

A New Way to Teach Culture: Social Justice in the Language Classroom

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Inception

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Abstract

"A New Way to Teach Culture: Social Justice in the Language Classroom" explores the need for social justice education in the English language classroom in North America. In light of English as a global language, the current socio-political climate of America necessitates a need for a deeper awareness of current social justice issues. By taking advantage of the interrelationship between language and culture, language teachers have the potential to challenge the dominant ideologies present in the English language by teaching culture through a new lens of social justice. I outline the colonial roots of English that have contributed to its current position in society, and I then describe how language teachers can challenge this dominant way of thinking in the classroom.

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The current spread of English, as a global language, carries implications that cannot be ignored. Throughout the last 500 years, English has spread worldwide largely by means of British colonization and later by American economic influence (Fennell

2001, 243). English has been used as a tool for colonial control and expansion, resulting in the loss of language, culture, and identity for many people around the world. Nonetheless, the economic incentive to learn English has resulted in an increasing number of EAL-learning immigrants in North America. In fact, “English language learners represent the fastest growing student population in [American] public schools today” (Conners 2016, 248). Language carries the culture and ideologies of its speakers, and the Western bias of superiority in the English language reinforces existing social structures of inequality in the Western world.

In light of English as a global language, the current sociopolitical climate in North America necessitates a need for social justice education to be implemented in the classroom. In this paper, I will argue that English language teachers in North America are uniquely situated to become active agents of social change for their EAL students, many of whom are deeply affected by social inequality. I will demonstrate that by taking advantage of the interrelationship between language and culture, language teachers have the potential to challenge the dominant ideologies present in the English language by teaching culture through a new lens of social justice education. I will outline the colonial roots of English that have contributed to the current Western sociolinguistic climate, and I will then describe how language teachers can challenge this dominant way of thinking in the classroom. While most of the research discussed in this paper is based on American sources, Canada faces similar ideological concerns regarding language and power. The issue of social justice in language education concerns North America as a whole, and the concepts in this paper are applicable to both Canadian and American contexts.

There has been much literature devoted to discussing the imperialistic potential that English carries with its global status. English has become a power symbol and a “tool for elitism” (Fennell 2001, 260) which widens the gap of social privilege. According to

Guo and Beckett, English as a *lingua franca* is both the result of colonialism and a method by which it is sustained (2007, 117). Crystal posits language death as one major consequence of global English (2003, 20), which is made clear by the fact that “of the approximately one thousand indigenous languages spoken in America before its colonization by English-speakers, only approximately 200 survive today” (Fennell 2001, 265). Additionally, English carries certain Eurocentric ideologies that have the potential to undermine local cultural values and identities in the countries in which it is being taught (Guo and Beckett 2007, 119). However, English is also seen to take on a malleable nature as it is adapted to different intercultural situations (Jenkins et al. 2011, 303). While the “native speaker ideal” has long dominated English language learning and has been a clear example of linguicism in action (Guo and Beckett 2007, 122), recent years have witnessed a shift toward the importance of intercultural communication, which multilingual speakers of English may benefit from. Nonetheless, there is a need in today’s globalizing world for critical multiculturalism in language learning, which “makes explicit hidden or masked structures, discourses and relations of inequity that discriminate against one group and enhance the privileges of another” (126). This need is especially evident in the United States, which is home to 70 percent of the world’s native English speakers (Fennell 2001, 257). Harper (2011, 517) posits that the neutrality of America’s language policies could be a strategic form of linguistic imperialism that reinforces Western ideologies. It is evident that English carries a complex power structure in the United States which requires further examination.

According to Suhanthie Motha (2016, 110), “English is a fundamentally racialized language.” This is evident by its colonial history in which English was elevated above other languages and English cultures and identities were privileged around the world. In language learning, the “native speaker ideal” is supported by the colonial belief that the native speaker somehow “owns” English and

therefore holds a superior position in society, so idolizing the native speaker also elevates the Western ways of thinking that the native speaker is seen to represent, resulting in a wider social divide (Mott-Smith 2016, 99). One problematic assumption carried in the English language is the binary mindset of “self” and “other” which was first established when British colonies distinguished themselves from the original inhabitants of the lands they were colonizing. This “superiority” mindset became embedded in the English language and is still widely seen in the Western world today (Pennycook 1998).

Despite the belief that we are living in a post-racial society, discrimination based on language and culture still exists today in the less overt, but no less detrimental, forms of linguicism and neo-racism. Linguicism can be clearly seen in U.S. politicians’ mandate that immigrants must “speak American” (Chan 2016, 138-39). Similarly, neo-racism can be seen in the harsh immigration stances taken by some Americans who believe that immigrants should assimilate completely to Western culture and ideals (Lawton 2013). Both of these types of discrimination directly impact immigrant English language learners’ academic success and overall well-being (Chan 2016, 139). The educational system plays a crucial role in maintaining this societal power imbalance because it is a structure that every American passes through (Wong and Grant 2016, 172). However, this also makes it a potential place for the status quo to be challenged. It is crucial that English language teachers recognize the colonial impact that English carries for many language learners in order to avoid “unwittingly participating in cultural and linguistic genocide” (168).

The Western-based binary categories of “self” and “other” have found their way into the language teaching profession, most notably in the categorization of “native versus non-native speaker” (Selvi et al. 2016, 85). In the same manner that racism is a “socially constructed” phenomenon (Omi and Winant 1986), native versus

non-native speaker categorizations are socially and contextually constructed, and letting them go unquestioned is problematic. Splitting language speakers into binary categories ignores the reality that each individual experience is unique and fails to allow students to negotiate identity in the English-speaking world (Selvi et al. 2016, 86-7). Language is malleable, which means the ideologies carried through language have the power to change. As long as these ideologies are unnamed, their power will be subtly reinforced. When teachers provide students the opportunity to verbalize the ideologies such as “self” and “other” present in English, they become agents for social change. Jennifer Mott-Smith demonstrated this case in point by creating a curriculum for her ESL classroom which allowed her students to examine the colonial roots of English and the different types of English around the world. This resulted in her students “constructing themselves as knowers and resisting the colonialist discourse that positions them as unsophisticated thinkers” (2016, 100-1). This is a clear example of the way that challenging Western binary thinking can help students begin to find their identity and agency in the English-speaking world. Language learners, specifically undocumented immigrants, are much more than “non-native” English speakers. Thus, “the fluidity of privilege and marginalization necessitates going beyond categorical binaries and the one-size-fits-all approach” (Selvi et al. 2016, 91).

The current U.S. sociopolitical climate presents significant challenges for undocumented immigrants who comprise about 65,000 of American high school graduates each year (Hermes 2008, 16). The challenges these immigrants face include “poverty, assimilation, language barriers, violence in their community or home environment, lack of access to health care, and mental health issues” (Eusebio and Mendoza n.d., 5). These obstacles are underpinned by the intolerance that has increased due to stereotypical and often inaccurate fear-based depictions of undocumented immigrants. These stereotypical narratives “impede global progress and prevent social recognition” (Poteau 2016, 236),

which is specifically detrimental to undocumented immigrants who have very little recognition to begin with. Stereotyping in the language classroom can have similar effects: it is a form of binary Western thinking at work and does not make space for learners to linguistically express their full identity. Additionally, stereotypes in teaching material can be detrimental to the goal of language acquisition itself. Research has shown that “curricula that lack recognition of a learner’s language background...can impede literacy development” (236). Thus, it is crucial for language teachers to provide legitimate recognition to undocumented language learners who often have no official papers and very slim chances of going to college or achieving their professional dreams. Honneth (2003) states that “recognition locates the core of all experiences of injustice in the withdrawal of social recognition, in the phenomena of humiliation and disrespect” (134). In this case, teachers become active agents of social justice when they move beyond the social stereotyped narrative and create a classroom environment that provides learners with individual recognition. Social recognition allows students to find their voice, which is an integral part of the language learning process. By creating an environment of recognition and inclusion, teachers are actively combatting misperceptions Americans may hold of undocumented immigrants and are thus moving towards a more unified nation (Poteau 2016, 236).

The challenges faced by undocumented immigrants are further complicated by the misperceptions – both social and economic – that immigrants themselves carry about life in America. In one qualitative study of American international students, “thirty-five percent of the students reported that they knew nothing of racism or believed that it no longer existed in the United States,” whereas only four percent of those students had not experienced any discrimination in America (Chan 2016, 140). Immigrant students have experienced lack of academic support and social exclusion from both students and professors alike, both of which can lead to

decreased motivation and self-confidence (Lee and Rice 2007). In this sense, linguicism is dramatically affecting students' "access to higher education, a meaningful career, and emotional well-being" (Chan 2016, 139). While undocumented immigrants are guaranteed access to free public education, there is almost no financial support available for their higher education. As stated by Michael Conners (2016), students are "pushed to graduate from high school (in four years), and attend college, and yet are not being given the financial and legal support to do so" (251). The harsh reality that many immigrant language learners face "can often create disillusionment for undocumented students, many of whom have already internalized US values that guarantee upward mobility for those who succeed academically" (Abrego 2006, 223). Students' misperceptions can be detrimental to their mental health once they realize the full extent of the economic barriers they face in America (Lee and Walsh 2015, 58). The misperceptions held by immigrant language learners are reinforced when they internalize the cultural belief that they are living in a post-racial society. In reality, the discrimination they face is evident. It is here that language teachers have a crucial role to play as agents of social justice by helping students become aware of the inequality in the world today and to critically examine this reality (Lee and Walsh 2015, 53).

It is clear that there is a need for social justice education in the language classroom, perhaps more today than ever before. Through interactive and experiential learning, social justice education aims to "help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression both in the social system and in their personal lives" (Bell 2007, 2). Social justice education serves many purposes: it helps students learn to think critically, it provides recognition for students, it encourages self-reflection, and it builds intercultural competence which is an important aspect of language learning in light of English as a global language (Poteau 2016, 237). All of these aspects help students develop a sense of identity and agency, increasing their opportunity for success which will lead to the betterment of America

at large (Conners 2016, 252). We now turn to a discussion of acknowledging language and culture in the English language classroom.

Language is the medium by which cultural values are expressed. Sociocultural competence is also an important outcome in language learning (Rodríguez 2015, 3). Therefore, teaching English as an additional language is inextricably connected to teaching culture. Because English carries such a complex colonial history, this complex interrelationship must be acknowledged by language teachers in the implementation of social justice education. In an effort to promote social equality, some language teachers have moved toward the “deterritorialization” (Hardt and Negri 2000) of English, which attempts to “reduce the connectedness between the English language and particular places” (Motha 2016, 108). While globalization has rendered English no longer solely representative of Western geography and culture (Zheng 2014, 35), power structures are still present in different English dialects. Thus, teaching students that all dialects of English are equal and independent from cultural situations fails to acknowledge the linguistic power imbalance in the Western world, which can serve to reinforce the existing inequality. In this way, it is impossible to fully separate the teaching of language and culture. However, another approach suggested by Suhanthie Motha (2016, 109-11) states that although the effects of colonization cannot be removed, their power can be greatly diminished when they are adequately framed and critically examined. She puts forward the possibility of “provincializing” English, which involves educating learners and teachers “of the ways in which the language is racialized and colonized, of how learning English changes us, and of how participating in the teaching of English changes the world” (108). In this way, provincializing English allows students to develop a critical understanding of the way that “different varieties of English are situated among networks of power within a history of slavery and colonization” (111). When teachers create a safe and inclusive

classroom environment, it is possible for them to share political beliefs for the sake of allowing students the opportunity to make informed decisions, regardless of whether or not they agree with the teacher (114; see also Lee and Walsh 2015, 62). This increases the students' agency as active contributors to society, rather than passive recipients of ideologies that may be passed down through the educational system.

A practical method by which provincializing English can be implemented in the language classroom is through the teaching of "deep culture." Language has traditionally been taught from a "surface culture" perspective, including things such as famous people and places, national foods, and cultural celebrations. Surface culture tends to be learned in a "safe, neutral and congratulatory" manner in order to avoid undue conflict in the classroom. However, this method of language learning tends to reinforce cultural stereotypes without encouraging critical thinking skills in the classroom (Rodríguez 2015, 1-3), which can further increase the social divide faced by international students. The teaching of deep culture can supplement this traditional approach in light of social justice education. This type of education fosters an awareness of topics such as "race, gender, class, ideologies, power, and oppression" and encourages critical reflection on these ideologies (15). As a result, this can reduce stereotypes and misrepresentations of all cultures involved in the language learning process, while simultaneously increasing the intercultural competence of the students. Studies have shown a direct correlation between students' language competence and their intercultural awareness, which suggests that teaching deep culture is linked to a productive and effective grasp of the target language (14-15). Similarly, critical multiculturalism challenges the ideologies present in culture and provides a new lens through which language teachers can address the complex relationship of language and culture (14; Guo and Beckett 2007, 126). In this way, teachers do not attempt to separate language and culture in the classroom. Rather, they take

an innovative approach in teaching culture by using language learning as a tool to allow students to develop a more critical understanding of the culture that English represents. By engaging with culturally relevant material and participating in critical written and oral responses, students can greatly benefit from social justice education in the language classroom.

There are many practical implications for language teachers who choose to engage in social justice education. It is no easy task, and educators must be willing to take risks in the classroom that may pose threats to the larger institutions and potentially to their own teaching career. Additionally, teachers face the challenge of creating a safe classroom environment that “[promotes] positive cross-national and cross-cultural understanding” (Osborn 2006, 17) while still equipping students to meet rigorous language requirements such as standardized tests (Selvi et al. 2016, 90). Additionally, it is imperative that teachers examine their own ideologies and privileges that may affect their teaching (Faust 2016, 151). There are numerous possibilities for incorporating social justice in the classroom, including the effective use of technology, awareness of the bias in teaching materials and pedagogical practices, and careful examination of one’s own metalanguage in the classroom (Chan 2016, 143; Selvi et al. 2016, 89-90). Should language teachers choose to move towards implementing this type of education, the potential impact on the social climate of North America is large.

The global spread of English has many implications, but they need not all be negative. Language has the power to create a new lens by which to see the world. There is clearly a need for social justice education in North America today, and there is no better place to start than the language classroom itself. In this paper, I have demonstrated the way that language teachers can use their expertise in language and culture as a force for social change amidst a complex sociopolitical climate. Language is a powerful tool in the hands of its speakers. By promoting social equality through English

language teaching, teachers are helping students become active agents of change in the world while giving them the language skills to be able to succeed. Fostering an awareness of language and power imbalances in Canadian and American contexts has important implications for future global progress. While there remains much to be done in terms of the education systems at large, there are important and meaningful steps that can be taken by every language educator that have the power to make apparent the hidden biases in the English language and help the world to become a place of greater social equality and opportunity.

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