

## **A critical analysis of *English* language as power resource expressed in EFL teachers' discourse in an Orkut forum**

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Abstract: The worldwide significant increase in the number of *English* speakers has raised interest in the investigation of this phenomenon. *English* is considered, in many cultures, a gatekeeper for privileged social positions. In this paper, we explore aspects of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Critical Language Awareness (CLA) and Structuration Theory as an attempt to describe and explain the relations between power and *English* language in EFL teachers' discourse materialized in posts in a community discussion forum at the website Orkut. In the first moment of the analysis, we explore the textual level through an investigation of the transitivity system, and we establish teachers' views of power in the *English* language instantiated in the post entitled 'What does *English* mean for you? Just language?'. In order to understand the possible impact of these views on teaching, we rely on CLA, as the teachers' personal understandings of language have the potential to impact significantly in pedagogical practice. We also employ Structuration Theory to develop issues related to how power can be exercised through *English* language.

**Key words:** Orkut, *English* language, power, SFL, CLA, Structuration Theory

### **1. Introduction**

The teaching of *English* as a second/foreign language has attracted researchers' interest in the social elements which may influence the use of a language. This is an interest we share in our investigation of the power relations involving the *English* language in a discussion entitled "what does *English* mean for you?" by *English* teachers in an online forum.

The global spread of the teaching of *English* as a foreign language is related to its status as a facilitator of international communication, as well as its functioning as a gatekeeper to most prestigious positions in society. Accordingly, Pennycook has argued that “with *English* taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment or social positions” (81). The author also highlights the barrier established by the great incidence of materials published in *English*, which, in turn, demands from prospective students a high degree of proficiency in the language.

Regarding international communication, the Internet, which easily allows the transfer of intellectual capital across the world, epitomizes the need of *English* as an international language, as the greatest part of websites and internet traffic have elected *English* as their *lingua franca* (Graddol). Therefore, individuals’ inclusion in the digital world and, consequently, their access to the flow of information which is available in this virtual environment, will be directly related to their competence in using *English* as a tool.

Nonetheless there are other issues which should be considered about the importance conferred to *English* as an international language. Pennycook alerts to the apparent common sense among professionals involved in English Language Teaching (ELT) that “the spread of English is natural, neutral and beneficial” (3), which disregards its potential as an imperialistic tool serving the interests of dominant classes. Although the spread of *English* as an international language had its origin due to the military power of *its* speakers, it has become increasingly connected to the economical power, which will directly influence cultural values (Graddol). Hence, new interests have emerged, transforming *English* into a commodity which will grant access to power.

In order to unveil issues relating *English* and power materialized in EFL teachers’ discourse in an online forum, we are going to develop an analysis which will cover the

textual and social dimensions. For the textual dimension, evidence from the lexico-grammatical choices are discussed under the light of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL), while the social dimension is explored based on a two-fold theoretical rationale: Fairclough's Critical Language Awareness (henceforth CLA) and Giddens's Structuration Theory.

## **2. Context of investigation**

Considering the direct connection between *English* and technology and, hence, the new means of communication which may originate from this tool of the information society, new possibilities of interactions occurring on the internet, as online forums, are worth investigating. Therefore, we explore how *English* and power are related in the discussion forum of an ELT community in the relationship website Orkut, which has reached, according to Wikipedia more than 40.42 million members this year; being, thus a large-scale means of text distribution and production and ideology spreading.

Orkut, besides allowing its users to collect friends, also enables the creation of virtual communities where discussions can be conducted by members. These communities, which are created by the users, aim at gathering people with similar interests in a myriad of areas. Based on our object of investigation, we elected an EFL teachers community, which, besides being the longest in existence<sup>1</sup> is the one with the highest membership rate<sup>2</sup>. We found of particular interest a topic entitled "What does *English* mean for you?" and analyzed posts of seventeen teachers<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Since May 22, 2004

<sup>2</sup> 9,326 members on April 18, 2007

<sup>3</sup> The texts which were analyzed are the ones posted until Jan 8 2007, when the data was collected.

### 3. Power representations in teachers discourse - a textual analysis

Halliday's SFL has been used as a textual support in research of power and ideology materialization in discourse. The choices made in a text<sup>4</sup>, thus, reveal the ideological investment which is inherent in any type of interaction (Fairclough, "Critical Language"). These choices are also determined by the functions language perform: the ideational, what is being talked about; the interpersonal, the relationships involved in the interaction; and the textual, the way the message is organized (Eggins, Butt et al, Halliday and Mathiessen).

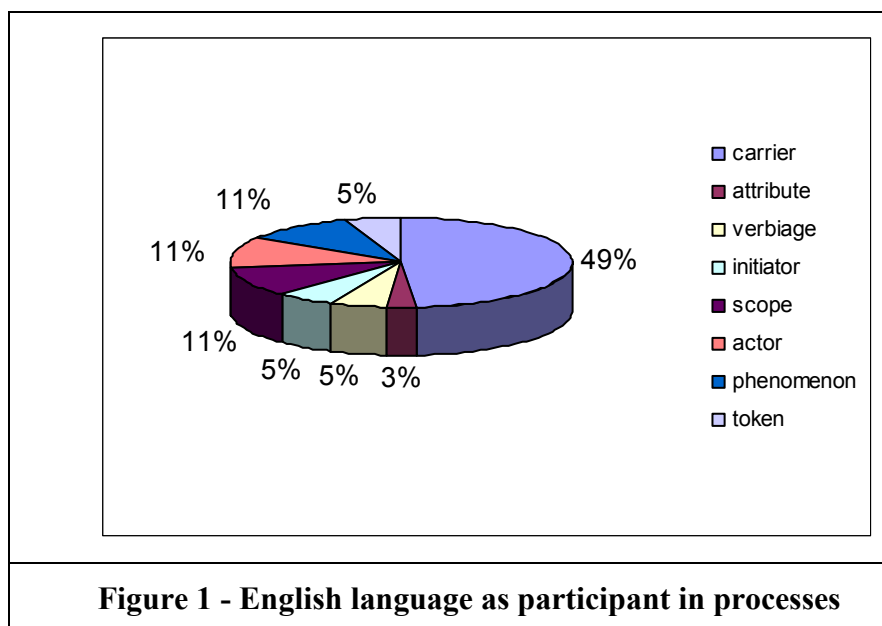
Although the three metafunctions coexist and occupy an equal status, for the purpose of our analysis, the ideational metafunction will be explored. Aiming at unveiling the representations of *English* language in the teachers' discourse, the transitivity analysis is performed focusing on three aspects: (a) what roles *English* plays in the clauses it is a participant, (b) what attributes and/or values are related to *English*, and (c) what *English* enables people to do.

<p><b>English</b> is... just the love of my life I had <b>the key</b> to the front door of the world</p>
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The posts were segmented into clauses which we re selected based on the explicit or indirect participation of *English* (see examples above) and the roles *it* occupied were categorized as shown in figure 1. :

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<sup>4</sup> Text, from the SFL perspective, is "a piece of language in use" (Butt et al, 2000, p. 3)



The high incidence of relational clauses, where “something is said to ‘be’ something else” (Halliday and Matthiessen 213), met the expectations originated by the topic title, *What does English mean for you?*. This predominance of relational processes in the corpus justified an examination of what attributes and/or identities are conferred to *English*. The numbers and graphic in figure 1 demonstrate that *English* is given attributes in 49% of the selected while 5% of the considered clauses identified *English* with a value. In attributive processes, an entity can be ascribed with a class or a quality which establishes a criterion for class-membership (Halliday and Mathiessen), for example *just one more way of communication* or *a difficult language*, while on identifying clauses they are conferred an identity, which makes them unique, as for instance *my friend*, *my strength*.

The attributes and values conferred to *English* (see table 1) can help us have a picture of how it is conceived in the discourse materialized in the posts. An interpretation of these values, from a social perspective, is discussed in section 4.

Attributes	Values
<p>(just/ not only / a difficult )language</p> <p>very little (as a language)</p> <p>only a business</p> <p>the key to the frontdoor of the world</p> <p>a conquest</p> <p>one more way of communication</p> <p>just like a living and it a key to enter the world of communication</p> <p>so important as a canvas when you go camping</p> <p>the reason why I keep my orkut always on</p> <p>like having access to other treasures</p> <p>a way of knowing more about other cultures</p>	<p>'my friend,my strength'</p> <p>(part of / just the love of ) my life</p>
<p><b>Table 1 – Attributes and Values ascribed to <i>English</i></b></p>	

In other relational processes the teachers ascribe themselves the possession of attributes which they relate to their knowledge of the language, as shown in clause 37; moreover, they characterize themselves in relation to the language as a *native speaker* and as *addicted to it*<sup>5</sup>.

cl. 37		
who	got	the strength to overthrow the barriers of linguistic exclusion.
Possessor	Pr: relational	Possessed

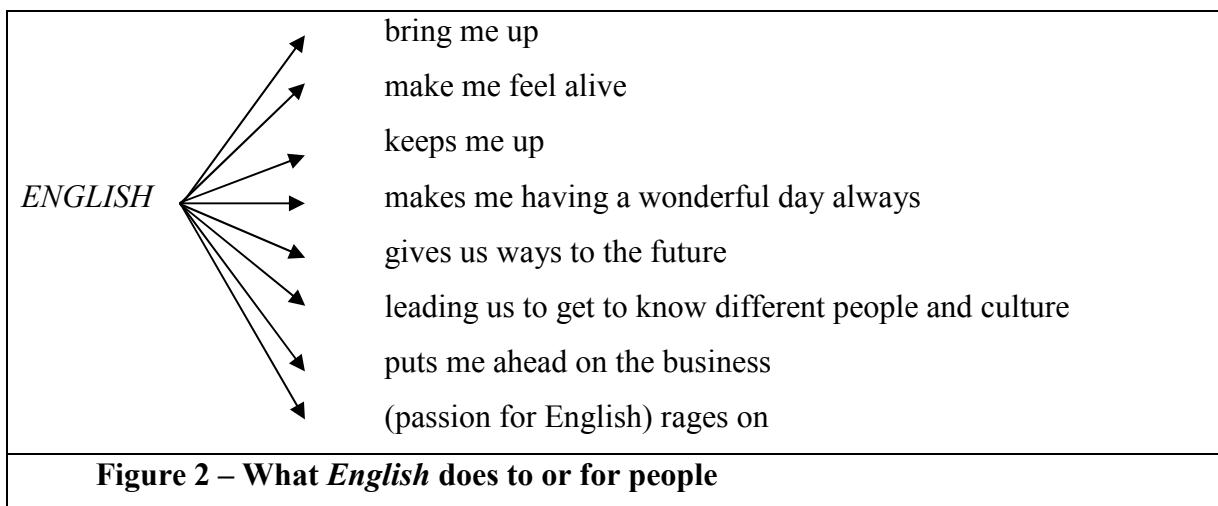
Other roles *English* plays as participant are also worth investigating to avoid that important information is missed or neglected. In the mental clauses where *English* functions as a phenomenon, it is the object of teachers' love:

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to appendix 1

cl. 51		
I	LOVE	<i>English!</i>
Senser	Pr: mental	Phenomenon

Besides the role *English* occupies as Scope in material clauses as a language *one teaches, studies, reads books in, can't speak or live without*<sup>6</sup>, it is important to highlight the role of *English* as Actor as well as its occurrence as Initiator, the latter being the one which causes people to act. In both cases, teachers express what *English* does to or for them, since they occupy the roles of either Goals, being affected by the action performed by *English*, or Beneficiaries, the ones which benefit from their knowledge of the language.



Finally, we want to comment on what *English* enables people to do, which in the text is related to a manner of making money (clause 54), thus obtaining financial success as illustrated in clause as well as interaction using the new forms of communication which the internet made available (clause 64).

<sup>6</sup> For constraints related to the size of this paper, we could not exemplify all the comments, please refer to the APPENDIX 2, clauses 11, 19, 35, 45, 46, 47, 53 and 62.

cl. 54			
I	earn	money	with this language,
Actor	Pr: material	Scope	Circumstance of manner: means

cl. 65		
and	used to spend	average 4 hours <<voice chatting on the net with people from all over the world.>>
	Pr: material	Scope/embedded clause

So far we have used the transitivity analysis to unveil issues regarding the interrelationship of power and *English*. In the next section we interpret the findings under the light of CLA and Structuration Theory.

#### 4. Critical Language Awareness and Structuration Theory

People interact in social practices which are determined by and at the same time determine social structure and role prescriptions (Meurer “Role prescription”; “Integrando”, Giddens “Central problems”). While role prescriptions are “the privileges or rights and duties or responsibilities associated with specific social identities” (Meurer “Role prescriptions” 87) and, thus, determined by the social position and individual holds, structure is established by the rules these individuals follow and the resources they possess to either perpetuate and reinforce these rules, or to challenge and change them. However, for new practices and conventions to be developed, it is essential that consciousness is developed first (Fairclough, “Critical Language”).

Moreover, individuals interact in social contexts where they share a certain level of ‘mutual knowledge’ (Giddens, “The Constitution”). The concepts about *English* expressed in the posts reveal that teachers share the consciousness of the power one is granted by his/her proficiency in the language. Different individuals may present different interests (Giddens,



“The Constitution”) such as access to knowledge, culture, leisure and financial success. However different these interests may be, the resource applied in their pursuance is the same: *English*, which can be considered both an authoritative resource meaning the knowledge some individuals have in detriment of others who do not have it, and as an allocative resource because it generates power and control over people.

The common sense in the forum that *English* is more than a way of communication is a global ideology which is “immediately related to the distribution of power” (Giddens, “The Constitution” 120). In other words, the widespread presence of *English* and, consequently, its transformation into a primordial good, which propagates its use through the creation of new sources of information in this language, can be considered an example of how structure is reinforced by social practices.

Regarding the social practice of speaking a variety of *English* related to correctness and prestige, any unconventional use may cause “strong reactions from other speakers” (Giddens and Pierson 77) in the form of coercion, as, for instance, the questioning of the existence of the term *mistakening* in an informal discussion where the main focus was not grammatical correction. Likewise, the declared *love* and *addiction* to *English* can be understood as effects of societal forms related to the production and reproduction of structure in people’s actions, as the choices one makes in order to convey feelings for the language are shaped by discourse conventions which are part of the socio-historical context. These conventions usually frame the dominant views about the counterfeit relations between participants of any type of discourse (Clark and Ivanic, 1992), thus, their understanding can bring light into the contribution of discourse to social action, as for example regarding ideological views and unfolding bias or power relations. (Fairclough, “Critical Language”; Leal)

The claim that “social forces may be as powerful as actual physical coercion” (Giddens and Pierson 87), is noticeable in the status given to *English* and in the constraints it may

impose on the ones which do not speak it. These constraints seem to be apparent for the teachers who have ascribed to *English* such attributes as *having access to other treasures, a key to enter the world of communication and business, a way of knowing more about other cultures and the key to the frontdoor of the world*, which indicates a clear notion of *English* as a tool for international communication, and as a gatekeeper to most prestigious positions in society. At the same time teachers have referred to it as *a difficult language and a conquest*, highlighting that even though learning *English* may be demanding, it is for them *so important as a canvas when you go camping*. One of the teachers even reported feeling *like a free liver who got the strength to overthrow the barriers of linguistic exclusion*. As a speaker of a minority language, this teacher was linguistically excluded from access to various sources of culture and international communication that in his community are granted to those who speak foreign languages. Thus, speaking *English* has entitled him a fuller citizenship.

The teachers whose discourse was analyzed expressed a level of awareness of not only the widespread presence of *English* in the world, but also its power in establishing values and enabling or constraining actions. Concerning the role of *English* in ELT, Fairclough's CLA proposes a three-fold approach which relates language to the analysis of its form, process and socio-historical context. The elements presented by Structuration Theory are an alternative to the interpretations on social issues conveyed in the discourse which is materialized in language use.

## **5. Final remarks**

The present research dealt with a particular group of teachers in a very peculiar context and the results obtained cannot be generalized. Neither can these teachers' practice be investigated, since we only have access to what they discursively construct in their posts.

However, online forums are types of media which have been reaching and possibly influencing a large number of people.

Critical language studies criticize “main-stream language study for taking conventions and practices at face value, as objects to be described, in a way which obscures their political and ideological investment” (Fairclough, “Critical Language” 7). It is important that teachers, along with their students, have a space for discussion of *why* they are learning a language. We, therefore, do not intend to criticize the teaching of *English*, or its positioning as an essential tool for individuals who want to have access to the *information society*. Conversely, our concern lays in what is hidden behind discourse and the practices which reinforce its use influencing not only communication itself, but also the whole societal organization (Giddens and Pierson).

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## Appendix I

### What does English mean for you? Just language?

Showing **1-10** of 12    first | < previous | [next >](#) | [last](#)

Fabio <sup>7</sup>	11/5/2006 11:36 AM <b>What does English mean for you? Just language?</b> Hey folks, i'll cherish your understanding of what English means for you!
Ellen	11/5/2006 11:48 AM one more way of communication!!
Fabio	11/5/2006 11:59 AM <b>Well, that's for sure!</b> The main meaning of what i said is hidden behind communication! i know it may be the first answer that comes up on our mind when we talk about language! But if you say, it's just one more way of communication you're saying it's just a language! And by doing so, you're mistaking my meaning! i respect you anyway but if you don't mind reread and you'll get my drift!!
Marcel	11/5/2006 1:43 PM <b>my life</b> My life!! I'm simply addicted to English! Can't live without it!
Fabio	11/5/2006 4:08 PM <b>hey Marcel!</b> that's exactly how i feel about English! it's not only a language but something that brings me up and make me feel alive! I'd be nothing without it!! in short, English is my life too!!
Sylvia	11/6/2006 2:13 AM English means a canvas to me.....n u know y Fernando, dont u ?!
Willy	11/6/2006 5:29 AM a diffecult language for me  cant speak it
Ana	11/7/2006 2:33 PM <b>:-D</b> english is just the love of my life... what keeps me up and makes me having a wonderful day always...
Fabio	11/7/2006 5:17 PM <b>Hey srinanda!</b> Well, Did you mean that English is so important as a canvas when you go camping? wether you did so! i got you!
Mike	11/7/2006 8:34 PM ... I fell like a free liver who got the strength to overthrow the barriers of linguistic exclusion.
Kate	11/8/2006 4:08 AM  English is not only the language we live on...  It's also the reason why I keep my orkut always turned on... 
Robert	11/8/2006 12:45 PM <b>mistakening</b> Is 'mistakening' a neologism? Or a kind of non-standard English? I've never seen it as a verb, like 'misundstanding'. Could you explain, please?  and, as for what English means to me, it is a conquest, knowing how to express

<sup>7</sup> Teacher names were changed to maintain their privacy

	yourself in another language is like having access to other treasures!
Jennifer	11/28/2006 5:23 PM <b>English</b> In my opinian English is just like a living and it a key to enter the world of communication and bussiness,it give us ways to the future leading us to get to know different people and culture.
Fabio	12/16/2006 12:07 PM <b>English, my life!</b> It flows in my blood just like oxygen!i couldn't live without it!I LOVE English!
Yara	12/16/2006 7:28 PM It is part of my life...and a way of knowing more about other cultures.
Mary	12/17/2006 7:06 AM I love English and everything linked to it. I earn money with this language, that ´s why I love it so much.
Rose	12/17/2006 9:48 AM English is a part of my life,'my friend,my strength'.
Nelson	12/17/2006 9:11 PM only a buisness
Ubbi	12/28/2006 9:55 AM I love english and I earn morney teaching... :-)
Richard	1/6/2007 2:14 PM <b>Fabio</b> I don´t know how old you are but I guess I was quite like you when I was younger ( than now, 38 ).  I started studying English as a false beginner when I was 18. two and a half years later I was teaching and still am.  Just to put you in the picture, I read 63 books in English in a little bit more than 2 years and used to spend average 4 hours voice chatting on the net with people from all over the world.  I used to think I had the key to the front door of the world and soon I´d hit the jack pot.  Well, to make a long story short, now I teach 25 hours of English a week as an odd evening job, make some nice money but that ´s all.  What I mean is, professionally speaking, English alone means very little.  You have to go for something else to match your passion for the language. Otherwise you´ll probably work as a teacher for some people who barely speaks English, had the money and the balls to invest in an English school, is making a lot o money, traveling abroad every year while you stay home unemployed and broke every summer vacation.  Thank God I have my own business on Fiberglass,to keep me up, which I love more than teaching . By the way, English puts me ahead on this business ´cause I can pick many first world brains on this subject.  Anyways...my passion for English rages on!
Andrew	1/8/2007 3:34 PM <b>English and Portuguese</b> Well- I am a native speaker of English and I teach it to immigrants from Brazil here where I live. I guess I like Portuguese because Brazil is a neat country!

## Appendix II – Transitivity Analysis

cl. 1				
<b>What</b>	<b>does</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>mean</b>	<b>for you?</b>
Attribute		Carrier	Pr: relational	Circumstance of angle: viewpoint
cl. 2				
<b>^IT</b>	<b>^MEANS</b>		<b>Just language?</b>	
Elliptical carrier	Elliptical Pr: relational		Attribute	
cl. 3				
Hey folks,	i'	ll cherish	your understanding of what English means for you!	
	Senser	Pr: mental	Phenomenon	
cl. 4				
<b>^IT</b>	<b>^IS</b>		one more way of communication!!	
Elliptical Carrier	Pr: relational		Attribute	
cl. 5				
when	we	talk	about language!	
	Sayer	Pr: verbal	Verbiage	
cl.6				
it	's	just one more way of communication		
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute		
cl. 7				
you	're saying			
Sayer	Pr: verbal			
cl. 8				
it	's	just a language!		
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute		
cl. 9				
<b>^IT</b>	<b>^IS</b>		My life!!	
Elliptical Token	Pr: relational		Value	
cl. 10				
I'	m	simply addicted to English!		
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute		
cl. 11				
<I>	Can't live	without it!		
Actor	Pr: material	Circumstance of accompaniment		
cl. 12				
it	's	not only a language		
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute		
cl. 13				
but	something that	brings	me	up
	Actor	Pr:	Goal	mate rial
cl. 14				
and <ENGLISH>	make	me	feel	alive!
Actor	Pr:	Goal	material	Attribute
cl. 15				
I	'd be	nothing	without it!!	
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute	Circumstance of accompaniment: comitative	
cl. 16				
in short,	English	is	my life	too!!
	Token	Pr: relational	Value	
cl. 17				
English	means	a canvas	to me.....	
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute	Circumstance of angle	
cl. 18				
<ENGLISH>	<IS>	a diffecult language	for me 🤖	
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute	Circumstance of angle	
cl. 19				
<I>	cant speak	it		

Actor	Pr: material	Scope		
cl. 20				
english	is...	just the love of my life		
Token	Pr: relational	Value		
cl. 21				
what	keeps	me	up	
Actor	Pr:	Goal	material	
cl. 22				
and	^ENGLISH	makes	me	having
	Elliptical Initiator	Pr	Actor	material
				a wonderful day
				Scope
				always...
				Circumstance of extent: frequency
cl. 23				
English	is	so important as a canvas when you go camping?		
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute		
cl. 24				
... I	fell	like a free liver		
Senser	Pr: mental	Circumstance of manner		
cl. 25				
who	got	the strength to overthrow the barriers of linguistic exclusion.		
Possessor	Pr: relational	Possessed		
cl. 26				
English	is	not only the language we live on...		
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute		
cl. 27				
It	's	also the reason	[why I keep my orkut always turned on...]	😊
Carrier	Pr: relational	attribute	Circumstance of cause: reason	
cl. 28				
why	I	keep	my orkut	always turned on...
	Actor	Pr: material	Goal	Attribute
cl. 29				
as for what English, means to me,	it	is	a conquest	
Circumstance of angle	carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute	
cl. 30				
knowing how to express yourself in another language	is	like having access to other treasures!		
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute		
cl. 31				
In my opinian	English	is	just like a living and it a key to enter the world of communication and bussiness,	
Circumstance of angle	Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute	
cl. 32				
it	give	us	ways to the future	
Actor	Pr: material	Beneficiary	Scope	
cl. 33				
^ENGLISH	leading	us	to get to know	different people and culture.
Elliptical Initiator	Pr:	Actor	:material	Scope
cl. 34				
It	flows	in my blood	just like oxygen!	
Actor	Pr: material	Circumstance of location place	Circumstance of comparison	
cl. 35				
i	couldn't live	without it!		
Actor	Pr: material	Circumstance of accompaniment		
cl. 36				
I	LOVE	English!		
Senser	Pr: mental	Phenomenon		
cl. 37				
It	is	part of my life...	and a way of knowing more about other cultures	
Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute	Attribute	
cl. 38				



I	love	English and everything linked to it.			
Senser	Pr: mental	Phenomenon			
cl.39					
I	earn	money	with this language,		
Actor	Pr: material	Scope	Circumstance of manner: means		
cl. 40					
that's why	I	love	it	so much.	
Circumstance of reason	Senser	Pr: mental	Phenomenon	Circumstance of manner: degree	
cl. 41					
English	is	a part of my life,		'my friend,my strength'.	
Carrier /Token	Pr: relational	Attribute		Value	
cl. 42					
^ENGLISH		^IS		only a buisness	
Carrier	Pr: relational		Attribute		
cl. 43					
I	love	english	and		
Senser	Pr: mental	phenomenon			
cl. 44					
I	earn	morney	teaching... :-)		
Actor	Pr: material	Scope	Pr: material		
cl. 45					
I	started studying	English	as a false beginner	when I was 18.	
Actor	Pr: material	Scope	Circumstance of manner: role	Circumstance of location: time/ embedded clause	
cl. 46					
two and a half years later		I	was teaching	and still	am.
Circumstance of location: time		Actor	Pr: material		Pr: material
cl. 47					
Just to put you in the picture,		I	read	63 books in English	in a little bit more than 2 years
Circumstance of reason: purpose		Actor	Pr: material	Scope	Circumstance of extent: duration
cl. 48					
and	used to spend	average 4 hours <<voice chatting on the net with people from all over the world.>>			
	Pr: material	Scope/embedded clause			
cl. 49					
voice chatting		on the net		with	people from all over the world.
Pr:	Circumstance of location: place		verbal	Receiver	
cl.50					
I	used to think	[[I had the key to the front door of the world and soon I'd hit the jack pot.]]			
Senser	Pr: mental	Phenomenon/projected clause			
cl. 51					
I	had	the key to the front door of the world			
Possessor	Pr: relational possessive	Possessed			
cl. 52					
and	soon	I	'd hit	the jack pot	
	Circumstance of location: time		Actor	Pr: material	Goal
cl. 53					
Well, to make a long story short,	now	I	teach	25 hours of English a week,	as an odd evening job.
	Circumstance of location: time	Actor	Pr: material	Scope	Circumstance of manner: role
cl. 54					
make	some nice money				

Pr: material		scope		
cl. 55				
What I mean is,	professionaly speaking,.	English alone	means	very little
	Circumstance of manner: means	Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute
cl.56				
who	barely	speaks	English,.	
Sayer	Circumstance of manner: quality	Pr: verbal	Verbiage	
cl. 57				
Thank God	I	have,	my own business on Fiberglass	to keep me up,
	Possessor	Pr: relational	Possessed	Circumstance of reason: purpose
cl. 58				
which	I	love	more than teaching	
Phenomenon	Senser	Pr: mental	Circumstance of manner: comparison	
cl. 59				
By the way,	English	puts	me	ahead on this business
	Actor	Pr: material	Goal	Attribute
cl. 60				
Anyways...	my passion for English		rages on!	
	Actor		Pr: material	
cl. 61				
Well-	I	am	a native speaker of English	
	Carrier	Pr: relational	Attribute	
cl. 62				
and	I	teach	it	to immigrants from Brazil here where I live.
	Actor	Pr: material	Scope	Recipient