English as a Linguistic and Intellectual Weapon against Nativespeakerism

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Over the last three years, we have been conducting an ethnographic research study on how the students enrolled in the TESOL program at the state university in the city of Oaxaca, Mexico. Oaxaca, situated at the South-western part of the country, is one of the poorest states economically and one of the richest in terms of ethnic diversity (Martínez Vásquez, V.R, 2007). Most of the students enrol in the TESOL program with very little knowledge of English. Within this context we have been working on ethnographically describing how these young adults learn, use and teach English. They perform their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, youth and social class while constructing various learning cultures that they use to develop their own styles of language creativity. These performances are their linguistic and intellectual weapons against the hegemonic discourse of Standard English and native-speakerism (Canagarajah, S., 2004; Holliday, A., 2005). We refer to this as performing English with a postcolonial accent (Clemente & Higgins, 2007b.)

In this paper we present ethnographic illustrations of how these language learners use the linguistic contexts, within their school or outside it, as local stages to perform English for their own uses and desires. We have composed three examples of how the students find creative ways to be themselves in this other language: 1) Learners who organized themselves into an advocacy committee to reform the English curriculum; 2) A class that composed poetry in English that was also used by another student-teacher when teaching her own English class; and 3) a former student that confronted the hegemony of the colonial difference when performing English in his professional life (Mignolo, W., 2002).

Finally we will discuss how, using these performances, these learners constructed a context for politics of affinity through their use of English. They see English as a weapon not for cultural homogenization but rather for forms of intercultural communication with other language users throughout the postcolonial world. By recomposing their language performances as relationships

of affinity, they were able to put aside the discussion on the native speaker and to deconstruct the identity locations of non-native speakers of English. Furthermore, they were able to step out of the contradictions of the colonial difference (the geopolitics of knowledge production) through their performances. By being themselves in this other language they felt better able to connect with each other and to seek affinity with other postcolonial language learners of English (Clemente, A. &. Higgins, M., 2007; Derrida, J., 1998; Dietz, G., 2003; Garcia Canclini, N., 2004; Haraway, D., 1991; Kurmaravadivelu, B., 2007; Mignolo, W., 2002; Mouffe, C., 2005; Ortner, S., 2006).

Curriculum Revision Clique

In the summer of 2006, six students in their last term of the TESOL program put forward an interesting and challenging project, suggesting what they thought to be a more innovative and adequate English curriculum. Adriana, Rebeca, Odelma, Dalila, Heidee and Angelica started their undergraduate program in 2002. They formed a close group that was committed and hard working but at the same time, quiet and reserved. In their last year, they were all accepted for an exchange program at UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), the national public university in Mexico City. There, they quickly learned the difference between the provinces and the metropolitan academic world:

> We are about to graduate and feel like we don't have the proficiency level we should have…. We know how to use English grammar however; we don't use the language in everyday contexts. It seems that teachers prefer to only teach from their textbook and they focus more on teaching us the grammar rather than encouraging us to actually use the language…. In the classrooms, because (of) such a contrasting level among the students, those with lower skills have problems of low-esteem and don't like to participate…. We don't think we are prepared well enough to be good English teachers.

The Curriculum Revision Clique was aware that if they wanted to propose major changes in the existing program they needed to attain input from other students, and to find out the views from the faculty and the authorities. So, for their senior thesis project, they carried out their own

investigation on how others members of the community felt about the curriculum. Based on this information, they put together their proposal for innovation which was presented to the faculty for their consideration.

Their major concerns focused on the questions of teaching methodology and content. First of all, they proposed an approach to teaching whose central element was to be on students' language needs. With the stress put on the learner, the teacher's decisions about linguistic aspects (vocabulary, grammar, etc) and methodological aspects (*how* to teach) had to be based on the specific needs of the students the teacher was dealing with. That was their way to conceive of a student-centred approach: everything should evolve around the language needs of the students.

But more important than their proposal, these students told the institution and its faculty that they were strong enough to critique their teachers and tell them where they were wrong and what to do to change the situation.

Postcolonial English poetics: Creating and recreating the language

This ethnographic example involves ten students who at the end of their TESOL program asked the institution for a English writing course, since they felt that it was he weakest of their linguistic abilities. The professor assigned for the course decided that, as a way to develop writing skills in these students, he needed to set the conditions that would allow students to explore how to be critical and creative writers. The beginning was very painful, for the students were reluctant to write about themselves and were too self-conscious about their classmates reading what they had written. Fortunately, little by little, they felt more confident and willing to develop the tasks designed by their professor which resulted in around two hundred texts (mainly poems). At the end of the course, the students felt so satisfied and empowered by their outcome that they decided to put their writings into a printed volume that could be read by others. These are two short examples of their writings:

And I have learned

by Rosa Araceli

And I have learned to be persistent,

To crawl and walk.

And I have learned to be strong when I fall down, but to get back up.

And I have learned to have ambitions

But to know limitations.

And I have learned to recognize

The capacity of others as well as my own.

 And I have learned a lot of things

And I have learned to love myself.

About hate

by Marianela

White is a crypt

A thousand buzzings blowing through your ears

Like a delicious ice cream salted

Cinnamon suffocating you

A repulsive cockroach you best friend.

This tale temporarily ends with two current students using the experience of this class for their senior thesis on teaching methodology (Cisneros Villalba, B. & Valenzuela Ricardez R., 2006) and a third student-teacher, not involved in the poetry course, using their poems to teach English to teenage English students.

Ervin's involvement with English

Ervin graduated about six years ago. As student he was one of the more political and radical students of his generation and was well known for *Ladrillos Muertos* an alternative newspaper for the students which addressed a range of domestic and international political issues. Some of

his professors considered Ervin too critical and a little bit irresponsible, while others acknowledged his sensitive and skilful style for teaching English. Since he left the university, he has played different roles connected to his skills with English (a translator, presenter and business assistant for a chocolate company, a mediator between a Human Rights Commission and the people of a Oaxacan community, a interpreter between the police and a captured drug dealer who pretended not to speak Spanish, a improvised language assistant for an American journalist who was reporting on Oaxaca's social movement in 2006, among many others). From all these roles he has discovered that he does not like the way business people mistreat and exploit their workers. From his experiences with the police and the social movement he has realized that his command of English has put him in rather difficult situations. From all of them he has learned that: 'English is already part of me and I cannot get rid of it'. As we can see, his various language adventures have located him within the complex social folds of postcolonial Oaxaca, particularly in his dealings with international commerce; police and drug trade, and issues of human rights. His everyday life has forced him to navigate the reality of the colonial difference. It seems that he has successfully claimed the rights of userhood of English through his thoughts and actions (Kandiah, T., 1998) . Moreover, although his attainment of user rights of English is complete, he finds that success has come with personal and political costs.

Conclusion

These three stories on curriculum reform, poetry experimentation and navigating the daily realities of the colonial difference, make for illuminating tales about having the confidence to say what you want with your own particular postcolonial accent. They have changed the script in terms of how to use and present their language performances in various linguistics contexts.

In these stories we see the absence of the native speaker in different ways. In the case of the curriculum revision clique and poetry writing project, the native speaker was never mentioned. In their various proposals, guides, and models offered, there was no discussion if the English should be modelled in terms of meeting some kind of standards: their concern was that what was to be taught should meet the needs of the students in terms of their communication desires. The poetry project students never felt nor desired that their writing was to be a demonstration of their command over assumed standards of English, but to illustrate that they were quite able to

navigate their way in 'the seas of creative expression' in this language. In both cases, the native speaker was not allowed entrance into the theatre of these students' performances. Ervin never worried about whether his language performances were or were not meeting the standards of English. Actually, he was more worried and confused about the way his command of English got him involved in all these frustrating but also dangerous situations. In the end, he accepts his passion for using this language in the way he wanted to.

In all three cases, in their refusal to play the role of the non-native speaker, they were also removing themselves from the hegemonic authority of the colonial difference (Holliday, A., 2005 Kandiah, T., 1998;. Kurmaravadivelu, B., 2007; Mignolo, W., 2002). By resisting the authority of the language regime of English to set the standards of their performances they were able to write scripts that fit their needs and aspirations (Makoni, S. and Pennycook, A. 2006; Woolard, K., 2005). Thus, in the confidence of their performances they were moving away from the safety of their learning cultures towards the more problematic location of being language users in the multicultural and multilingual context of Oaxaca and beyond (Clemente and Higgins 2007b).

Further, within these activities one can note also the presence of an emerging politics of affinity (Dietz, G., 2003; Haraway, D., 1991; Mouffe, C., 2005). The actions of these young language actors were not just directed towards their own immediate goals, but were concerned with opening new spaces for the learning and use of language for future students. The possibilities they had attained or envisioned, they want to past on to others. Their quests were not directed towards the ownership of their successes, but directed towards making their quests available and useful for other learners in the future. They were not concerned with turning their learning cultural experiences into a set of how to do recipes. Their interests were directed towards suggesting other kinds of possibilities that were possible (Bauman 1973; Foley, D., 2007).

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