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CRITICAL CONTENT AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE FOR TESOL TEACHERS

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There is an ongoing debate in the area of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) about what should constitute the knowledge-base of language teachers. This paper offers an analysis of the major opposing views in the debate and suggests an alternative critical approach to language teacher knowledge. While recognising various types of teacher knowledge, I focus on two types: content and cultural knowledge. I argue that content knowledge should be informed by critical pedagogy and that cultural knowledge needs to include more than mere factual information about ways of life in other countries. Cultural knowledge needs to be informed by a deep sense of commitment on the part of the TESOL teacher to understand his/her students' social and cultural contexts and how these shape their approach to learning and attitudes to English as a second or foreign language.

REVOLUTIONS IN TESOL TEACHER EDUCATION

In a recent article published in TESOL Quarterly, Yates and Muchisky (2003) expressed concerns about a quiet revolution currently occurring in the area of TESOL teacher education. Before commenting on this concern I would like first to elaborate on this quiet revolution, which marks one of the most recent developments in TESOL teacher education.

This revolution was proclaimed by Johnson (2000) in the introduction to a volume of articles entitled: *Teacher Education*. Basing her comments on a previous article by Freeman and Johnson (1998), Johnson states that TESOL teacher education is experiencing a fundamental change in the nature of what it offers to teachers and in what it conceives teachers' essential knowledge base to be. The contention is

that some teacher education programmes now focus much more on teachers' socio-cultural experiences of learning to teach than on the technical and methodological aspects of teaching. There is, it is argued, a downplay of the role of language knowledge, second language acquisition and teaching skills in favour of the role of sociocultural factors and local contexts in which teachers work. Contrary to what Yates and Muchinsky propose teachers are encouraged to see language as more than just form and structure and their classroom decisions not limited to how, where and when to use linguistic structures (Freeman and Johnson, 2004). Talking about this quiet revolution, Johnson argues:

> It is stirring the very essence of what stands at the core of TESOL teacher education: a core that has long been based on the subject matter of language teaching and less on the sociocultural processes of learning to teach (2000, p. 1).

Freeman & Johnson (1998) argue that language teachers have for a long time been excluded from the debate on teacher knowledge and state that this situation is ironic as it is in their classrooms that researchers learn about what teaching and learning involve. It is only very recently that research studies started including teachers and investigating their views about what constitutes teacher knowledge (Johnson, 1999; Bailey and Nunan, 1996). In addition, teachers' lack of contribution might be due to the academic and theoretical nature of this debate, which might be viewed of little relevance to practicing teachers. Freeman and Johnson trace this situation back to the effect that second language acquisition (SLA) studies have had on language teacher education in the last four decades. SLA is a branch of applied linguistics that focuses on the complex cognitive, psychological and social processes involved in learning a second language (Ellis, 1997). The discipline of SLA is rooted in first language acquisition and cognitive psychology and language learning is investigated from an individualist perspective with very little attention paid to the role of interaction in the social context. While acknowledging the role of language acquisition in teacher base knowledge, Freeman and Johnson strongly claim, "much current knowledge in SLA may be of limited use and applicability to practicing teachers" (1998, p.

411). Talking about course work of an academic nature such as SLA studies, linguistics, pedagogical grammar and educational psychology, Freeman (1994) states, "there is no evidence, apart from anecdotal reports, that these things make a person a better or more effective teacher" (p.8). This view is not shared by all TESOL professionals. Nunan and Lamb (1996) recognize that language teachers can benefit from educational psychology. They explain how an understanding of affective factors such as motivation, anxiety and attitude can help teachers make classroom management and pedagogical decisions.

It is not difficult to understand Freeman and Johnson's dissatisfaction with the effects of SLA on TESOL teacher education. Many language teachers will probably acknowledge the limitations of SLA and what it offers them in practice (Krashen, 1983; Markee, 1997; Nunan 1991). One of these limitations is that the technical knowledge produced by SLA studies is not easily accessible to practicing teachers. Terms and labels such as input, intake and teachability hypothesis form part of a discourse specificity (Kramsch, 1995). It is also not always clear how this technical knowledge about how languages are learned can be transferred into practical knowledge that teachers can employ in their classrooms. It is also only relatively recently that research in second and foreign language education started considering the role of the social context and the socially negotiated processes involved in language learning (e.g., Lantolf & Appel, 1997; Ahmed, 1997; Platt and Troudi, 1997; Williams & Burden 1997, Platt and Brooks, 2002). The field of TESOL has also seen in the last two decades an increasing number of research studies based on a social constructivist view of language learning that allows readers to hear teachers' voices and views on the nature of teaching and how they learn to teach in different social contexts (e.g., Carter, 1990, Buchmann, 1997; Freeman, 1994; Bailey and Nunan, 1996; Johnson, 1998, 1999; Johnston, 2000). With this shift in theoretical framework from individualist to social constructivist and this increasing body of knowledge about how teachers learn to teach, it is evident that SLA is losing some of its monopoly on TESOL teacher education debates and even in graduate teacher education programmes at diploma and masters levels.

Johnson's quiet revolution in TESOL teacher education comes as a natural development to show that the field of TESOL is progressing and evolving along with the wider areas of education, teacher education and cultural studies. The reconceptualisation of the knowledge-base of TESOL teachers that Freeman and Johnson (1998) suggested is based on the premise that teachers develop their teaching skills and refine them by being involved in a dynamic sociocultural process framed by the institutional forms and contexts where their teaching is done. It is these processes and teachers' reflection about their teaching that is central to teacher education rather than theoretical knowledge about teaching (Bailey, 1998). Freeman and Johnson therefore argue (1998, 397):

> The core of the new knowledge-base must focus on the activity of teaching itself; it should center on the teacher who does it, the contexts in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done. Moreover, this knowledge-base should include forms of knowledge representation that document teacher learning within the social, cultural and institutional contexts in which it occurs.

SLA IS NOT DEAD

In their concern about the quiet revolution and how it displaces knowledge about language as central to language teaching, Yates and Muchisky (2003) maintain that even though SLA is concerned with cognitive processes about language learning it has a lot to offer to classroom pedagogy. They argue that it is up to language teacher educators to decide on what aspects of SLA findings are relevant and applicable to classroom teaching rather than dismissing SLA as irrelevant. Referring to recent SLA research (e.g., Long, 1990; Lightbown, 2000), Yates and Muchisky warn against the danger of marginalising language and linguistic knowledge in TESOL teacher education by the advocates of reflective teaching. They recognise the role reflection plays in refining one's teaching skill but they also maintain that "a reflective language teacher should also ask questions such as what it means to know a language, how teachers should treat learners'

nontargetlike forms, how teachers can assess learners' knowledge, whether learning an L2 is similar to or different from learning an L1" (Yates and Muchisky, 2003, p. 139). Nontargetlike forms are grammatical structures and utterances that are not considered correct or appropriate in the target language.

The debate is not about what a language teacher should know but rather about what is considered *core* knowledge. SLA advocates will insist on the centrality of linguistic knowledge and models of language acquisition, arguing that to be an English teacher one needs to know the system of the language just as one would need to know mathematics in order to teach it.

Theoretical debates about what should be *core* in TESOL teacher education can have serious effects on the planning and designing of teacher education programmes around the world. TESOL professionals in charge of postgraduate programmes are aware of the perpetual challenges involved in designing and reshaping courses to ensure that they are congruent with current developments in education. Hedgcock (2002) talks about a dilemma in teacher education programmes which, in response to a call for reflection and teachers' autonomy, have undergone a shift to a teacher education model that focuses on reflective practice (Richards, 1998; Roberts 1998). This shift might be at the expense of prospective teachers' need to study linguistics, language acquisition, and pedagogy.

A CRITICAL DIMENSION IN TESOL TEACHER EDUCATION

What I argue for in this paper is not the centrality of any teacher education component or the primacy of one type of knowledge over the others. In the debate about the nature of teacher knowledge-base, many models do not address the nature of language education that prospective teachers will be responsible for. In my view, if any element is to be the core of a teacher education programme it should be the teacher's view(s) of what language education is about and what he/she considers teaching to be. TESOL teacher preparation programmes should, therefore, engage in ongoing philosophical discussions about what education is. These discussions will help teachers explore, express and even revisit and question their views on the purpose of the act of teaching. Is education a

commodity, a solution to a problem or a moral act? Is teaching a profession, a passion, a mission or a mixture of all of these? One of the controversial issues that is not addressed enough in TESOL literature is whether teacher education programmes prepare language teachers or language educators. This is of course linked to how professionals in the TESOL area would like to perceive themselves. If we believe that we are involved in much more than preparing teachers to deliver a subject then we need to develop a teacher education framework that prepares teachers not only in the technical knowledge of language and the various discourses of the related fields, but especially in the cultural and socio-political issues that come with teaching English. To do so, TESOL teacher education needs to look at the nature of education with the lenses of the critical paradigm as well as post-structuralism, cultural studies and social constructivism (Giroux, 1983; Hall, 2002; Pennycook, 1998, 1999, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999; Hall and Eggington, 2000; Tollefson, 2002).

TESOL teacher education has so far been dominated by the communicative competence movement, which came as a reaction to Chomsky's language competence (1965). Based on Hyme's work in sociolinguistics (1972, 1974), communicative competence has become TESOL's major theoretical framework informing issues of syllabus design, materials production, teaching methodology and student evaluation. While criticality has claimed a place in the wider areas of education, the TESOL field has been lagging behind and this is due in part to what TESOL professionals consider a focal point in their field. Their major concern has been what the learner can do with the language and his/her ability to convey meaning in different contexts. A learner-centered approach to teaching has been hailed as the most effective way to achieve this goal. However, recently there has been an increasing interest in content-based instruction as a result of criticism directed at the lack of intellectual content in TESOL education. TESOL, however, remains mostly a conservative and mainstream area despite a new wave of TESOL studies embracing critical pedagogy, critical discourse analysis, transformative pedagogy and critical theory (Pennycook, 2001; Ibrahim; 1997; Lin, 1997).

It is worth stressing that these critical theories are not uncontested and are not presented in this paper as the only solution to a more effective TESOL teacher education. It is beyond the scope of this paper to state the shortcomings and

criticisms addressed to critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical applied linguistics. Giroux, for instance, argues that "radical educators have failed to establish a theory that posits real alternatives within schools (1997, p. 120). The critical paradigm has challenged pre-determined forms of knowledge but has yet to establish a strong enough position to replace the dominant conservative and liberal discourses in educational institutions. This criticism of the critical paradigm does not, however, belittle its potential contribution to TESOL teacher education.

CRITICALITY AND TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

Even though there are different views about the knowledge-base of English teachers, there seems to be some consensus in the TESOL teacher education literature about the types of knowledge language teachers need to have (Roberts, 1998; Hedgcock, 2000, Freeman and Johnson, 1988). Roberts (1998) proposes six types of knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, curricular knowledge, contextual knowledge and process knowledge.

In the following section of the article the traditional notion of content knowledge is expanded and the concept of cultural knowledge is introduced. These two types of knowledge will be framed in the critical approach. The term 'critical' in this context is not limited to the concepts of power and inequality and how they are related to issues of gender, class, race and religion. A critical framework for teacher education would link issues of TESOL, such as methodology, syllabus design, materials selection and student assessment to broader social and political relations (Pennycook, 1999, 2001).

CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

It has long been established that TESOL teachers need to have a good working knowledge of the English language, its system, (e.g., syntax, phonology, and lexis) and how people use it (McCarthy and Carter, 1994). These elements, one can safely argue, are the tools of the TESOL trade. However, English is not just a neutral commodity that can be planned, organised and delivered through a lesson

plan and some pedagogical activities using a set of materials (Tollefson, 1991, 2000). Novice TESOL teachers need to be aware of the ever-changing role of English and its increasing power in almost all domains of life. As a powerful educational and political tool English is in the process of slowly replacing many other languages as the main medium of instruction (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-kangass, 2000a; Pennycook, 2000; Troudi, 2002). Teachers need to be aware of the attitudes towards English that learners and their communities have. Given that we live in a complex political world shaped by loose terms such as peace, justice, globalisation, terror etc., TESOL teacher education programmes cannot afford to ignore the political and social implications of teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language.

The controversial issue of the global power of English (Pennycook, 1999) has everlasting effects on foreign language policy and educational planning in many parts of the world. English is now a gatekeeper to better jobs and professional opportunities in places where it was just a foreign language fewer than two decades ago. Teaching English as a foreign or second language in the post-colonialist era is a complex matter that carries with it many dimensions and images. It is not a neutral act as often presented in mainstream TESOL literature. It is a way to learn about others, communicate with the rest of the world and have access to information (Crystal, 1997). But it is also conceived as a threat to native languages and a vehicle of economic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, 1998; Skutnabb-kangass, 2000b). While there are some scholars who still celebrate the growth of English and its supremacy (e.g., Crystal, 1997) and its role as an accompanist to globalisation (Hanson 1997), many others warn against this very role. Tsuda (1994) and Phillipson (1999) argue that as a tool of ideological globalisation, monolingualism and homogenization of world culture, English can be used as a powerful tool against linguistic and cultural diversity. In fact, Phillipson makes a link between global economic inequality, cultural and social imperialism and the global spread of English.

Tollefson (2000) stresses that the global spread of English can result in social and economic inequalities. In some parts of the world where English has become the medium of instruction especially at tertiary level, the consequences have been disastrous. Students are forced to study content subjects in English without having the right linguistic abilities to do so (Pattanayak, in Tollefson, 2000). Still many

others are deprived of access to higher education because of lack of English, and in many cases lack of financial resources to attend private schools, rather than lack of academic abilities.

It is beyond doubt that the globalisation movement is gaining a great deal of ground and that there is in Giddens' words "an intensification of world wide social relations" (1990, p.64) and that English is playing a major role in breaking geographical, linguistic and even cultural borders (Bauman, 1998). English is also changing. It belongs to more than three or four countries. Subsequently, the definition of a native speaker of English is changing with the global spread of English. The role of TESOL teacher education is not necessarily to offer alternatives to such critical problems as the dismissal or "linguistic genocide" of native languages (Skutnabb-kangass, 2000b), but to put such issues on the agenda, to question the hegemony and supremacy of English and to engage teachers in discussions and projects about them.

Pennycook (2000) argues that one of the main objectives of critical approaches to TESOL is to problematize the givens of TESOL and challenge their assumptions. A critical approach to TESOL content knowledge will encourage teachers to be in a constant mode of questioning their knowledge about the subject matter, English, and its role in the global community. It is this type of content knowledge that will ensure that learners will be exposed to an English that reflects its changing nature and the cultural and ethnic varieties of its speakers.

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

One major challenge facing TESOL teachers is the issue of culture. Culture in this context refers to both *large* and *small* cultures (Holliday, 1999). Large culture refers to entities such as ethnicity, national and geographic boundaries, tradition, religion, language and their effects on people's everyday lives. In contrast, small culture refers to any type of cohesive behaviour and shared definitions within a social group. Holliday states that "a small culture paradigm attaches 'culture' to small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour, and thus

avoids culturist ethnic, national or international stereotyping" (1999, p. 237). It is to these issues related to large and small culture that I shall turn to next.

LARGE CULTURE

Many TESOL teachers work in cultural and linguistic contexts that are foreign to them. Most will have had very little exposure to their students' large culture before starting their teaching and it is impossible for TESOL teacher education programmes to prepare prospective teachers for the complexities of the cultures of English learners. At best they might receive seminars, lectures or workshops about the role of culture in TESOL methodology and syllabus design. Many teachers are also exposed to issues of intercultural communications, multicultural education and the challenges of developing pedagogy for students from diverse cultural and linguistic environments. All of these issues help prepare teachers to teach in other cultures, but they still need to develop the type of critical cultural knowledge that will help them understand their students and their educational and language needs.

There are many ways of developing cultural knowledge and all of which require patience, motivation, tolerance of differences, curiosity and a passion for knowledge. A monolingual teacher from the USA, UK or Australia teaching English as a foreign language overseas will need to invest a lot of time in learning about the new culture, the various ethnic groups, patterns of acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour, forms of politeness, educational philosophies and practices and language. It is this type of knowledge about the new culture and its diverse forms of manifestations that will help the teacher understand his/ her students and develop appropriate pedagogy and materials that meet their needs.

The situation can be further complicated by unforeseen political events in many areas. In the Arab world, for example, English has gained a high status, especially in the Arabian Gulf states where it is becoming the language of instruction in many institutions (Al Mansori, 2001; Troudi, 2002). However, the most recent events in the region have had some negative effects on people's attitudes toward the West, mainly the USA and UK. In addition to these political complexities, TESOL teachers in this part of the world need to be familiar with the linguistic

and social culture of the students. Because Islam plays a major role in the life of the students, teachers cannot afford not to learn about the major principles and practices of this religion and how they shape their students' lives and attitudes.

What is needed is more than just cultural sensitivity and respect for other cultures. Teachers need to be very aware of modes of learning and sociolinguistic patterns of communication in the cultures of their students that affect their approaches to learning English. Hall confirms this point, stating that "the sociocultural worlds into which learners are appropriated play a fundamental role in shaping their language and cognitive abilities and, more generally, their cultural beliefs about the language and their identities as language users" (2002, p. 72).

This might sound an obvious point to many TESOL professionals, yet it is not always possible even for the keenest teachers to invest in this type of cultural knowledge. TESOL teachers work with all kinds of constraints under various conditions. One of the main challenges or obstacles for TESOL teachers is their workload. It is common in many parts of the world for them to teach twenty-six hours per week and even more. This is of course on top of their preparation and marking duties.

SMALL CULTURE

What kind of knowledge should teachers develop about their students' learning in classroom contexts? While traditional views of classroom learning considered the teacher as central to the learning process regardless of learners' cultural and linguistic experiences, modern approaches to teaching view the learners' contribution as essential. The sociocultural perspective on language and learning views the classroom as a sociocultural community where students and teacher create shared meanings, goals and patterns of interaction (Hall, 2002, Wells, 2000). A number of classroom ethnographic studies have contributed to our knowledge about classrooms as legitimate communities where learners and teachers develop and co-construct identities and ideologies (e.g., Canagarajah, 1993, Duff and Ushida, 1997; Duff 2000).

Related to the view of the classroom as a community of learners is the concept of the classroom as a community of inquiry (Hall, 2002, Wells, 1999). This

conceptualisation of the classroom views inquiry as "the fundamental principle around which curriculum and instruction are organised" (Hall, 2002, p. 97). Learners are encouraged to be in a constant mood of inquiry with an emphasis on the exploratory style of teaching using open-ended questions and themes or topics generated by the students. These topics need to be relevant to their daily experiences and concerns (Freeman and Freeman, 2003). Drawing on students' experiences, activities will have real meaning beyond the learning of linguistic and structural items.

Awareness of these conceptualisations of the classroom as a community of learners, a legitimate sociocultural community and a community of inquiry, will help teachers design activities that allow for students' personal differences and at the same time help them develop their individual identities. In this way the TESOL classroom is not just a context for the learning of isolated and discrete language skills but a community where ideologies and meanings are co-constructed and personalities are developed.

Critical cultural knowledge is by no means easy to develop. This is due in part to the nature of culture. TESOL teacher education has to acknowledge the heterogeneous and ever-changing nature of culture and the difficulty of drawing boundaries of social groups and their linguistic, religious and ethnic identities (Bhabha, 1994; Kramsch, 1998). It is an increasingly difficult challenge for TESOL teachers to be aware of the ever-changing cultures of English as a first language (e.g. UK, USA, Australia) and the heterogeneous home cultures of their students.

Related to the issue of critical cultural knowledge and its role in TESOL teacher education is the increasingly pressing question of what variety of standard of English to use in TESOL classrooms. This is of course made complicated by the global spread of English and the growth in regional varieties of English. This diversity has become more dramatic since the 1960s with the independence of many ex-English colonies in Asia and Africa. 'World Englishes', a common phrase in sociolinguistics and ELT literature (Kachru, 1996), refers to the native and non-native varieties of English such as Australian English, British English. Indian English or Nigerian English. These varieties of English have expanded the definition of native speaker and added new dimensions to the debate about whose variety of English is to be taught as a second or foreign language.

Even though the classical dichotomy of standard British English versus standard American English does not accurately represent all English varieties. TESOL teachers in many parts of the world are expected to teach one of these two varieties. Most teachers are not involved in second language policies and will have no choice but to use the variety chosen by those in charge of TESOL curricula. The dominance of the British and American varieties of English in TESOL is due to historical, political, cultural and commercial factors. Many of the ex-British colonies like Malaysia and Singapore continue to consider British English as the model of good use, at least at the level of teacher preparation and ELT materials. Because of the political and cultural dominance of the United States, many countries have opted for the American variety of English and this is reflected in many ELT materials that represent various aspects of the American culture. The fact that the UK and the USA have various forms of spoken English characterised by regional accents in particular but also influenced other factors such as age, and ethnicity is rarely addressed in TESOL training programmes, materials and classroom practice.

The debate over what standard or variety of English to use in TESOL should go beyond the descriptive level of linguistic analysis. The lexical, structural and phonological differences between one variety and another might cause some problems of intelligibility, but it is the choice of one variety over others that can deprive the ELT students from exposure to other cultures and ways of life. For example, in countries with no local varieties of English such as Romania or Algeria the choice of only the American variety will give the student a limited view about English and the cultures of its speakers. It will be more fruitful to introduce the students to a range of English varieties thus, exposing them to the rich and complex linguistic and cultural realities that accompany the learning of English.

In countries with local varieties of English, known in the literature as outer circle countries, (Kachru, 1992) such as Malaysia, Nigeria, India and South Africa the question of standard is even more controversial. If any of these countries opts for a British variety, as is the case in Malaysia, it will exclude its emerging local English from being represented in the classroom. This choice often represents a purist view of language and does not reflect the various degrees of hybridisation taking place in society. Studies conducted about Malay English (Baskaran, 1994)

show different levels of language mixing ranging from one word to a whole sentence borrowing. This raises the question about teachers' roles in addressing this linguistic phenomenon. Teachers might be aware of the crucial role of Malay English and its facilitating role at the level of classroom interaction and pedagogical instruction but they might refrain from using it because they have been trained to keep to standard British English. Conversely, some linguists in Nigeria have long been calling for the use of Nigerian English and its recognition as a language of instruction (Bamgbose, 1992). TESOL contexts are different and reflect a variety of language and educational policies, so teachers have to consider what is most appropriate for their context while keeping in mind the international dimension of communication through English. Crystal (2001) suggests working towards a balance between the notion of a standard and the recognition of local and regional varieties of English. He explains that "the need to maintain international intelligibility demands the recognition of a standard variety of English, at the same time as the need to maintain local identity demands the recognition of local varieties of English" (p. 57).

FINAL COMMENT

This article has attempted to frame language teacher knowledge-base in a critical perspective. With a critical knowledge of English as a second/foreign language and its global status, teachers will be able to raise their learners' awareness of the socio-cultural, political and economic implications of learning English. English is a powerful tool that can give access to all types of professional opportunities but it can also be an excluding barrier. It is equally important for teachers to develop a critical knowledge of students' home cultures, their attitudes and their individual learning experiences. It is my contention that this type of knowledge, along with a view of the classroom as a community of inquiry, will enable teachers to provide their learners with more meaningful learning opportunities than is often the case (Kumaradivelu, 1994, 2001; Crabbe, 2003). Other aspects of teacher knowledge not addressed in this paper, such as curricular knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge, would also benefit from being framed within the critical approach.

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