



The changing language and literacy landscape of Brazilian universities: English in policy development and in practice

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study was based in two federal universities in Brazil. Both were in large metropolitan settings and were campus-based universities having circa 50,000 students. Both universities had been awarded CAPES Print funding from 2017.

The research team



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Research questions

The research questions addressed in the study were as follows:

1. What kinds of policy initiatives, related to internationalisation, have been discussed in each of the universities? And which have actually been taken?
2. In what areas of academic life (research, teaching/learning or administration)? In what disciplines?
3. What issues recur across particular kinds of initiatives? What references are made to barriers, challenges or opportunities?
4. How have particular activities related to internationalisation been accompanied and mediated by the production and use of texts in Portuguese, in English or in other languages (on and offline)?

METHODOLOGY

We chose to address these research questions ethnographically, in two universities, bringing together the research traditions of ethnography of language policy (Johnson, 2013) and ethnography of literacy (Barton, 2009). We did this for two main reasons: Firstly, instead of aiming to capture trends in policy-making across a large number of universities, and representing these trends quantitatively, we were committed to gaining detailed, fine-tuned insights into the specific ways in which policy processes were unfolding in each of the two universities. Secondly, as well as documenting the specific nature and scope of particular policy initiatives (in response to research questions 1 and 2), we were investigating the ways in which these initiatives were being interpreted and appropriated by different members of staff (research questions 3 and 4). Our focus was thus on the perspectives of those participating in the study, on their lived experience of the changing language and literacy landscapes of their university and on their stance on particular kinds of policy initiatives. As Heller (2008: 250) has argued: “Ethnographies ...allow us to see how language practices are connected to the very real conditions of people’s lives, to discover how and why language matters to people in their own terms, and to watch processes unfold over time”.

DATA GATHERING

Two types of interviews (all audio-recorded and transcribed in full)

1. 9 policy-related interviews with social actors who were closely involved in creating, interpreting and appropriating university-wide policies related to internationalisation and, in particular, policies relating to CAPES Print.
2. 9 life history interviews and techno-linguistic interviews with academics in different disciplines. These were mostly established researchers, who had already developed international links and/or engaged in international research collaboration prior to the introduction of the CAPES Print programme.

Participant observation, field notes and data-gathering related to organized events (Recordings, power point slides, field notes etc.)

The gathering of policy-related documents

DATA ANALYSIS

We have been taking a three-step approach: (1.) thematic analysis of all the interviews; (2.) analysis of the narratives that occur in some of the interviews; and (3.) triangulation of data sources and making links with other project data that provides insights into wider policy processes, past and present.

FINDINGS

Research questions 1, 2 and 3

Both of the universities in this study had received CAPES Print funding to promote internationalisation. Both had created committees, with an institution-wide

brief, to oversee internationalisation initiatives and both had prepared an institutional plan. There were commonalities in the directions taken in their institutional strategies but there were also some differences in the nature and range of initiatives that were being taken. We point to some of these commonalities and differences here, taking account of initiatives in three areas of university life: (1.) research; (2.) teaching/learning, and (3.) administration.

Research

University-wide fora for debate

Both universities have organised seminars since 2017 as means of stimulating interest and debate around aspects of internationalisation. In one university, seminar participation was international in nature and so most of the programme materials were in English. At the other university, most of the participants were members of staff. The input took the form of scheduled talks, some in Portuguese and some in English.

Debate about publishing in English

One recurring theme in our interviews, and in events we observed, was concern about the increasing normalisation of the use of English globally, as a language of knowledge-building and scientific publications, and about the challenges that this posed for Brazilian academics. Some interviewees pointed to the “double load” they faced: That of writing for publication in Portuguese to gain national visibility and writing in English to achieve international visibility.

Diversity of knowledge-building and writing practices across disciplines

A second recurring theme in our study related to the diversity of knowledge-building practices across academic disciplines, and to the different ways in which language and literacy resources are drawn upon in building knowledge. The normalisation of the use of English was clearly more advanced in the sciences, engineering and technology than in the social sciences and the humanities. Moreover, different ways of writing (different registers, genres and styles, and different types of multimodality¹) predominated across academic disciplines. The upshot of this is, as one senior academic put it, during our Forum for Dialogue: “It is not possible to have a university-wide language policy” (“Não é possível ter uma política linguística para toda a universidade”)

Both universities were providing support for members of the academic staff who wished to publish in English. They could apply for assistance with translation or for the proofreading of drafts in English.

¹ The term ‘multimodality’ refers to communication via different ‘modes’, including texts and other meaning making resources such as visual signs (e.g. diagrams, pictures) and sound (e.g. audio-recorded speech, music).

Access to publications in English

A third theme that recurred across the interviews was that of access to journals and publications in English. While most Brazilian journals are open-access journals, and while most are published in Portuguese or multilingually, this is not the case with English-medium journals aiming at an international readership.

The new research environment and the differential positioning of researchers

A fourth theme emerging from our interviews related to the ways in which individual researchers and research groups were positioned vis-à-vis the new policy environment created by CAPES Print. Those who had already had long established international networks, and who had been publishing in international journals for some time, were favourably positioned.

Teaching and learning

Policy initiatives related to language came up in four broad ways detailed below:

Language provision designed to support outward student mobility

Both universities were making provision for the teaching of a range of languages through the Idiomas sem Fronteiras (Languages without Borders) programme. This provision was organised on both campuses, along with provision for English for Academic Purposes (Inglês Instrumental), and it was supported by a mix of funding, including university funds, external funding and fees (as part of Extensão Outreach). However, arrangements for coordination of the provision differed across the two universities: In one university, the coordinator was based in the International Relations Office, while in the other university, most of this language teaching provision was organised as part of Extensão (Outreach).

Other forms of support for outward student mobility being developed at one university included preparation for the taking of tests in language proficiency or educational achievement required for postgraduate study in anglophone countries. In this case, the provision was oriented primarily to further study in the United States, to the TOEFL test and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). This was primarily due to the nature of the external funding received to support this work.

Portuguese as an Additional Language

In both universities, there were strong, well-established programmes for the teaching of Portuguese as an Additional Language (PAL), which had been developed in different institutional spaces. In one university, there was a stated commitment to attracting visiting academics from abroad and dedicated PAL courses were represented as a key resource in developing this policy initiative. In addition, both universities had increasingly diverse student intakes (e.g. from other Latin American countries) and a growing need for PAL provision.

Strategies for attracting international students

In both universities, there were ongoing discussions about strategies for attracting international students. One of the challenges, mentioned in our interview with the Director of Research in one of the universities, lay in the difficulties involved in securing reciprocal agreements with other universities, particularly those in the Global North which charged high student fees. One policy initiative being taken forward in this university was the creation of an interdisciplinary minor in International Studies, including courses offered in English (22 in all) and in Spanish (2 courses).

English as a medium of instruction (EMI)

One of the universities had a specific initiative that had been designed to support academic staff who wished to teach through the medium of English. This initiative had been made possible via external funding. However, in developing this initiative the Director of the International Relations Office and the Coordinator of the EMI programme – pointed out (in their respective interviews) that they found it difficult to build an institution-wide picture of the number of academics who were making some use of English in their teaching. In class language and literacy practices did seem to be quite varied across the departments and post-graduate programmes that we came into contact with. Some of the academic staff we interviewed mentioned regular use of English in different modalities (in spoken interactions with students, in talk around texts, in power point slides etc) while other simply mentioned the inclusion of bibliographic references in English in their course materials. The use of English as a medium of instruction was more visible in accounts of the development of online courses that involved international collaboration.

Administration

Two themes related to administration were particularly prominent in our interviews: Firstly, the use of languages (other than Portuguese) in representing the university on the university website and, at the same time, the challenges and costs involved in developing multilingual policy initiatives of this kind, because websites need to be updated regularly; and secondly, the need for support for administrative staff in developing their language resources, especially senior administrative staff who are in regular contact with academic visitors.

Research question 4

Through our life history and techno-linguistic interviews, we were able to identify some of the ways in which language and literacy practices and the use and production of texts, on and offline, mediated the research activities of the academics participating in our study, including those research activities that had a clearly international dimension.

International research activities, digital resources and multilingual literacies

Mobile technology played a central role in the working lives of the research participants. Their smart phones and portable devices (e.g. laptops or Ipads) were brought into work and taken home again, with literacy practices in different languages crossing the boundaries between home and the workplace in this way.

Communicating with international research partners

Digital literacies played a key role for them in sustaining international research networks and in participating in the creation and running of research projects, Different digital resources were used, including email and WhatsApp. These resources were used on a range of devices, to communicate in different languages. The languages mentioned most often by our interviewees were English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. For one-to-one or multi-party research conversations and conference calls, platforms like Skype or Zoom were also used.

Joint authorship and editing

Joint authorship or editing work was mostly organised through the exchange of Word documents in email attachments, or via Google docs. Larger manuscripts (e.g. edited volumes) were exchanged using platforms such as Dropbox. Some of these literacy practices were multilingual in nature.

Submission and preparation of publications

Email and the web pages of particular publishers were used in submitting journal articles and proposals for book series and in preparing manuscripts for publication. For most international journals, this was done in English.

Submission of research proposals

All of the academics participating in our study had experience of submission of research proposals to Brazilian funding bodies (e.g. CNPq) in Portuguese and, in some cases, to international funding bodies. These submissions had been done online, using digital resources

Conference organisation

Most of the participants had had experience of organising international conferences. Some had done this on several occasions. They had designed web pages for publicity purposes and had employed a range of other digital resources to seek funding, to invite international participants, arrange the reviews of abstracts, hire interpreters, prepare the conference materials and coordinate the event itself. Some had also been involved in organising panels for international conferences, engaging primarily in email correspondence with international participants and conference organisers in English or other languages such as French or Spanish.

Accessing intellectual resources online

All of our interviewees emphasised that the internet was a key resource for gaining access to Brazilian journals, and other open access journals, to take part in different discussion fora, to learn about the work of other scholars or to access different types of intellectual resources. They also reported making regular use of SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online): An electronic library resource covering a selection of the more highly ranked Brazilian journals and some international journals.

Online representing the academic self

Our interviewees all noted that they had created a personal portfolio on the Brazilian scholars' platform called Lattes. This was a requirement for all those who were employed at one of the two universities in our study. The Lattes entries were all in Portuguese. Only two of the interviewees indicated that they had used social media (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) or blogs for academic purposes e.g. to disseminate information about their research or to promote a publication.

In sum, gaining access to key intellectual resources, achieving international visibility as a researcher and developing collaboration with scholars in other contexts, crucially depends on having access to a wide range of digital tools and resources and making regular use of them. Four of the academics who we interviewed about their professional trajectories indicated that their collaboration with some of their international partners had been first established over two decades ago, before the advent of current communication technologies. They pointed out that what makes a difference in their current working life is the ease and the speed with which communication takes place, as a result of digitization. However, some participants pointed out that there is also a cost in terms of workload. This chimes with the finding of a recent research project on the writing practices of academics in the UK, particularly regarding "the ubiquity of email" (Tusting et al., 2019: 86) and the multiple uses that it serves.

References

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Conference presentations about our research in 2020

Symposium on “Internationalisation, digitization and the changing language and literacy landscapes of universities” at the AILA Congress, Gröningen, The Netherlands, 9th – 14th August, 2020², with contributors from researchers working in the Brazil, China, Lithuania, South Africa, Sweden and the UK. Two papers about our research project will be presented as part of this symposium.

² AILA (International Association for Applied Linguistics)

APPENDIX: Implications of the study and pointers for future research

What pointers are there (from this small-scale research project) for language policy-making, for curriculum development, for teaching/learning practice, for university administration and for future research on language and internationalisation in higher education in Brazil?

What are the pointers for language policy-making?

Firstly, given the diversity across disciplines in knowledge-building practices, in forms of research collaboration and in the use of language resources, it is perhaps not feasible to have a single, over-arching language policy for a university. Perhaps, instead, a more focused, language policy is called for, one that takes account of the practices 'on the ground' in different disciplines and in related areas of knowledge-building.

Secondly, given that academics are positioned in different ways regarding the new orientation to internationalisation ushered in by CAPES Print, perhaps newer members of staff and doctoral students could be prioritised for support with mobility and for publishing in English (where appropriate).

Thirdly, as different policy initiatives linked to internationalisation are rolled out, there needs to be some consideration of the translation and interpreting implications of each of these initiatives. For example, staff with relevant language resources need to be appointed to the university team that deals with the management of the university web pages. Also, trained staff in the area of interpreting could support academics organising international conferences. This is already happening at one of the universities in our study.

Fourthly, there needs to be some recognition of the amount of work invested by academic staff in the development and consolidation of international research networks and research activity using a range of digital tools and resources and drawing on their own multilingual resources. As we pointed out above, the constant development and refinement of new communication technologies has greatly enhanced international research collaboration. However, there is also a cost in terms of workload and universities need to work out how to provide administrative support for those who are serving their higher education institutions in this way.

Lastly, there needs to be some form of language support for administrative staff who find themselves working in departments, postgraduate programmes or research institutes where there are frequent visits by international scholars.

What are the pointers for curriculum development and for teaching and learning practice?

Firstly, the continuation of language programmes in support of student mobility - programmes such as *Idiomas sem Fronteiras* (Languages without Borders) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) - is reassuring. However, we detected some precarity in

the funding for these programmes. There may therefore be a case for additional external funding.

Secondly, the strategy adopted in one university in this study – that of establishing an undergraduate minor in International Studies, with courses in English and in Spanish - could be further strengthened by collaborating with universities that have a commitment to Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL).

Thirdly, with regard to initiatives in the area of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), a robust and sustained line of research needs to be developed in this area. More needs to be understood about current pedagogic practices, about the ideas about language and pedagogy underpinning the practices and about how EMI has a bearing on student learning.

What are the pointers for further research in higher education in Brazil?

Small scale studies such as the one that we have carried out need to be complimented by larger scale comparative research. The policy processes related to internationalisation at work in large federal universities, with CAPES Print funding, such as the two universities where our project was based, need to be compared with those processes that are at work in federal or state universities, or private universities, in other regions of Brazil. For example, account needs to be taken of the different conditions in different regions of Brazil and of the differences emerging between those universities that have received CAPES Print funding and those that have not.

Ideally, large-scale comparative projects should start out from the foundations laid by small-scale research projects of a qualitative or ethnographic nature, which aim to investigate, in depth, particular policy processes or literacy practices, taking account of the perspectives of the social actors involved.

We list here possible avenues for future qualitative research. The findings of projects of these kinds would provide a sound basis for taking forward particular kinds of policy initiatives, particular forms of curriculum development or teaching provision, or particular aspects of university administration. We have organized our list with reference to three areas of academic life: research, curriculum development and teaching/learning and administration.

Research

- Case studies of the particular language and literacy practices involved in offering forms of support with publishing in English e.g. translation of articles or editing and proof-reading of drafts in English.
- Ethnographic research into the use of different languages, and different digital tools and resources, by scholars participating in well-established international research networks.
- A series of ethnographic research projects into the knowledge-building

and multilingual writing practices of scholars in different disciplines or interdisciplinary areas of research.

Curriculum development and teaching/learning

- Detailed case studies of joint online course provision, at undergraduate or postgraduate level, by academics at different universities, in different countries.
- Research into any of the forms of language provision linked to internationalisation that we have mentioned would be of value, whether it be the Idiomas sem Fronteiras (Languages without Borders) programme, PAL, EAP or EMI. This research would need to have two dimensions: (1.) investigation of the ideas about language and about pedagogy guiding the teaching; (2.) Detailed and systematic study of classroom discourse and interaction, and talk around texts, focusing on the ways in which ideas about language and about pedagogy are being translated into situated practice.
- Detailed case studies of innovation in language teaching/learning based on the use of digital tools and resources.

Administration

- Case studies of members of the administrative staff in Brazilian universities who are working in departments or postgraduate programmes which host visiting scholars from other countries on a regular basis.
- Ethnographic research into the nature and scope of the work undertaken in the International Relations Offices of different kinds of Brazilian universities.
- Qualitative research into the processes and challenges involved in the creation and ongoing management of university web pages in different languages

These are examples of areas for future research that we have identified as a result of our own work in 2019. Our readers will think of other examples. It is clear that there is considerable scope for small-scale research of this kind in the future. It could be conducted at doctoral or post-doctoral level. At doctoral level, some form of provision for capacity-building and discussion of research methodology for these aspects of the study of language and internationalization would be necessary. Members of our research team would be well-placed to assist in this regard.