

Chapter 9

Flipping the Script on the Language Teacher/Researcher: Language Learning as a Vital Tool to Decolonize Our Practice

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ABSTRACT

Standard language ideologies, hierarchical language structures and resulting ethnic and racial inequalities have long been reinforced within and by means of the TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) field. These standards and structures echo the colonial history of forced language assimilation and indigenous erasure, a history that in many ways continues today. This chapter proposes language learning and ongoing reflection on the language learning process as a critical framework that English language teachers and researchers should adopt and apply to their work. When teachers and researchers take on the language learner identity inside and outside of classroom/research spaces, they equip themselves to dismantle rigid power structures in TESOL, transforming the colonizer narrative into one of decolonization, collaboration, and equity.

INTRODUCTION

Standard language ideologies have long been leveraged to create and maintain social, cultural and economic hierarchies that perpetuate racial and ethnic inequalities in the US and around the world. Language is considered standard when it adheres to the explicit rules and/or implicit expectations of society's elite—those at the top of the educational, political and/or socioeconomic ladder. As James Milroy (2001) describes, standardization is not just about “uniformity” but about who in society uses a (certain type of) language and how they are associated (or not) with “prestige” and “legitimacy” (pp. 531–2). Prestige and legitimacy are deeply racialized concepts, made evident in prevalent language biases. For instance, variations of English associated with white, historically colonial powers (British English,

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Standard American English, Australian English) come with perceptions of correctness, legitimacy and prestige, and are taught and otherwise institutionalized as “correct” English; meanwhile, variations of English associated with non-white, historically colonized peoples (e.g. Black Standard Vernacular, Indian English, Philippine English) are perceived as less correct, legitimate, and prestigious, though no less uniform within their own standards (Rubdy, 2015). Frantz Fanon (1970) famously depicts the relationship between whiteness and linguistic power as a product of colonization in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (p. 18). Throughout the book, Fanon describes how French colonization in the Caribbean tethered whiteness to correctness and humanity (and blackness to wrongness and inhumanity) through language.

These biases about language and race have very real social and economic consequences that are actively reproduced by academia. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power* illustrates how standard language use translates to symbolic competence within society; it grants access to being considered credible and knowledgeable, key gateways to power and upward mobility. Teaching and research are key institutions that uphold the relationship between standard language and symbolic competence due to their control over “correctness” and “expertise.” Teachers and researchers are deemed the valid constructors and distributors of knowledge based on how well they have learned and can reproduce elite academic standards. In turn, education and science continued to be used to privilege the knowledge, language and culture of dominant groups and oppress that of minoritized and/or colonized ones. On these bases, the reproduction and rigidity of standard languages have been key mechanisms of colonization, indigenous erasure, elitist language hierarchies and other institutionalized processes that perpetuate ethnic and racial inequalities.

Today’s critical TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) practitioner increasingly recognizes and theorizes the need to decolonize their practice, but perhaps falls short in identifying actionable ways to do so. Determining such methods necessarily involves seeing the deep-seated linguistic power dynamics in English language teaching and research, reflecting on how one consciously and unconsciously feeds into these dynamics and finding ways to disrupt this system in one’s everyday practices. Applying such methods takes dedication, time and humility as an expert admitting they must unlearn and reframe the very systems and benchmarks that propelled them to their current position of academic and cultural power. This kind of time and humility can and should be grounded in the practitioner (re)positioning themselves as a learner and engaging in ongoing critical reflection about their learning.

This chapter proposes language learning itself as a process English language teachers (ELTs) and researchers should utilize as a foundation for critical praxis. By learning a new language, teachers and researchers have the opportunity to position themselves as a non-expert as well as promote multilingual normalcy. By continuously reflecting upon the learning process, they can identify ways to use their critical linguistic awareness to disrupt elitist academic and linguistic values in their classrooms and research. Of course, most ELTs and language researchers already have experience studying non-native languages, many in fact being non-native English speakers (NNESs) who themselves have spent years studying English. This proposal to continue learning new languages, especially those most marginalized in one’s social or regional context, can and should be used by teachers and researchers of any language background to enhance critical linguistic awareness and self-reflection, especially if it is not already an ongoing practice.

The remainder of this chapter discusses how and why TESOL practitioners should leverage language learning and translanguaging to inform their teaching/research methods. The chapter identifies how

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