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Politics of TESOL
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As an English language teacher with four years experience, my focus has always been on the classroom- methodologies, approaches, and how to be an effective language educator. Recently my focus began shifting to implications of our profession beyond the classroom to the communities, provinces, nations, and world we work in. The following are some of the questions and quotations that have helped me explore and re-evaluate my path as an English language teacher.

Can English be neutral? Can language be separated from culture and politics?

"To view it as neutral is to take a very particular view of language and also to assume that the apparent international status of English raises it above local social, cultural, political, or economic concerns." (Pennycook, 1997, pp23-24)

"To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization." (Fanon, 1967, pp 17-18 found in Pennycook, 1997, p1)

"English does have one clear advantage, attitudinally and linguistically: it has acquired a neutrality in a linguistic context where native languages, dialects, and styles sometimes have acquired undesirable connotations...It was originally the foreign(alien) ruler's language, but that drawback is often overshadowed by what it can do for its users. True, English is associated with a small and elite group, but it is in their rule that the neutrality of a language becomes vital." (Kachru, 1986, pp8-9 found in Pennycook, 1994, pp9-10).

"Languages are not equal in political or social status, particularly in multilingual contexts. How does English relate to other languages in a multilingual speaker's repertoire? Why does someone use English rather than a local language? What characteristic patterns are there in the use of English by non-native speakers?" (Graddol, 1997, p12)

Are we, as English language teachers, neutral?

"ELT practices cannot be reduced to a set of disconnected techniques but rather must be seen as part of larger cultural, discursive or ideological orders." Pennycook 1994 pp 167.

"What we teach and particularly the way we teach reflects our attitudes to society in general and the individual's place in society, and that our own educational practice is an implicit statement of power relationships, of how we see authority in the classroom and by extension in society outside the classroom." (Prodromou 1988, pp 74-75 found in Pennycook, 1994, p168)

"EFL approaches, like all foreign language teaching, positions the learner as an outsider, as a foreigner- one who struggles to attain acceptance by the target community. The target language is always someone else's mother tongue. The learner is constructed as a linguistic tourist- allowed to visit, but without rights of residence and required always to respect the superior authority of the native speaker." (Graddol, 2006, pp 82)

Is the spread of English beneficial?

*"To view it as beneficial is to take a rather naively optimistic position on global relations and to ignore the relationships between English and inequitable distributions and flows of **wealth, resources, culture, and knowledge**." (Pennycook 1994, pp 24, bold type added)*

English and employment opportunity-

"As developing economies mature and per capita income rises, so social and economic inequalities also seem to grow: proficiency in English may be one of the mechanisms for dividing those who have access to wealth and information from those who don't." (Graddol, 1997, p37)

Proficiency in English is not merely an instrumental affair - it is too often used as a gatekeeping mechanism. The lack of an examination certificate, or signs, even trivial, that a writer or speaker is not a native or fluent speaker may be sufficient to bar access to certain jobs. (Graddol, 1997, p38)

In your home contexts or previous working contexts, how does English act as a “gatekeeper” to employment opportunities?

What kind of jobs require English proficiency in your home/previous context?

Have you or somebody you know been granted/denied access to opportunities because of their level of proficiency in English?

Who has access to English in order to move up the social ladder?

English and education-

“Nobody could go on to wear the undergraduate red gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the papers in all other subjects, unless they had a credit (not even a simple pass!) in English. Thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to holders of an English-language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom. (Ngugi 1985 p 115, found in Pennycook, 1994, pp. 14-15)

“The study of English remains a purposeless pursuit excepting as a passport to a degree and a convenient ladder to a job and consequent privileges.” (Pattanayak 1969, p. 44) (from Pennycook pg 21)

English-medium education...is often seen by both parents and children as a means to economic success, but it has been argued that where teachers are not fully proficient in the English language and where there is little use of English in the community the aspirant language learner will be condemned to a second-rate education. (Graddol, 1997)

“One of the reasons why English education is such a sensitive matter in many countries is because the distribution of English proficiency may affect the ‘balance of power’ between ethnic groups and for that reason be subject to political management.” (Graddol, 1997, p39)

What is your reaction to the above quotes?

In your previous contexts, what role does English play in education?

At what age and for what reason are students learning English?

Is English-medium education a part of schooling? If so, what effect does it have on students?

Is a certain level of proficiency required(officially or unofficially) for higher education?

How does this affect future education or job opportunities for better or worse?

What choices do we have as English language teachers?

English and information inequality

“A large proportion of textbooks in the world are published in English and designed either for the internal English-speaking market or for an international market. In both cases, students around the world are not only obliged to reach a high level of competence in English to pursue their studies, but they are also dependent on form of Western knowledge that are of limited value and of extreme inappropriacy to the local context.” (Pennycook, 1994, p20)

“English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising. Over two thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three quarters of the world's mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. English radio programmes are received by over 150 million in 120 countries. (Crystal 1987 p358) The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language

For those in developing countries, access to knowledge is a costly, problematic business and there is growing concern that unequal access to information technologies will create new distinctions between the information poor and the information rich.(Graddol, 1997, p39)

What is your reaction to the quotes?

How will access or lack of access to information in English affect people in your teaching context?
Is there a strong desire for students from your context to study abroad in an English speaking country?
Why?
How will the dominance of western forms of knowledge impact the diversity of cultures and perspectives around the world?
What choices do we have as teachers?

English and the local culture and language

English and local culture:

"The potentially negative ramifications of the relationship between modernization and the English language are also intrinsic to the EFL learning situation itself and can easily be intensified with unfortunate affective results. It hardly needs pointing out that the presumptuous, ethnocentric spirit of westernization readily finds its way into EFL instructional materials and instructor opinions, attitudes, and approaches." (Casewit, 1985, p.12, found in Pennycook, p 145)

English is closely connected to the global spread of popular culture through music and films, thus it is hard to maintain that English is not ideologically encumbered. (Pennycook, 1997)

If language and culture are integrated, how does the spread of English affect local culture in your teaching context?
In the past, have you seen ethnocentric attitudes from western teachers to their students?
What choices do we have as teachers?

English and local language:

This trend towards reduced linguistic diversity is the outcome of global demographic and economic trends: the local cultures and lifestyles which supported small community languages are disappearing and their speakers are usually those with least political or cultural power. (Graddol, 1997)

"When English becomes the first choice as a second language, when it is the language in which so much is written and in which so much of the visual media occur, it is constantly pushing other languages out of the way, curtailing their usage in both qualitative and quantitative terms." (Pennycook, 1994, p 14)

How does the spread of English affect the language in your teaching context?
What attitudes do people have toward English?
What choices do we have as teachers.

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