides to comply with the teacher’s request and switches to Portuguese.

In the next example, the teacher and the children are having a geography lesson focusing on the names of the states in Brazil and their capitals. As a follow-up activity, the teacher has asked the students to tell the group about the places they have visited in Brazil, things they have done there and how they liked it. Antônio takes the next turn and chooses to talk about a holiday resort he visited in the Northeast of Brazil.
Example 6

A: Quando eu foi pra Natal eu foi no cachoeiro e tem os os slides, slides? Escorregou. Mas é de ... rock... de pedras, natural. E você parou no piscina natural lá. [When I went to Natal I went to a waterfall with slides, slides? Slides. But it was of ... rock ... of of rocks, natural. And you ended in the natural swimming pool there.]

In his short description, Antônio uses Portuguese as much as he can. However, he uses two words in English, ‘slides’ and ‘rock’. As I mentioned earlier, Antônio's exposure to Portuguese is more limited than that of Josefa and Benedito. Therefore, it could be said that he uses these two English words as sentence fillers because he cannot find the right words to express himself in Portuguese. However, Antônio uses an enquiry tone in the first case and pauses in the second one. These two strategies may indicate that he is not only searching for the right words in Portuguese but also asking for help. Although there is no help from the teacher or any of his classmates, Antônio's strategy works as it enables him to remember the correct words and insert them in his description. Here the two languages are juxtaposed as an integral part of Antônio's learner identity.

Conclusion

As other chapters in this book have shown (eg Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 12), the children's language choice and identity negotiations reveal an understanding of the different values attached to Portuguese and English. More specifically, the recordings showed that the children mainly interacted with their teachers in Portuguese and with the other children in both languages. They oscillated between the use of Portuguese and English to negotiate one particularly salient identity option, that of a good learner of Portuguese.

To conclude, it is important to highlight the impact the school has on the children's learning experiences and links between their language learning and processes of social identity construction. Indeed, the Brazilian Portuguese school may be the main site where mixed-heritage children interact with other children in the heritage language. For this reason alone, the role of the school in the maintenance of Brazilian Portuguese deserves to be highlighted (see also Chapter 7).