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# English Proficiency Barriers in Brazil: Communication Challenges Among International Students and Professionals

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examines the challenges of English language proficiency faced by international students and professionals living in Brazil, highlighting the communication barriers that hinder academic, professional, and social integration. Using survey data collected from 200 participants in São José dos Campos—including primary school learners, university science students, hospital staff, and visiting scholars—the research investigates English proficiency levels, language-learning attitudes, and daily communication experiences across diverse demographic groups. Findings show that 80% of respondents reported having no English proficiency, and among the remaining 20%, only 15% expressed confidence in their skills. For international students and professionals, limited English proficiency in the surrounding community created substantial challenges when navigating daily life, accessing services, socializing, and seeking assistance. These barriers were most acute during the first year of residence, when limited Portuguese proficiency further compounded communication difficulties. The study underscores the need for targeted language-support initiatives, community-based integration programs, and institutional strategies to facilitate more effective communication for international populations in Brazil. Strengthening language support will enhance academic success, workplace effectiveness, and social inclusion for international students and skilled professionals.*

# INTRODUCTION

English has become the dominant global lingua franca, spoken as a second or foreign language by more people than native speakers (Crystal, 2003). Its prominence stems from its historical spread through migration, colonization, and globalization (Graddol, 1997). Today, English serves as the primary language for international communication in academia, business, and technology (Seidlhofer, 2011).

In nonnative English-speaking countries such as Brasil, linguistic challenges can hinder international collaboration and social integration (Gomes & Cruz, 2019). Brazil belongs to Kachru's expanding Circle, where English is primarily a foreign language (Kachru, 1985). While English plays a vital role in global academic and professional interactions, Brasil's linguistic landscape remains predominantly monolingual, dominated by Portuguese (EF Education First, 2020).

This study investigates the linguistic challenges faced by international English-speaking students and professionals in Brazil and examines Brazilians' attitudes toward English. These challenges highlight the need for pioneering language support strategies in academic, professional, and social settings. However, the distribution of English usage across countries varies, as captured in Kachru's expanding Circle framework. According to Kachru (1985), Kachru's model classifies English usage into three circles: the inner circle, where English is a native language (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom); the outer circle, where it functions as an official or second language (e.g., India, Nigeria and some West African countries); and the expanding circle, where it is primarily a foreign language (e.g., Brasil, China).

Brasil falls within the expanding circle, where English is taught primarily as a foreign language. Its role is confined to education, business, and academia, creating significant challenges for international students and professionals who are mainly English speakers. In addition, translanguaging theory provides insights into how multilingual individuals navigate language barriers. Translanguaging refers to the dynamic process in which speakers draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning (Garcia & Wei, 2018). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of international students in Brasil, who often rely on English, Portuguese, and language-learning tools such as Duolingo and other online applications or language learning videos to adapt to their new environment. Lin Sin and Schartner (2024) examined overlooked aspects of the international student experience, including caregiving roles, and emphasized the need to consider broader sociocultural contexts. Similarly, Wang et al. (2017) explored cross-cultural adaptation, highlighting language as a critical factor in successful integration. Recent studies also emphasize institutional responsibility in language support (Lee & Kim, 2023)

**Context of English as a Global Language**

**The Brazilian Context**

Brasil, with a population of over 200 million, is the largest Portuguese-speaking country globally according to EF Education First (EF Education First, 2020). Despite the growing importance of English, Brasil ranks 53rd in the EF English Proficiency Index, placing it in the "low proficiency" category. This linguistic barrier is particularly significant for international professionals and students, who face difficulties navigating daily life and academic environments (Nunes & Ribeiro, 2016).

While English is part of the national curriculum, proficiency levels vary widely across regions and socioeconomic groups. Research indicates that linguistic challenges stem from limited exposure to English and the prioritization of Portuguese in education and professional settings (Brown, 2000). While English has an established presence in Brazilian media, advertising, and education, it is rarely used in daily conversation outside of specific academic or professional contexts. For example, in São José dos Campos, where I conducted my study, participants from a leading space research institute in Brazil, often rely on English in professional settings, but many still struggle with communication outside these environments.

For many international students, the first year in Brazil can be a struggle, as Portuguese is the primary means of communication, and proficiency in English alone is insufficient. I faced these challenges firsthand, and the most critical moment was when I fell sick and had to explain my condition to a medical personal who cannot speak English and I cannot speak Portuguese, which served as a motivation for this research into language barriers and proficiency in Brazil.

**The Role of English in International Collaboration**: Research by Smith et al. (2011) has shown that English proficiency is crucial for success in international academic collaborations. In Brazil, universities and industries are increasingly engaging in global research projects where English serves as the primary medium of communication (Oliveira, 2019).

**Language Learning Challenges**: Many international students struggle with communication barriers upon arrival, as highlighted by studies on language socialization (Caruthers, 2024). This phenomenon is further exacerbated for students who must learn Portuguese to fully engage with Brazilian society, a critical challenge this study aims to address.

**Research Questions:**
- How does English proficiency affect the daily lives and social integration of international students and professionals in Brazil?

- What role does language proficiency play in academic and professional settings, particularly in fields such as scientific research and healthcare?

## METHOD

This study surveyed 200 participants from São José dos Campos, a city recognized for its technological and industrial significance. The participants were divided into four groups to capture a range of perspectives on English proficiency:

**Group A**: Primary school students in São José dos Campos.
**Group B** included visiting scholars from a leading research institute in Brazil.
**Group C**: Students from a leading research institute in Brazil.
**Group D**: Hospital and local workers in São José dos Campos.

The participants answered an 18-item questionnaire measuring their attitudes toward English via a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly. The survey data were analyzed to identify trends across groups, including their personal experiences with English and perceptions of its importance in their professional and academic lives.

### Questionnaire Design

Validation: The questionnaire was reviewed by two language education experts for content validity and clarity. A pilot test was conducted with 10 participants, and revisions were made on the basis of their feedback. Reliability was evaluated via Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$), which indicates good internal consistency. The study employed an 18-item bilingual (English and Portuguese) questionnaire to gather data on participants' demographics, English proficiency, attitudes toward English, and communication challenges.

The complete questionnaire is available for reference from the author upon request. The questionnaire was divided into four sections:

1. **Demographics**: This section included questions about participants' age, education level, and occupation.
2. **English Proficiency**: Participants were asked to report their ability to speak English, self-assessed proficiency levels (e.g., Beginner, Intermediate, Fluent), and frequency of English use in their daily lives.
3. **Attitudes Toward English**: This section explores participants' perceptions of the importance of English, its relevance for professional success and globalization, and their preferences regarding English language learning for themselves and their children.
4. **Communication challenges**: Closed-ended questions identified common language difficulties, such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and grammatical errors. Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses revealed recurring challenges, including: difficulty in explaining symptoms to healthcare providers, confusion during everyday tasks (e.g., grocery shopping), and misunderstandings

when using public transportation. The participants reported using digital tools (e.g., Google Translate, Duolingo) and relying on bilingual peers to navigate these communication barriers.

**Demographic characteristics**

The participants were categorized into four distinct groups according to their occupational roles, age ranges, and nationalities, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Participant Groups by Type, Age Range, and Nationality**

| Group | Participant Type | Age Range | Nationality |
|-------|------------------|-----------|-------------|
| A | Primary school students | 8-12 | Brazilian |
| B | Visiting scholars | 30-55 | International |
| C | Research students | 20-35 | Brazilian |
| D | Hospital and local workers | 25-60 | Brazilian |

**Data Analysis and Statistical**

The data were analyzed via both descriptive (means and standard deviations) and inferential statistics. Independent-samples t-tests and chi-square tests were used to assess differences in English proficiency and attitudes across groups.

For instance, a chi-square test revealed a significant difference in English confidence levels across groups ($\chi^2 = 86.45$, $p < .001$). T-tests comparing science students and hospital workers revealed substantial differences in the perceived importance of English for higher education ($t(98) = 3.42$, $p = .001$). 95% confidence intervals were calculated to ensure statistical validity and generalizability.

**Confidence intervals**: 95% confidence intervals were used to estimate the population parameters for English proficiency and attitudes, ensuring that the results were statistically valid and generalizable to the broader population.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with Wang et al.'s (2017) findings on cross-cultural adaptation, this study reveals that English proficiency significantly impacts students' ability to navigate academic and social environments. However, the unique linguistic landscape of Brasil presents additional challenges, as highlighted in our results.
The reliance on Portuguese for daily communication creates barriers for international students. The participants highlighted the difficulties of navigating essential activities, such as grocery shopping, medical appointments, and expressing emotions during their first year in Brasil. The survey revealed that 80% of participants did not speak English, with only 15% of the remaining 20% feeling confident in their proficiency, and 5% reporting insufficient proficiency. Interestingly, although a majority of the participants indicated limited

proficiency in English, many expressed a strong willingness to engage with English speakers whenever possible. This eagerness to communicate with others in English reflects a clear desire to enhance their language skills and indicates a proactive approach to learning. This finding suggests that even among those with lower English proficiency, there is a strong motivation to improve through real-world interactions, which could be an important factor in their language-learning journey.

**The Role of Translanguaging**
The participants frequently used translanguaging strategies, combining English-, and Portuguese-, and using Google translators and digital tools such as Duolingo. This aligns with translanguaging theory, which emphasizes the fluid use of multiple languages to navigate communication challenges (Garcia & Wei, 2018).

**Table 2: English Proficiency, Attitudes, and Motivation Scores by Group.**
Note. Group labels (A–D) represent distinct demographic or regional samples. Values are percentages or means with standard deviations (SD).

| Measure | Group A | Group B | Group C | Group D |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Language Proficiency (%) | | | | |
| No English Proficiency | 80 | 0 | 0 | 80 |
| Confident English Speakers | 0 | 15 | 15 | 0 |
| Insecure English Speakers | 0 | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| Attitudes Toward English (Mean ± SD) | | | | |
| English is worth learning | 4.8 ± 0.3 | 4.9 ± 0.2 | 4.9 ± 0.2 | 4.7 ± 0.4 |
| I like speaking English | 4.5 ± 0.6 | 4.4 ± 0.7 | 4.6 ± 0.5 | 4.1 ± 0.9 |
| I want my children to speak English | 4.7 ± 0.3 | 4.8 ± 0.3 | 4.9 ± 0.2 | 4.6 ± 0.5 |
| English is important for higher ed. | 4.6 ± 0.4 | 4.8 ± 0.2 | 4.9 ± 0.2 | 4.5 ± 0.6 |
| English reflects globalization | 4.4 ± 0.5 | 4.5 ± 0.6 | 4.7 ± 0.4 | 4.3 ± 0.7 |
| Motivational Clusters (Mean ± SD) | | | | |
| Integrativeness / Likeability | 4.6 ± 0.4 | 4.7 ± 0.3 | 4.8 ± 0.2 | 4.3 ± 0.6 |
| Instrumentality: Economic Advantage | 4.7 ± 0.3 | 4.8 ± 0.2 | 4.9 ± 0.2 | 4.6 ± 0.4 |
| Instrumentality: Social Recognition | 2.8 ± 0.9 | 2.9 ± 0.8 | 3.0 ± 0.7 | 2.7 ± 0.8 |
| Attitudes Regarding Brazilian Culture | 2.0 ± 0.7 | 2.1 ± 0.6 | 2.0 ± 0.5 | 2.2 ± 0.7 |

**Kachru's Expanding Circle Framework**
The findings also reinforce the insights of Kachru's Expanding Circle. As an expanding circle country, Brazil's English proficiency is limited to specific domains, such as higher education and business (Kachru, 1985). This creates unique challenges for international students, who often rely on English for academic and professional purposes. Table 2 presents the participants' language proficiency levels, revealing that 80% reported no proficiency in English. These results underscore the need for targeted language-learning interventions, particularly for the large proportion of participants who lack English proficiency, to improve their communication skills in an increasingly globalized environment. This is consistent with the global trends observed in nonnative English-speaking countries, where proficiency varies significantly across region and professional contexts (Baker, 2014).

**Attitudes Toward English**: Participants generally expressed positive attitudes toward English, especially regarding its importance for higher education and economic advancement. However, there was variation across groups, with science students and visiting scholars showing stronger support for English as a tool for academic achievement than hospital and local street staff do.

**Impact of Proficiency on Communication**: International students and professionals with lower English proficiency faced significant challenges in their first year in Brasil. These challenges were particularly evident in situations such as shopping, socializing, and expressing personal feelings. This aligns with findings from similar studies in other countries (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). He explained further that students motivated to develop intercultural competence through studying abroad (Jackson, 2015) face several challenges that prevent them from fully benefiting from that experience. Examples of these challenges include language and communication difficulties, cultural and educational obstacles affecting their adaptation, socialization, and learning experiences (Andrade, 2006), psychological distress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), and social isolation and immigration and visa extension issues caused by COVID-19 travel restrictions (Hope, 2020).

These statistics underscore the widespread communication barriers faced by non-Portuguese speakers, both internationally and locally. The data reveal that, while there is some awareness of English's importance, there remains a significant gap in the ability to use English effectively in professional, academic, and everyday settings.

Table 2 also presents the results for English across the four groups, with mean scores indicating varying levels of agreement with statements about the value and importance of English. Overall, the participants across all the groups generally held positive views of English. The statement "English is a language worth learning" received high ratings across all groups, with Group B (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.2) and Group C (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.2) showing the highest agreement, followed closely by Group B (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.2) and Group A (Mean = 4.8, SD = 0.3). These findings indicate that, regardless of their

proficiency levels, participants recognized English as a valuable language to learn. Concerning the statement "I like speaking English," Group A showed the highest enthusiasm (Mean = 4.5, SD = 0.6). In contrast, Group D had a slightly lower mean score (Mean = 4.1, SD = 0.9), suggesting some hesitation or discomfort in speaking English. Interestingly, while Group A expressed more enjoyment in speaking English, the consensus across groups was that speaking English was somewhat interesting.

For the statement "I would like my children to speak English," all the groups expressed strong support, with Group C (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.2) showing the highest level of agreement, followed by Group B (Mean = 4.8, SD = 0.3). This suggests a strong belief in the importance of English for the next generation, possibly tied to perceptions of education and professional opportunities abroad. Participants from all groups also acknowledged the importance of English for higher education, with Group C again leading (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.2), reflecting their awareness of English as a key factor in academic success. However, Group D, had a slightly lower rating (Mean = 4.5, SD = 0.6), which may indicate differing views on the role of English in education on the basis of their specific professional frameworks. Finally, the statement "The presence of English is a natural outcome of globalization" elicited consistent responses across all groups, with Group C (Mean = 4.7, SD = 0.4) again showing the highest agreement. However, Group D (Mean = 4.3, SD = 0.7) showed slightly lower agreement, perhaps reflecting a more localized perspective on globalization.

We can therefore conclude that, while there are some variations across the groups, the general trend suggests that English is seen as a valuable tool for both personal and professional development, with strong support for learning English for oneself and for future generations. The attitudes of participants toward English are shown-, and are divided into four clusters based on different motivational aspects: integrativeness /likeability, instrumentality (economic advantage), instrumentality (social recognition), and attitudes toward Brasilian culture.

**Integrativeness/Likeability**: This cluster measures the participants' affinity for English and its speakers. Across all groups, the scores were generally high, with Group C (Mean = 4.8, SD = 0.2) showing the strongest affinity for English, followed by Group B (Mean = 4.7, SD = 0.3) and Group A (Mean = 4.6, SD = 0.4). Group D had the lowest score (Mean = 4.3, SD = 0.6), suggesting that while there is a general fondness for English, participants in Group D may feel less connected to it or find it less enjoyable.

**Instrumentality: Economic advantage**: The scores for the economic value of learning English were similarly high across all groups, with Group C again leading (Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.2), followed closely by Group B (Mean = 4.8, SD = 0.2). These findings suggest that participants perceive English as a useful tool for career advancement and economic opportunities. Group D (mean = 4.6,

standard deviation (SD) = 0.4) also highly rated this factor, indicating that economic motivation is a strong factor across all groups.

**Instrumentality: Social Recognition**: In contrast, the scores for the importance of English for social recognition were significantly lower across all groups, with Group D scoring the lowest (Mean = 2.7, SD = 0.8). This indicates that, while participants recognize the economic value of English, its role in enhancing social status or recognition may be less compelling. Group C (Mean = 3.0, SD = 0.7) showed slightly greater interest in this aspect, but overall, social recognition seems to be a weaker motivator than economic factors.

**Attitudes Regarding Brazilian culture**: The scores for attitudes toward Brazilian culture were consistently low across all groups, with Group D (Mean = 2.2, SD = 0.7) showing the highest score.

This suggests that while participants value their own culture, the influence of English and the perception of Brazilian culture's relevance to language learning is relatively minimal. The Group A, B, and C participants all rated this aspect similarly (means between 2.0 and 2.1), indicating a neutral or slightly negative view of the relationship between English learning and their own cultural identity.

**Language Proficiency:**
The distribution of English proficiency levels across the groups is shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the percentage of participants who reported speaking English, those who feel confident speaking English, and those who lacked proficiency.

Figure 1 displays a histogram of the challenges associated with English proficiency among participants in Brazil, shedding light on the significant language barriers faced by international students and professionals. The data are segmented into three groups: participants with no English proficiency, confident English speakers, and insecure English speakers. The figure shows that a substantial majority of participants (over 80%) reported having no English proficiency. This highlights the critical language gap within the local population, posing a significant challenge to effective communication with international communities. Only a small percentage of participants identified themselves as confident English speakers, suggesting a limited number of individuals who can actively engage in professional or academic contexts that require English fluency. The group representing insecure English speakers is relatively more minor but still significant. This suggests that while some participants may have basic knowledge of the language, their lack of confidence prevents them from speaking the language.
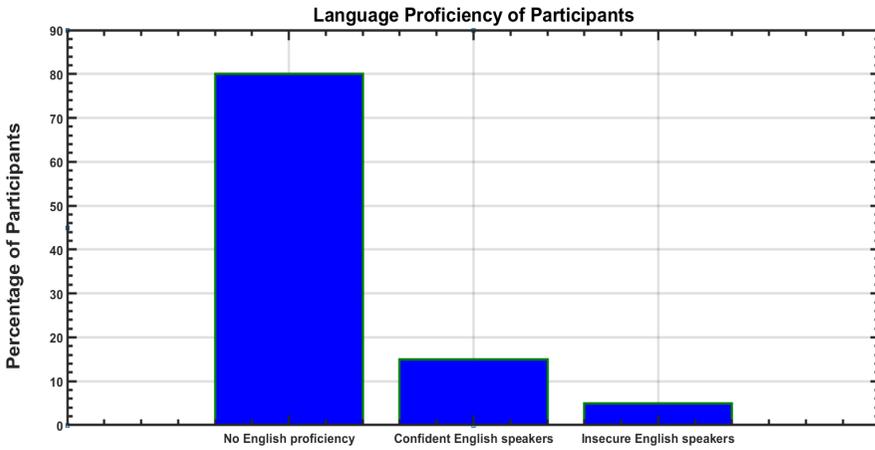
**Language Proficiency of Participants**



Figure 1. Distribution of English Proficiency Levels among the Participants.

The histogram in Figure 2, upper panel, shows the mean scores (on a scale of 1 - 6) reflecting participants' attitudes toward English across four distinct groups (A, B, C, and D). Attitudes are measured along three key dimensions: the belief that English is a language worth learning, enjoyment of speaking English, and the opinion that children should learn English. The data provide valuable insights into the cultural and educational perspectives on English language learning in Brazil. Across all groups, the mean scores for all three categories are consistently high, indicating a strong positive attitude toward English. This suggests a consensus that English is an important skill and should be embraced for future opportunities. The "children should Learn English" category scores particularly high across all groups, emphasizing the importance participants place on introducing English education to the younger generation.

While the scores for "Like Speaking English" are also high, they show slight variations among groups, possibly reflecting differences in confidence, exposure, or personal experiences with the language. Differences between the groups are minimal but may be attributed to factors such as socioeconomic background, level of education, or professional experience. These findings align with (Garcia & Wei, 2014), which states that participants across all groups valued English for its academic and professional utility.
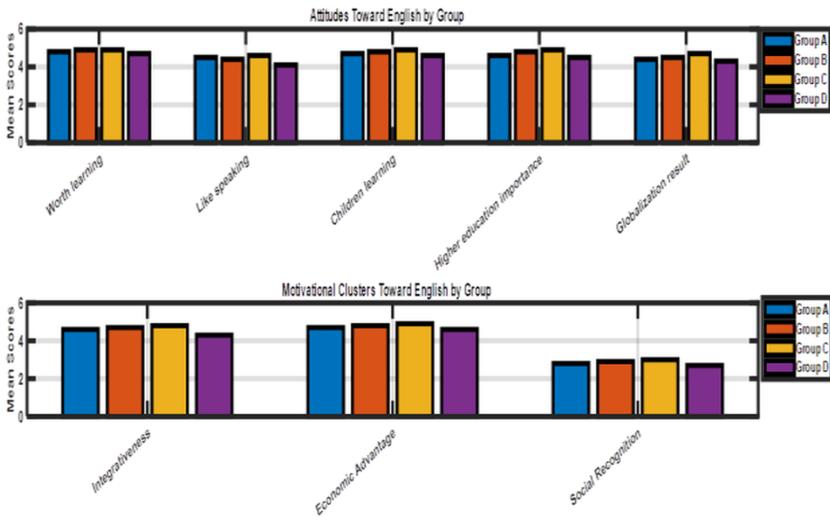
Figure 2. Attitudes and Motivations Towards English by Group.

The histogram in Figure 2, lower panel, displays the mean scores for three key attitude clusters toward English-integrativeness, economic advantage, and social recognition across four participant groups (A, B, C, and D). It highlights the varying perspectives and motivations behind the value attributed to English within these groups.

Across all groups, the scores for Integrativeness are consistently high, indicating that participants recognize English as a practical tool for communication and integration into global networks. The economic advantage cluster also scores very high in all groups, underscoring the perception that proficiency in English can lead to better economic opportunities, such as career advancements or access to higher-paying jobs. The social recognition scores are notably lower than those of the other two clusters.

This suggests that while English is highly valued for its practical and economic benefits, it is less frequently associated with gaining social prestige or status within these participant groups. There is minimal variation in attitudes between the groups, indicating that these perspectives are broadly shared regardless of demographic or contextual differences. The findings underscore that while attitudes toward English are generally positive, there are notable disparities in proficiency, especially outside the academic and professional spheres. International students, in particular, struggle to communicate effectively in daily life without local language skills.

## IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many English speakers reported using Google Translate frequently. However, this often led to confusion, as the translation sometimes differed from the intended message, creating awkward situations for non-Portuguese speakers. The findings of this study suggest a clear need for tailored language support programs, especially for international students and professionals arriving in Brazil. Institutions should consider offering language classes designed to enhance communication skills in academic and professional contexts.

**Portuguese Language Integration for International Students:** Implement a compulsory one-year term of Portuguese language classes for all English-speaking international students enrolled in Brazilian academic institutions. These classes should focus on equipping students with practical language skills to navigate daily life, academic activities, and social interactions effectively.

**For Brazilian Institutions**: English language instruction should be strengthened to bridge linguistic gaps and promote international collaboration (Zhao & Zhu, 2010).

**For Local Communities**: Developing bilingual public services to facilitate interactions with international residents.

**Cultural Integration Initiatives**: Integrating cultural exchange programs to help international individuals navigate not only language barriers but also cultural differences.

**Support Networks**: Establish peer-support systems where fluent Portuguese or English speakers can assist newcomers.

**Enhanced English Education for Indigenous Brazilians:** Continue to prioritize and improve English education in Brazilian schools to enable local students to meet the growing demands of international collaboration. This could include increasing exposure to spoken and written English through immersive programs, multimedia resources, and interactions with native English speakers.

**Support Systems for International Students:** Develop institutional support systems for international students, including access to language resources, translation services, and workshops on cultural adaptation. These measures can ease the transition period and help students overcome initial communication barriers.

**Adaptation of Academic Content:** While most courses in Brazil are taught in Portuguese, they consider offering certain courses or supplementary materials in English to aid international students during their initial academic terms. This can serve as a bridge while they build proficiency in Portuguese.

**Policy-level language planning:** Encouraging collaboration between educational policymakers and institutions to align language education goals with Brazil's increasing globalization. This includes promoting bilingual or multilingual education to prepare students for international opportunities.

**For researchers,** longitudinal studies should be conducted to explore the long-term effectiveness of translanguaging practices in fostering linguistic integration.

**Broader Implications**: Addressing these challenges contributes to global linguistic equity, ensuring that both international and local students can engage meaningfully in academic, professional, and social settings (Graddol, 1997; Zhao & Zhu, 2010).

**Limitations**
This study is limited by its relatively small, localized sample (São José dos Campos), reliance on self-reported data, and lack of longitudinal tracking. Additionally, the analysis relies primarily on descriptive statistics, limiting deeper causal inference. Future studies should expand to other regions and include mixed-methods approaches for richer analysis.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant linguistic challenges faced by international students in Brazil, framed through Kachru's expanding circle and translanguaging Theory. These frameworks provide valuable insights into the interplay between language proficiency, communication barriers, and multilingual strategies. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive language support programs to foster effective integration and global academic collaboration. While English proficiency in Brazil is increasing in certain educational and professional contexts, significant challenges remain for the broader population. Addressing these language barriers, especially for international students and professionals, are critical to fostering effective communication and collaboration in a globalized world. Further research should examine the socioeconomic and regional factors influencing language acquisition and discuss how educational interventions can improve proficiency. This study confirmed that language proficiency remains a significant barrier for international students and professionals in Brazil. While English is seen as important for academic and professional success, a lack of confidence in speaking English affects communication and integration. Further studies could explore the role of Portuguese proficiency in overcoming communication challenges for nonnative speakers in Brazil. Additionally, long-term studies could examine how language proficiency improves over time as students and professionals become more integrated into Brazilian society.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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