Brazilian Portuguese as a community language:
the training journey of a teacher in London

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Abstract

The increase in the number of Brazilian emigrants in the last thirty or so years has led to the development of the teaching of Brazilian Portuguese as a community language abroad. In other words, this type of teaching is new and, consequently, the teachers working in community schools tend to have been trained only to work with monolingual pupils in Brazil. In this article, we reflect on the experience of one of these teachers and who works with intermediate and upper-intermediate pupils aged 11 to 15 in London. The class that caters for this group of learners was initially created with the aim of preparing them to take mainstream examinations, i.e. GCSE and A-levels in Portuguese. In this article, we describe the contextual background for these lessons and contrast it to the teacher's expectations of teaching in this context. We then consider the few teaching courses available for teachers of Portuguese as a community language in London. Anderson's (2008) perceived 8-strand professional development needs of community language teachers are used as a framework for analysing the experience of this Brazilian teacher. We acknowledge the positive impact of these courses on teacher knowledge and practices and call for more of these initiatives.

Introduction

'My training journey started with a degree as a primary school teacher, which in Brazil, at the time, was an optional route for the equivalent of the A-levels in England. I then obtained the equivalent of a BA in Education, a course that included modules on Educational Psychology, History of Education, Philosophy and Teaching Principles and Methodologies. Having completed my university degree, I worked in Brazilian schools for three years. My training, education, and work experience were very rich and useful for the Brazilian context. Naively, I thought that my professional skills could easily be transferred to teaching Portuguese in a Brazilian community school in the UK.' (Rita Dorneles, March 2016)

Rita is one among hundreds of thousands of Brazilians who have migrated to England in the last three to four decades, when the migration flow from Brazil became significant. This flow has led to the development of the teaching of Brazilian Portuguese as a community language abroad (Souza 2010), a context which Rita joined to continue her professional career.

In this article, we reflect on the challenges faced by teachers trained in a monolingual[i] country when confronted with a multilingual and multicultural body of pupils in a new country. With a focus on the teaching of Brazilian Portuguese and the Brazilian community schools, this reflection will allow us to consider the needs of teachers of community languages. With this purpose, we consider the few teaching courses available for teachers of Portuguese as a community language in London. We draw on Anderson's (2008) study of pre- and in-service professional development of teachers of community languages and use his perceived 8-strand needs as a framework for analysing the

experience of a Brazilian teacher. We acknowledge the positive impact that attending the available courses has had on the teacher's professional knowledge and teaching practices. We conclude by emphasising the need for more courses to be delivered with the aim of supporting the professional development of the Brazilian community teachers.

A Brazilian teacher in the UK

Considering Rita's profile in the vignette in the introduction to this article, we could ask a few questions about her readiness to work in the context of Brazilian community schools in the UK. Is she prepared to teach Portuguese at all? How about Portuguese as a Heritage Language (henceforth, POLH)? What should she teach? What resources should she use? How much will her previous experience support her in this new context? How far are her teaching skills transferable? How would her confidence be affected?

Rita arrived in London in 2010 with her husband and three children. Initially, her focus was to ensure that her family settled well in the English capital. Two years later, being convinced that a new routine had been established and that her children felt secure with the move, Rita decided to explore the possibilities of being professionally active again. The Internet seemed a natural starting point. ABRIR[ii], the Brazilian Association for Educational Projects in the UK, was one of the institutions found online. The information shared by ABRIR on POLH raised Rita's interest in the field. It seemed a perfect opportunity for her to return to work and develop links with the Brazilian community in London. She contacted one of the schools listed in ABRIR's website and arranged to visit them. She was then presented with a very new context.

Community schools (also called complementary, supplementary or Saturday schools) are voluntary organizations that fulfil a range of functions (Lytra and Martin 2010a). In the case of the Brazilian community schools, they are mostly organized by parents who aim to transmit their linguistic and cultural heritage to their children, who are growing up away from their country of origin (Mendes 2012). In spite of the documented benefits of these schools to the learning and the identity formation of children of migrant backgrounds (see, for example, Lytra and Martin 2010b), they tend to operate in very challenging circumstances that include limited resources and classes with students with great variety of age and abilities (Hall et al 2002, Kenner & Ruby 2013). These circumstances were witnessed by Rita in her first visit to the school.

Rita arrived at the school for the first time much earlier than the start of the lessons. Her intention was to familiarize herself with an environment which was totally new to her. She was immediately surprised with the venue. It was not a 'proper' school building, but a community centre with a large hall. The walls were bare. There was no sign of the presence of the group in that space from the week before. As the families, the students and the current teachers arrived, Rita realized that the hall was used for lessons to the younger pupils (2-5 year-olds). There was in fact another very small little room coming off from the hall in which the older pupils (11-15[iii] year-olds) were squeezed. Rita could not help but compare this place to her previous experience. This led her to ask herself a number of questions: Where is the work of the younger pupils' displayed? How can the older pupils study in such a small space? It all seemed to lack professionalism.

Nevertheless, Rita decided to have a taster of the lessons and attended two of the sessions delivered by another teacher. The lessons were fun but were clearly not linked to each other. In addition, there was no lesson plan, no curriculum, no direction. Nobody could explain what the teaching content would be, except that POLH should be taught. Rita decided to accept a teaching position in the

school as a new challenge in her life. However, she felt the need to learn more about community schools and POLH.

Professional development in the UK

As described in the previous section, Rita is a teacher who was trained in her country of origin – a situation that is common among many of the teachers of community languages in the UK. These teachers' knowledge of language and of other academic subjects which have been developed through training and qualifications in their countries are indeed relevant to their practices (Barradas 2007). However, opportunities to reflect on how to transfer their knowledge and their skills to the context of the host country and adapt it to the needs of their new pupils would immensely contribute to the professional development of these teachers. Unfortunately, the offer of this type of pre- and in-service courses is very limited (Anderson 2008).

Nevertheless, there have been some initiatives with the view to address this gap. One example was the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) in Community Languages by Goldsmiths, University of London[iv], which would qualify teachers to work in the UK. This course no longer exists. Instead a Certificate is offered in teaching Chinese[v] and another one, in teaching Arabic[vi]. Although these courses do not qualify for teaching in British schools, they play a key role in supporting teachers of community languages to better understand their teaching context and their learners and thus better plan and deliver their lessons. After all, as advocated by Barradas (2007), equally important to teachers' linguistic and academic knowledge is their awareness of the needs of their pupils'. This view is shared by ABRIR, which developed a partnership with Goldsmiths in 2012 and 2013[vii] to deliver a Certificate in teaching Portuguese. In both occasions, the limited financial resources of the Brazilian teachers and their community schools did not allow the courses to be viable.

As an alternative, ABRIR applied for some funding from the Brazilian government and managed to offer four free[viii] full-day workshops[ix] in 2013. They were entitled Professional Development for Teachers of Portuguese as a Heritage Language and covered four themes. They were the following; Curriculum Design, Lesson Planning, Materials Development and Assessment of Learning. Rita attended these workshops and considered this experience to be positive, as illustrated in her own words below:

> 'I learned a lot about POLH and its specificities. For example, it was only in these workshops that I realized that the students tend to stay in the same class group for three years in all of the Brazilian community schools. Due to the limited number of students in each school, they are grouped according to age range – usually 4-6, 7-9, 10-12, 13-15. The exact age range adopted in each school varies, but this approach affects the curriculum. I learned that there is no way to establish a very rigid curriculum. The content changes every year depending on the students' specific abilities and interests. Ensuring that the topics are varied during the three years they stay in the same group is also important. Besides, the schools are spread all over London and their families may belong to different social classes, have different migration histories and plans. In other words, each school deals with a different context and has different specific aims that need to be considered in their curricula.'

Rita also reported to have realized that there were many differences between her teacher training and experience in Brazil and her experience with POLH in London. This realization led her to

continue to pursue other learning opportunities. In 2014, she attended the Introductory Course for Teachers of Portuguese[x] organized by ABRIR in partnership with the Institute of Education, then University of London. This course was possible because ABRIR managed to obtain funding[xi] to cover for half of the participant fees. The other half was financed by the Brazilian community schools to which the trainee teachers were linked. This course was 21-hour long divided in three full days. Rita explains the highlights of this course for her:

> 'This course made me realize that teachers need to understand that community language involves the culture and language as a social system in which the child is inserted. With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge that the Brazilian families may come from different parts of the country, and thus, be linked to different regional cultural and linguistic varieties. In addition, some of the Brazilian parents may have partners of another nationality, and thus, have links to other cultural and linguistic practices.'

As acknowledged by Anderson (2008), '[w]hilst the various minority language communities in the UK share much in common, there are also some important differences' (p. 284). It was in consequence of these differences that he offered the Goldsmiths' PGCE in Community Languages and presently offers a Certificate in Community Languages to specific groups. Nevertheless, in analysing those courses, Anderson (2008) identified strands of the professional development needs shared by the groups with which he worked. We adopt these strands to discuss more in-depth Rita's professional development in the UK in the next section.

Identifying professional development needs

Anderson (2008) explored the needs of pre- and in-service professional development of teachers of community languages in the UK, more specifically, teachers of Arabic, Chinese, Urdu and Panjabi. He identified eight strands in their professional development needs: (1) pedagogy and learner motivation; (2) planning; (3) inter-cultural, cross-curricular and citizenship dimensions; (4) differentiation; (5) resources; (6) ICT; (7) networking and links between mainstream and complementary sectors; (8) status, morale and career development.

One peculiar characteristic of the Brazilian community schools mentioned by Rita in the previous section is the fact that the students may stay for three years in the same class group – this means with the same teacher and, generally, the same classmates. She raises the importance of flexibility on the teacher's part in relation to the choice of topics. Although not mentioning motivation itself, Rita's report on her relevant learning in the UK indicates that she understands that designing stimulating and enjoyable lessons, as stressed by the trainees in Anderson's study, is of great importance in order to actively engage students in their learning of POLH.

In addition to implications to pedagogy and learner motivation, the organization of the groups in age range for the length of three years, highly impact on planning. Nevertheless, Rita noticed that the Brazilian community schools do not adopt a curriculum and may not even use lesson plans. In other words, she voiced the same need for planning - be it short, medium, or long-term - as the teacher trainees in Anderson's (2008) study. ABRIR has also acknowledged the key role that planning has in successful experiences of teaching and learning. Consequently, lesson planning and curriculum considerations were two of the topics covered in the courses ABRIR offered in 2013 and 2014. However, we stress that a curriculum for POLH is yet to be developed[xii]. The present planning of the Brazilian community schools is limited to content choice (Souza, 2016), i.e. choice of topic and grammar points, usually in reference to individual lessons, as described above by Rita.

Consequently, Souza (2016) draws on Van den Akker et al's (2008 in Souza 2016) 'curricular spider' concept to stress the importance of a rationale in the development of a curriculum for the teaching of POLH by the Brazilian community schools. The rationale is in the core of the spider web, which includes nine curriculum components (aims and objectives, content, learning activities, teacher role, resources, grouping, location, time and assessment). Furthermore, Souza (2016) advocates that the rationale be based on principles of a cross-curriculum, where the boundaries between different subjects are broken and the focus is on the development of transferable skills such as citizenship and learning to learn.

The citizenship issue is of keen importance for the children of Brazilian families and who are growing up abroad. In other words, these are children who have multilingual and multicultural experiences. In fact, the issue of multilingual and multicultural identification of children of migrant backgrounds has also been documented for other groups (see, for example, Pantazi 2010). As pointed out by Rita above, in addition to the Brazilian community / British society experiences, these multiple experiences refer to the different Brazilian regional cultural and Portuguese linguistic varieties of the families attending the Brazilian community schools in the UK. Adding an intercultural dimension to the curriculum of community languages has also been suggested by Anderson (2008) as a way of linking their home-community-society experiences in a positive way. The thematic teaching suggested by Anderson already exists, to a certain extent, in the Brazilian community schools. However, there is a need to consider the teaching of individual themes in a more connected way and based on multicultural and multilingual principles (Souza 2016).

Another challenge that needs to be addressed by professional development courses being offered to community language teachers is the highly mixed linguistic abilities of the students with whom they work. This challenge has been raised by Rita above and mentioned by the trainees in Anderson's (2008) study. As a consequence, Anderson (2008) calls attention to the fact that 'understanding and gaining confidence in using a range of strategies to support differentiation assumes huge importance' (p. 291) to teachers of community languages. It seems relevant to mention that the ability to use differentiation may be negatively impacted by the limited access these teachers have to resources, including ICT and teaching materials. The description Rita provided above of the venue when she first visited a Brazilian community school illustrates this gloomy situation well. Classrooms with no access to textbooks, neither to ICT or any other resources, only basic furniture and the good will of the teachers. Anderson (2008), Hall et al (2002), Kenner and Ruby (2013) reinforce that similar limitations apply to many of the community schools in the UK and in other countries.

Networking has played a key role in supporting the Brazilian teachers of POLH in relation to many of the issues covered in this section. ABRIR has created a network of teachers, schools and other organizations both online and face-to-face. Online resources can be accessed via ABRIR and many teaching ideas and materials are shared through its Facebook account. Additionally, ABRIR has developed links with the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has given the Brazilian community schools in the UK free access to the teaching materials and literature books produced in Brazil. Despite the need to be aware of the limitations linked to these materials (e.g. language difficulty level and topic relevance) due to being designed for use with pupils in their country of origin (Anderson 2008, Pantazi 2010), they offer a very good reference for teachers to start considering what to teach and how. In sum, networking has enabled the feeling of isolation and marginalisation which is common to teachers of community languages (Anderson 2008) to be reduced.

Furthermore, ABRIR has developed links with Brazilian community schools in other European countries and in 2013 created SEPOLH[xiii], the European Symposium on the Teaching of Portuguese as a Heritage Language. This is a biennial event that takes place in different countries and aims to support the exchange of knowledge and experience of the teachers and the institutions involved with the teaching of POLH in Europe. Rita participated in both editions of this event. The first one was in London in 2013 and the second one, in Munich in 2015. In the quote below, Rita explains the impact that the training courses and the symposia she attended have had on her teaching.

> 'All these courses and events have been very important in helping to develop an open-minded perspective of teaching POLH. I know better understand the context of Portuguese as a community language in the UK and in other parts of Europe. I have learned a lot about the differences between mother tongue, second language, foreign language and community language. I have had the opportunity to explore the links between language, culture and identity.'

In between the lines of Rita's description of her learning opportunities appear to be the sense of pride in being able to attend the courses and the events available to teachers of POLH. This participation seems to have enabled Rita to develop a positive identity as a teacher who belongs to a group of professionals and are working hard to develop their knowledge and acquire new skills in order to guarantee the standards of what they do. In other words, the professional training opportunities coupled with the creation of professional networks have had a positive impact not only on Rita's career development but also on her perception of the status attached to this development. It is a feeling of empowerment and personal fulfilment also observed by Anderson (2008) in his group of trainees.

Concluding thoughts

Rita's experience in arriving with teacher training and teaching experience from Brazil and being shocked with the context of the Brazilian community schools in the UK is what Pantazi (2010) describes as being 'a disjuncture between teachers' expectations and the reality' (p. 113). As the teachers of Greek as a community language in Pantazi's (2010) study, this disjuncture led Rita to start a process of reflective development that was grounded on her informal research, built of local knowledge and experimentation with new practices. We acknowledge that these initial reflections happened in isolation for about a year or so. After this time, still trying to adjust to her new teaching reality, Rita decided to look for support wherever she could find it. Luckily, she had access to a Brazilian institution that could offer her some training as well as access to a wide range of information and a supportive network of professionals in Brazil, the UK and Europe. This has been an enriching experience for Rita. She cherishes the opportunity the courses attended have created for her to

> 'discuss and compare [her] difficulties to that of other teachers of POLH in London and other European cities, [she] could exchange ideas about ways of working with the learners of POLH with the other participants, [they] talked about different materials and about what worked and did not work in [their] classes'.

Based on Rita's experience, we have been able to witness how significant professional development opportunities are for the Brazilian teachers of POLH in the UK. Similarly to the teachers of Arabic, Chinese, Urdu and Panjabi as community languages in Anderson's study, professional development can equip the teachers of POLH 'with the theoretical understandings and practical skills they need to carry out their role effectively' (Anderson 2008: 295).

The significance of the professional development of Brazilian teachers should be improved with the offer of a larger number of courses and events as well as more frequent ones. This is the only way that a new field such as POLH can contemplate a move from amateurism to professionalism.

Author's biodata

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[i] We acknowledge that Brazil has a number of local aboriginal languages and languages taken in by migrant groups. However, the idea of Brazil as a monolingual country has been constructed by a number of language policies and impacted on how the linguistic situation of the country is perceived by many until very recently (see de Oliveira, G. (2009) 'Brasileiro fala português: monolinguismo e preconceito lingüístico' in *Linguasagem* 11, http://www.letras.ufscar.br/linguasagem/edicao11/artigo12.pdf) (accessed March 2016)

[ii] www.abrir.org.uk

[iii] The pupils aged 6-10 years old were placed in another building, which Rita did not visit in her first time in the school.

[iv] www.cilt.org.uk/commlangs/pathways.htm (accessed March 2007)

[v] www.gold.ac.uk/educational-studies/programmes/chinesecertificatecourse (accessed March 2016)

[vi] www.gold.ac.uk/educational-studies/teacherscentre/arabiccertcourse (accessed March 2016)

[vii] http://blog.abrir.org.uk/2013/07/09/goldsmiths-college-certificate-in-the-teaching-of-community-languages-portuguese (accessed March 2016)

[viii] The Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the support of the Consulate-General of Brazil in London, fully financed these workshops.

[ix] http://blog.abrir.org.uk/2013/06/04/oportunidade-unica-oficinas-gratuitas-para-professores-de-portugues (accessed March 2016)

[x] http://blog.abrir.org.uk/2014/11/09/curso-introdutorio-para-professores-de-portugues-teve-apoio-da-rede-brasil-cultural (accessed March 2016)

[xi] The Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the support of the Embassy of Brazil in London, financed 50% of the fees of each participant.

[xii] Note that Switzerland (more specifically, the canton of Zurich) has a developed a general framework for the teaching of all the heritage languages in that country. This framework is adopted by the Brazilian organizations in Switzerland.

[xiii] www.sepolh.eu