

**I'll speak English just like an American:  
Overvaluing attitudes toward the foreign language and culture**

**Falarei inglês igualzinho um Americano:  
Atitudes de supervalorização em relação à língua e à cultura estrangeiras**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is about overvaluing attitudes toward the English native speaker, his/her culture and language. Under the aegis of Applied Linguistics, it intends, through some ethnographic data, to draw attention to the fact that when overvaluing attitudes occur, they might bring as consequence learner's inferiority feelings. Thus, the objective of this paper is to reflect about ideas that hierarchize people, making them feel inferior to other people from hegemonic cultures. This text also brings ideas that intend to make teachers aware about the importance of approaching in classroom issues that affects the English language, such as colonialism, imperialism, globalization and identity.

**KEYWORDS:** English language; overvaluing attitudes; learning.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo é sobre atitudes de supervalorização em relação ao falante nativo de língua inglesa, sua cultura e língua. Sob a égide da Linguística Aplicada, este artigo pretende, através de alguns dados etnográficos, chamar atenção para o fato de que quando as atitudes de supervalorização ocorrem, elas podem trazer como consequência o sentimento de inferioridade dos aprendizes. Assim, o objetivo deste artigo é refletir sobre ideias que hierarquizam povos, fazendo com que eles se sintam inferiores a outras pessoas das culturas hegemônicas. Este texto também traz ideias para conscientizar professores sobre a importância de abordar em sala de aula questões que afetam a língua inglesa, tais como o colonialismo, o imperialismo, globalização e identidade.

**PALAVRAS CHAVES:** Língua inglesa; atitudes de supervalorização; aprendizagem.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The cultural aspects in the foreign language classroom have been a controversial issue in many settings. The inseparability of language and culture in the English language context has been discussed a lot, mainly because it is about a global language.

This status the English language reaches, in the contemporaneity, seems to make possible that many cultural aspects, from several nations, be added to it. The recognition that English, today, is a language of communicational need and not of cultural identity (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2005), puts it in a position of hybrid language. When several

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cultures may be approached through it. However, it still persists the old fashioned notion that the teaching of English must be based on the hegemonic cultures, i. e., on the cultural and linguistic aspects of the United States and England. As a result, I suspect in the occurrence of overvaluing attitudes toward the English language and the native speaker.

This text intends to reflect on this idea. It is about student's overvaluing attitudes toward the English native speaker, his/her culture. And to warm up this reflection, initially, I share some concepts of culture I adopted for this study. For Kroeber e Kluckhohn (1952), culture is produced and modified by individuals and that each stage of life is product of a social group. They claim that like the language, culture exists in the individuals and through them solely. Hall (1989) highlights that culture involves the way people express themselves, including their emotions, how they act and think. For this author, the natural act of thinking is modified by culture and that there is not any aspect of human life which is not touched and altered by culture. For Santos (2012), culture concerns all the aspects of social life, knowledge, ideas and beliefs. It is a collective product of human life. In this way, Laraia (2015) also understands culture in an ethnographic perspective, as a complex constituted by knowledge, art, moral, beliefs, laws, habits and other abilities that individuals might acquire in society.

Thus, made this point clear, in the next session, I write about overvaluing attitudes toward the foreign language and culture and the native speaker myth.

## **II. OVERVALUING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AND THE NATIVE SPEAKER MYTH**

Made these considerations, from now on, I propose to explain the concept of overvaluing attitudes, their causes and consequences. Then, they might emerge in settings of foreign language learning, when teachers and students put forward the development of the wrong notion of the native speaker superiority, his/her language and culture. The overvaluing attitudes toward the target language and culture are feelings of exaltation, worship and exaggerated valorization toward other's language and culture. They are consolidated when an individual regards exaggeratedly other's culture, the way of speaking, acting, seeking out to be equal to the other and, thus, stops being himself. (FREIRE, 1979). As an example, the idea that learners of English must speak just like a North American is spread in many places, signaling a possible attitude of alienation. About

this, Moita Lopes (1996) verified that a group of students, researched by him, had highly positive attitudes toward foreign cultural aspects. He called such attitudes of glorification of the foreign culture, a fool act. He also thinks that the requirement of a perfect pronunciation just like the native speaker, has no other reason if not cultural domain, which has as consequence the abandon of the learner's cultural identity, signaling, for him, a symptom of a perfect alienation.

In this line of thought, in many English language classrooms, teachers when asked by their students about which accent to follow, they always tended to sign the hegemonic ones: North American or British. Thus, other accents were disregarded and underprivileged, influencing learners to follow the route of identification with the native speaker of these places. As a proof of this, I mention the research conducted by Friedrich (2002 *apud* JENKINS, 2007), with 190 Brazilian students, which data pointed that ¼ of them wished to speak English like a British and more than 50% realized the American and British English as varieties of more prestige. This puts in evidence the occurrence of overvaluing attitudes toward the English native accents. As we can see the native speaker myth is still in vogue and bringing consequences nothing pleasant.

There would not be problems with overvaluing attitudes if they did not bring negative consequences for language learners. Such attitudes are put forward in several learning settings, through colonial discourses, which bring with them the belief of the native speaker superiority, what has provoked very bad consequences for the teaching of English. (SHIN, 2006) As a consequence, I suspect that learner's inferiority feelings occur, when it is established the colonizer superiority, signaling the inferiorities of the colonized ones, consequence of their dependence.

In this sense, Rajagopalan (2003) acknowledges that several foreign language learners feel themselves decreased in their self esteem, because they attend learning settings which spread the hegemonic cultures sovereignty in detriment of the learners, product of a macabre ideology, which makes students feel ashamed of their own linguistic condition. This is a negative aspect of the overvaluing attitudes.

Besides that, the overvaluing attitudes are set up in two poles, the first one constructs the non native speaker as primitive, female, depraved and ingenuous. The other is based on a discourse with colonial ideologies marks, which puts the native speaker (colonizers), their language and culture, as more civilized, modern and advanced.

(PENNYCOOK, 1998). That is why, it seems that Motta *et alii* (2001) defend that the appreciation of the foreigner, many times, takes place masked by a pretentious pursuit of modernity. This is a colonialist side that still reigns and operates in the English language teaching/learning, to establish the native speaker superiority and the learner's inferiority, mainly concerning speaking this language. And to corroborate this colonial and imperial endeavor, many textbooks have been produced. In a furtive and silent way, when nobody waits its presence (RAJAGOPALAN, 2012) the colonialist ideology emerges in the pages of many English language textbooks. With this, they try to subvert realities and to conduct learners, and also teachers, to a process of emulation and exaltation of the foreign culture, because many English textbooks opt to hide issues concerning the minorities and reproduce ways of being, acting and thinking of the hegemonic cultures, favoring the occurrence of overvaluing attitudes toward the foreign language and culture.

In front of this problem, that has lasted for a long time, in which textbooks support it, it is urgent the need of attitudes that deconstruct the colonialist thought, that decolonize knowledge, because the thought and the western practices of exclusion, quite similar to the colonial cycle, still persist. (SOUSA SANTOS; MENESES, 2009). And the negative results reach high education, because in this setting, many learners reveal, for instance, to have difficulty in expressing themselves orally, because they believe they need, but they do not get to be like a native speaker. Thus, the overvaluing attitudes go on getting strength, when learners emulate the cultural and linguistic aspects from the so called first world countries, seeking for an efficiency that ideologically only they have. In this pursuit, it is possible to realize alienation, disguised of identification with the foreigner, the colonizer, whose superiority is ideologically put forward, conducting learners - the colonized ones – to emulation, virtually in all levels. (MOITA LOPES, 1996).

Concerning imitation, Freire (1979) does not take it as a mistake. However, he draws attention to the fact that the lack of self critic and passivity result in an alienated society or object-society, in which servile imitation makes an individual to stop being who he is himself. This thought of Freire (1979) aligns with another one of Motta *et alii* (2001), because these authors believe that our "brasilicity" is denied because of that supposed identification with the foreigner.

Under the light of the Critical Educational Theory, I intend, with this reflexion, to call attention about the mechanisms of oppression and domination which are produced in the

schooling process, mainly in the teaching and learning of the English language, because many teachers still let flow in their speeches colonial aspects. In this respect, Graddol (2004) is emphatic when he says that the model English as a foreign language has a tendency to highlight the native speaker's culture and society, based on methodologies which emphasize the emulation of native speaker's behaviors. Such practices corroborate the development of colonizing attitudes. That is why the theme colonialism and its relation with the English language needs to be understood, to make the educator aware of the presence of ideologies in the English language classroom, even today, because some of them, in the contemporaneity, have their roots in the cultural constructions of colonialism.

Implicit to this reflection, that does not exhaust here, is the invitation, for the need to adopt a new professional posture, one that understands the English language no more as colonial, but as a global language, a language of contact among people, without traces, nor remnants of colonialism. It is a fact that colonialism left its mark in the English language, operating, in the sense of , through it, to share and legitimate the cultural capital of the hegemonic cultures. Though today we may argue that the English language has no owners, without the custody of anybody in special, but a language of everybody, it is still current acritical practices, that flagrantly legitimates the way of being, acting and speaking of people from hegemonic cultures. Upon materializing these practices, the relation dominator-dominated emerges. The dominator exerts power over the dominated, who, without option, is ideologically affected. Upon having such attitude, without questioning, a learner might develop a behavior that devalues his/her country, poeple and language.

Aware of these imperial and colonial attempts, educators need to strengthen the objectives of language teaching with the global status, like English, to get rid of linguistic imperialism. In this way, Graddol (2004) signs the existence of a new model of English, the one which has not been learned as a foreign language, when it is acknowledged the hegemonic power of the English native speakers. But a language used by people with different identities. Thus, the goal of the English language teaching should not meet the empire interests anymore.

In this sense, to take on a contrary position to this cenary, where we see homogenizing practices, we also get on the way to decolonize the English language. Kumaravadivelu (2005) defends this perspective, proposing the reformulation of politics, programs, material and methods, in order to privilege the local education, valuing the

social and cultural features. In this line of thought, as an alternative to get rid of the moorings of colonialism, this author suggests that English language textbooks promote critical literacy.

If we want to be aligned with Kumaravadivelu (2005, 2012), the proper pedagogy, for the teaching of English as a *língua franca*, should be based on the concepts delineated by him: *Praticability*, *Possibility* and *Particularity*, what I believe, if taken into account will converge to the consolidation of significant learnings, giving voices to students, guiding them to react against injustices and social conflicts, for example. That is why new ways need to be followed. Possible ways are those that point to the teaching and learning that revolve around negotiation among people, that respect diversity and regard local issues, identities and local realities, in a social, political, scientific perspective, mediated by different areas of knowledge. (ANJOS, 2017).

Concerning the three tenets created by Kumaravadivelu (2012), in a post-method perspective, the first one, *Particularity*, is about the fact that teachers should take into account features of the learners and the context of learning. The second, *Practicality*, in short, signifies that teachers should theorize based on their own practices. For Kumaravadivelu (2012), any pedagogic knowledge, to have local relevance, must emerge from daily teaching practices. And the last one, *Possibility*, anchored in the principles of Freire's critical pedagogy, seeks to empower learners, so that they can react against domination practices, when considering sociopolitical knowledge, what, consequently, may give support to identity reformulation and social changing.

Therefore, as we could see, these tenets are of great importance for both teachers and students. That is why in a political perspective, globalization, colonialism, identity, the setting, are all elements that need to be taken into account. Because, teaching the English language, without paying attention to these elements, means to teach fragile contents, far from the learner's reality (ANJOS, 2017). One can not go on making mistakes when teaching English, ignoring its social and historical weight, since its violent colonizing character until this language reaches the status of global *língua franca*. Thus, I believe, in the possibility to deconstruct the overvaluing attitudes toward the foreign language and culture, which have brought bad consequences for English learners, when make them develop an inferiority feeling.

I finish here this literature review and, before presenting some data on student's overvaluing attitudes, next, I write about the setting and methodology I used to conduct my ethnographic research.

## II. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND RESEARCH SETTING

The data that will be shared in the next section are part of an ethnographic research<sup>2</sup>, conducted with 91 undergraduate students, from the Federal University of Recôncavo of Bahia. The research was done in the Health Sciences Center (CCS), located in the city of Santo Antônio de Jesus. CCS is a reference center, in terms of health formation, in the region of Recôncavo, with 937 students regularly enrolled in the courses of Medicine, Nutrition, Psychology, Nursing, besides the Health Interdisciplinary Bachelorship, one of the most solid proposal of the center. The center also has 168 professors, 58 technical workers. Concerning the methodology, I used three ethnographic tools to collect the data: 1. Free interview, 2. Questionnaire and 3. class observation. 91 students took part in the research. The data were treated both in a qualitative and quantitative way. In the next lines, I share some data, of this ethnographic research, those which sign the occurrence of overvaluing attitudes.

## IV. SHARING SOME ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

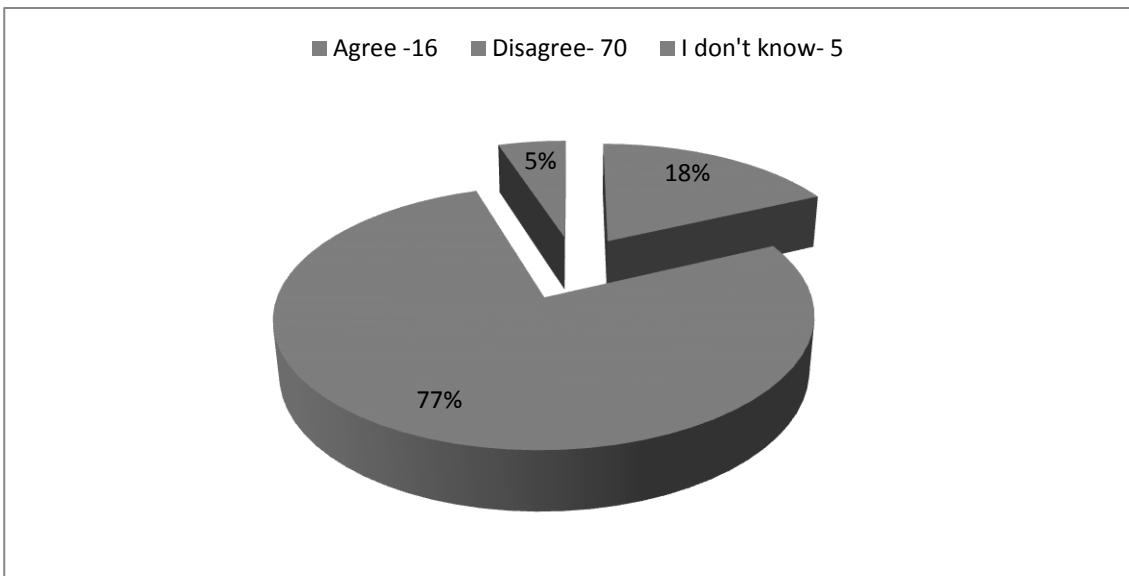
Intending to investigate the occurrence of overvaluing attitudes toward the English language, learners were asked the following: **because of its global reach and its importance in the current world, many people regard English superior to Portuguese, what do you think about it?** Based on the data, I verified that some participants had overvaluing attitude, when some of them agreed (16) with the wrong notion that English is superior to Portuguese. Another part of them (70), highly significant, more than 50% of the participants, disagreed with such evaluation. Based on this, I may assure that these participants has a critical conscience related with the fact that there are not languages better or superior than others. However, a smaller parcel (5) revealed not to know how to answer this question, what allows me infer that these participants did not

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<sup>2</sup> This research was properly protocolled at Plataforma Brasil, as the current academic formalities require, and it had approved opinion by the Ethic Committee, from the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), which number of certification is (CAAE) é 59915516.7.0000.5531. The proceedings adopted in this research obey the ethic criteria concerning research with human beings, according to the resolution CNS N° 466 de 2012.

have knowledge about the fact of not existing parameters to measure languages or they really have never thought about this issue. Next, it is the graphic with information on this question:

**Graphic 1 – Learners’ opinion on the superiority of English.**



Another question made in order to investigate learner’s attitudes toward English native speakers was: **What is your view on people who were born in The United States and England, and therefore have English as their native language?** The data in graphic 2 point that none of the participants had overvaluing attitudes toward the native speaker. The great majority (89) of the participants doesn’t see the native speaker as superior, because of the fact of being born in developed countries, quite different from what I found out in the data of my master’s thesis (ANJOS, 2013), when a great number of the participants showed to have overvaluing attitudes toward the native speaker, when they said the native speaker is superior, putting themselves in a inferiority position, giving support to the supremacy of the developed countries, which have English as their official language. And thus such overvaluing attitudes have put the native speaker in a pedestal, immune of any critic, idealized, the perfect model to be followed, but that can never be reached. To prove this, I share opinions of two participants from UFRB, in this perspective, when I asked them how they felt when speaking with a native speaker or with someone who is fluent in English:

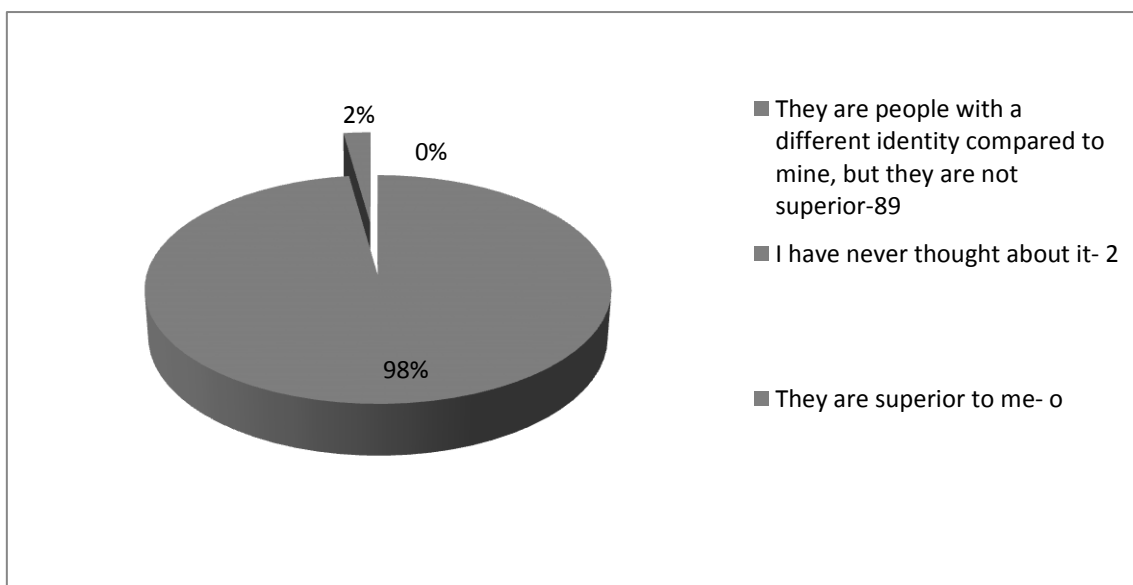


**A40:** I feel myself **inferior**, I know the importance of English, but, I know I won't learn it based on pressure, so I have to be far from worries, such as score.

**A52:** I have a feeling of "**superiority**" of that person, I think he/she is a step ahead of me.

However, it seems that many students when arriving in the high education, become aware that this issue of the native speaker superiority must be extinguished, because the data point this, what shows us that common sense has prevailed, proving that Brazilian learners already acknowledge that there are not people or culture better than others, what, somehow, deconstructs the native speaker myth and open doors so that non native learners/speakers, without fear, get close to other speakers, using their own identities to speak a language that does not belong only to the native ones, but a language of the world. Still, two of them said they have never thought about this question. Next, it is the graphic with these information:

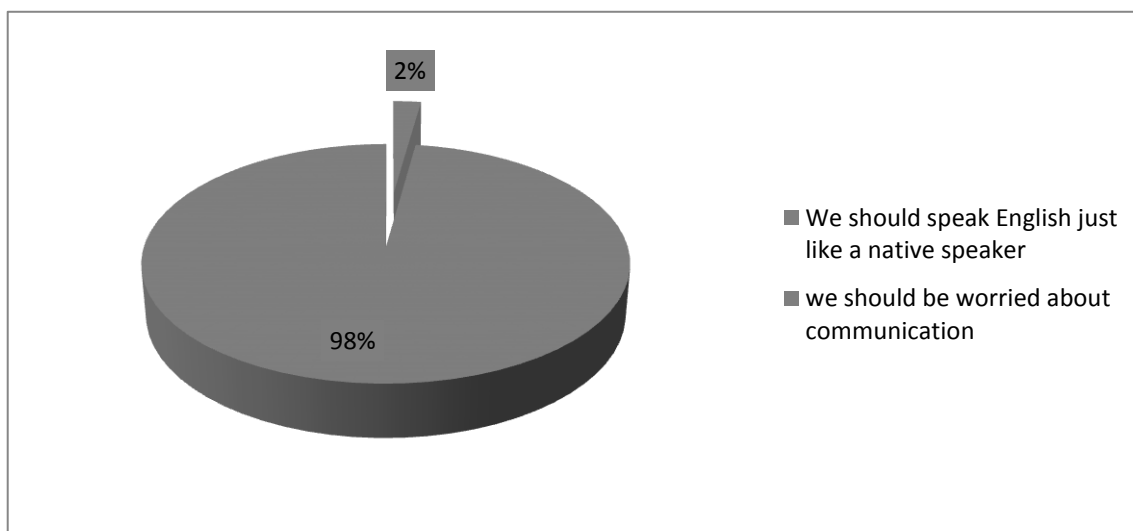
**Graphic 2 – Learner's opinion on the English native speaker.**



In another moment, I also asked them about how we should speak English. Some of them believed that we should speak English like a native speaker, pointing to the

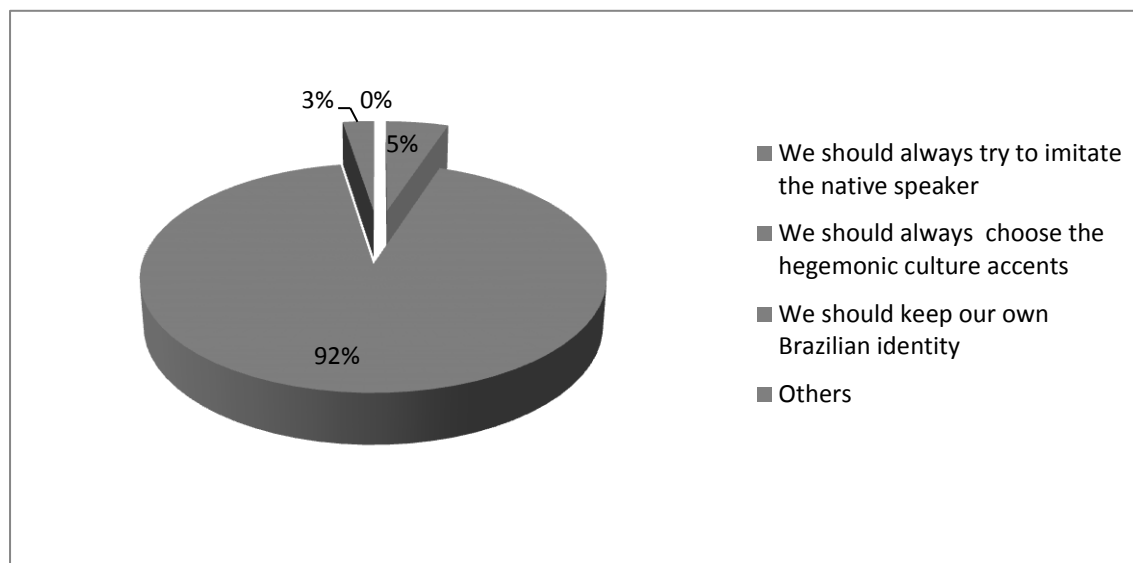
overvaluing attitudes towards the native speaker, in the pursuit of the ideal speaker, model to be followed, ratifying the hypothesis that many Brazilian learners of English exalt the native speaker of this language. However, the great majority revealed not to be worried about the fact of speaking like a native speaker. This is the evidence of a critical consciousness that is aligned with the tenets of the use of a global language, mainly because when using English (new) speakers should keep their own Brazilian identities. The graphic 3 presents these data:

**Graphic 3 – Learner’s opinion on how to speak English.**



On the other hand, some of them (13) had overvaluing attitudes toward the native accent, because they agreed to imitate the English native accent, showing us that it is still alive the wrong idea of the native-like, signaling overvaluing attitudes in detriment to the identity maintenance. In this line of thought, 4 of them had overvaluing attitudes toward the native accent, in another perspective, when they said that English learners must choose the hegemonic culture accents. In front of these data, I realize that the overvaluing attitudes, even in a lower rate, continue taking place and conducting learners to a wrong path. To change this setting, I believe we need effort to make students aware of the features a global language has, what, I think, will make possible for learners to keep their Brazilian identity when using English, stopping the inferiority feelings, which come from overvaluing attitudes. Graphic 4 brings these data:

Gráfico 4 – Learners’s opinion on accents.



However some of them revealed that until recently they had this type of attitude towards the native speaker, and they thought they must imitate the native speaker. But, the reflection proposed in the classroom, with the professor and other classmates, made possible the assumption of a critical consciousness in front of this issue. This assumption was like a kind of freedom for some of them, to know that they could speak English keeping their Brazilian identities, as we can verify in the statements below:

**QUESTION: Should we imitate the native speaker when speaking English?**

**A4:** I thought like that, but later the professor explained that he has a colleague who speaks with a northeast accent. I got happy, because we print our identity, it is about what the professor said in the classroom about *língua franca*, to bring not only what is about them, to bring also from us.

**A10:** I thought like that as well, eh... but I think that this concept has changed a lot, with the texts and discussions in classroom.

**A25:** In the truth I thought like that, I thought that we had to be closer of the target language. But we learned and I understood that no, we

can speak English, but with the northeast accent, for example, with our particularities.

As we could see, there was a change concerning the attitudes toward the native speaker accent. Such change is ascribed to the discussions developed by the professor in the classroom. With this, it is evident that educators need to be prepared to provoke and support these changes, because in many settings the non native speakers are underestimated, what influences on their motivation to learn this language. Here I finish the reflection based on the data. Next, I present the final considerations.

## **V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Attitudes are, in the truth, evaluative reactions, that in some cases, might bring unpleasant consequences, if they are not taken consciously. I myself have reported that when I started learning English, because of the institution ideology, an overvaluing attitude followed me, the one that I had to speak English just like a North-American. This attitude brought to me feelings of inferiority, inadequacy and fear. And only later, as a professor, I could get rid of this attitude, when I realized I could speak English keeping my own identity, that is, like a Brazilian. Barcelos (1995) also reports that she felt shy, inappropriate, and feared not to sound like a North-American or British, until one day, when chatting with a North-American friend, he asked her: “what’s wrong with your Brazilian accent?” And only later as well, she got to get rid of this attitude and belief that she had to speak like a native speaker.

These reports, somehow, signal the need to (re)think alternatives that may favor new speakers of English, from different linguacultures, that give support to the development of the right to speak (BOURDIEU, 1977). Upon learning a new language, we negotiate the code, without needing to cancel who we are, because a Brazilian speaking English is not a North-American, a British, nor an Australian speaking English, it is about a Brazilian speaking English (LEFFA, 2012). That is why it is important to preserve the sense of nationality, because we run the risk to go through a deep loss process of our subjectivities (HALL, 1992).

But we need to figure out that English different use forms, projected on each new speaker’s mouth, denote its diversity, a consequence of a natural trajectory that any

other language has ever experienced until now. However, this notion seems to bother some experts that position themselves for the Anglophony people hegemony, the ones who feed the native speaker fallacy, to go on allowing them to dictate the rules. Despite the wrong notion that we must emulate the English native speaker is on the popular imagination, the truth is that we have the freedom of choice and the ideal is that we can be recognized when speaking English, resting clear, upon using this language, who we are, where we are from, because its deterritorialization allows this.

I have something else to add and finish this reflection for a while. What I want to add is on teacher's role in order to avoid bad feelings concerning the learning of English, mainly the inferiority feeling, because it may stop students to progress in the learning process. We, as teachers, still have the task of deconstructing colonialist thoughts that still persist in many school settings. We could realized from the data shared here that these thoughts still persist. On the other hand, I need to say that the low rate of overvaluing attitudes, in the research shared here, made me feel happy, because only 18% expressed their agreement on English superiority when compared to Portuguese; 14% overvalued the native speaker and 5% think one should choose the hegemonic culture accent. However, teachers should act so that there is no space to the occurrence of these attitudes and their consequences. Thus, the learning process will go on in its flux toward success.

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