



English as an international language and Google's pronunciation tool

Inglês como língua internacional e a ferramenta de pronúncia do Google

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Google's pronunciation tool is widely used by English teachers to improve students' pronunciation, and it is also, and mainly, an accessible tool for online teaching, since it is available for free to all users of the platform. **Objective:** This article questions how much this use can be beneficial or harmful for the teaching of speech skills. **Materials and Methods:** This tool was analyzed in this article in the light of the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which proposes a decolonial look at the teaching and learning of the language, decoupling the concept of proficiency from the perfect imitation of the pronunciation of the natives of the countries of greater hegemonic power, mainly the United States and England. We explore the evolution of English teaching in Brazil, highlighting a post-structuralist approach to language, in which the traditional view of language as a structured system ready to be "acquired" is questioned. In this sense, a flexible approach that values the various variants of English, including that spoken by non-native speakers, is advocated. In this article, we investigated the use of the tool by a B1 (pre-intermediate) student. Images of the screen were recorded that present the evaluation that the tool makes of the student's pronunciation. **Results:** Google's tool, while useful, is criticized here for restricting itself to prestige variants and promoting a purist view of pronunciation. The corrections proposed by the tool demonstrate a restricted view of the language, suggesting modifications that would not interfere with the intelligibility of the student's speech. **Conclusion:** We propose a broadening of pronunciation options and a more flexible approach to assess speech intelligibility, reflecting linguistic diversity. These considerations are urgent given the importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in contemporary education.

Keywords: Teaching english, Google's pronunciation tool, Linguistic diversity.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we propose an analysis of the pronunciation tool coupled with the Google platform, available to all Google users for free and affordably. This analysis is made in the light of the concept of English as a Lingua Franca.

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DEVELOPMENT

ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

The teaching of the English language in Brazil has followed a path that involves the evolution of the understanding of language and linguistic identity, starting from a structuralist view to a more complex and contextualized one.

This work proposes a post-structuralist approach to language, which recognizes the influence of social and cultural context on the construction of meanings. In addition, we highlight the need to rethink the role of the foreign language teacher as a facilitator of the construction of meanings and critical reflection on language and culture, also rethinking the tools and technological resources that this teacher will have at his disposal.

The discussion of English as a lingua franca sheds light on the power and relations of linguistic hegemony, where dominant languages exert influence over minorities. The concept of "native speaker" as the only valid model of linguistic competence is questioned, emphasizing the importance of considering linguistic and cultural diversity.

The concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ILF) involves an approach that recognizes English not only as a foreign language associated with English-speaking countries, but as a language of global communication used by non-native speakers in international contexts.

Many authors of this line of thought argue that English is used as a lingua franca in international contexts, where speakers of different languages use English as a means of communication. Emphasis is placed on the importance of understanding and accepting the varieties of English spoken by non-native speakers, rather than privileging only native English norms.

Jeniffer Jenkins is one of these authors, and her work contributes significantly to the understanding of the varieties of English in her work on "English as a Lingua Franca" (ELF). She highlights the need for a more flexible approach to teaching and learning English, recognising and valuing the different forms of English spoken by non-native speakers. Jenkins advocates for developing effective communication skills in English, regardless of accent or specific grammar. (JENKINS, 2006).

The teaching of English in the traditional way, where learners have the obligation to shape the language to perfectly reproduce the "native speaker", reproduces a colonial logic that reflects a hierarchical vision of language and culture. The native speaker is always a representative of a social power group, American or British, speaking a prestigious accent even within his community. In Brazil, a country marked by neoliberal education policies, the influence of colonialism and linguistic imperialism on educational practices and teacher training has always occurred in a very intense way. (SAVIANI, 2019)

For this reason, we take a critical look at the use of the pronunciation tool available on the Google search engine.

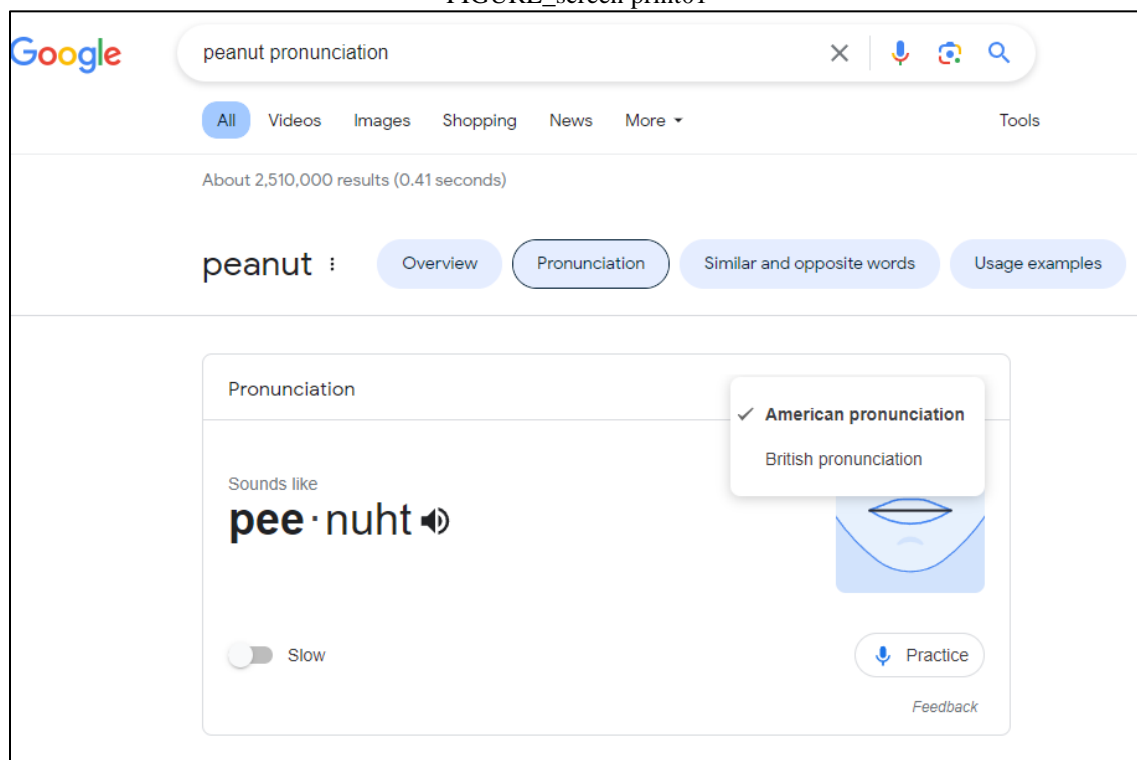
THE GOOGLE PRONUNCIATION TOOL

Technological tools have revolutionized language teaching around the world. Especially in the case of English, there are numerous tools available and free of charge accessible to all users who have an internet network and a device with which they can communicate.

Google Pronunciation has been used by learners to listen to and practice the pronunciation of that word, even receiving an evaluation of the pronunciation itself.

When entering a word in the search bar plus the pronunciation command, the user ²is faced with the following configuration:

FIGURE_screen print01



Source: Author

The word can be heard while displaying a "transcribed" version in a simplified form, which for the Brazilian speaker does not correspond to the way he would write the sound he hears.

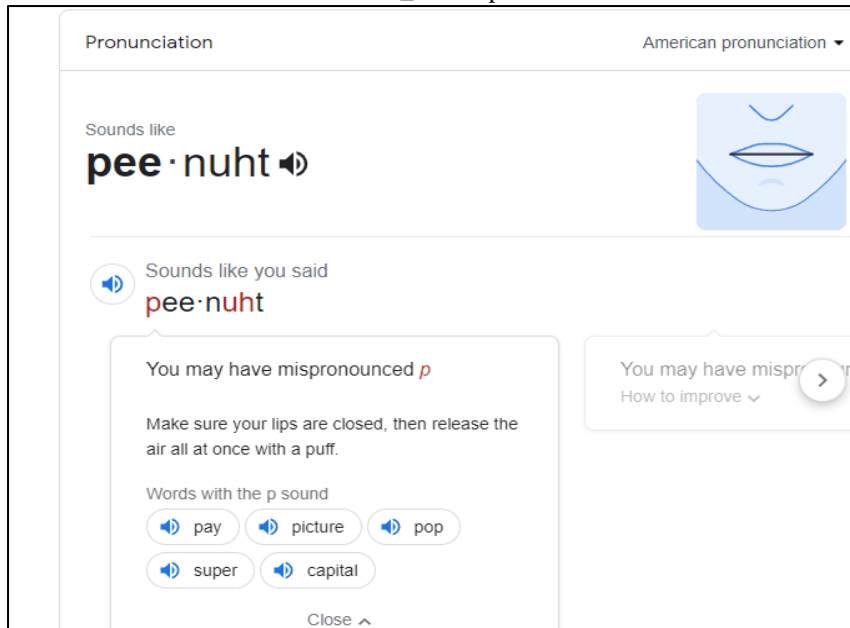
² In this case, the platform was used by a student of the author, an adult student at level B1



Note that the pronunciation options display the American and British options, and the student can listen to both versions, and can even opt for a more paused version of the speech by activating the Slow button.

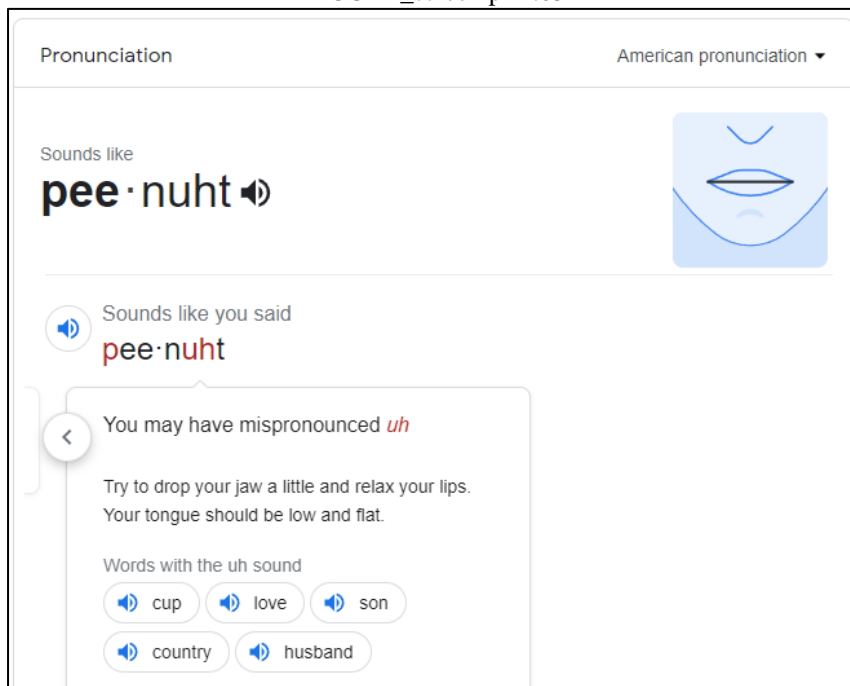
By clicking on the Practice icon, the student/user repeats the word on the microphone and receives feedback:

FIGURE_screen print02



Source: Author

FIGURE_screen print03



Source: Author



It is observed that the desired pronunciation is ['pi:.nʌt], and the phonemes /p/ and /ʌ/ have been corrected.

DISCUSSION

In view of the facts presented, we point out two issues to be discussed in relation to the use of the platform.

The first is the restriction to two prestige variants, the American and the British, ignoring other variants of native speakers from countries of less prominence in the international economic scenario, such as Jamaica, South Africa and Australia. Even the choice of American and British pronunciation, as discussed above, is based on a choice of prestigious standards within those countries.

The second concerns the search for "perfection" in the reproduction of the native mold. The corrected phonemes point to a "wrong" pronunciation of two phonemes, /ʌ/, which is difficult for the Brazilian speaker to do, and /p/, which is familiar to the Portuguese speaker.

CONCLUSION

Google's pronunciation tool could be a very useful tool for teachers and students. However, we point out here that the restriction to the most powerful variants reproduces a colonialist view of language. In view of contemporary discussions about the teaching and conception of the language, it would be expected that the platform would update its options, including other variants and expanding the range of choices for the student.

We also point out that a purist view of learning pronunciation prevails, while there could be greater flexibility in accepting a speech that maintains the intelligibility of the word. This could be achieved if there was an option in which the user declared their original language and specified that they would like to have only their intelligibility assessed.

We conclude that there is still a lot to evolve in the predominant view of ICTs about language and teaching, which is urgent given the importance of its use in the contemporary classroom.



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