The Power of English: Ethical Implications in English Language Pedagogy

English has developed into a global language, giving it a unique cultural and language power in classrooms around the world. The advantages of the dominance of English are preferential hiring in EFL contexts and academic influence (Snow, p. 180). English has been, and will probably continue to be, a power language around the globe as long as English speaking countries have economic and military dominance. Derek Kresge (2008), in his senior thesis, suggests that because of the United States’ power, “its culture, products, ideas, and languages are going to be of interest to the rest of the world, and through the free market system of its economy, the rest of the world has access to its commodities, which include its language” (p. 7). Providing language access is one way Christian English Teachers (CET) can draw on the power of the dominance of English and this dominance gives CET academic influence around the globe. For example, Kresge (2008) also shares that “since the vast majority of scholarly research and writings are done in English, scholars doctors and other professionals around the world must be able to read and study in English to stay at the forefront of their field” (p. 12). The pressure on foreign students to learn English then raises the value and need for well-trained English language teachers around the globe.

Although CETs have a desire to empower students through the use of the English language, we also should continue to empower them in their native languages. Snow recommends that “if the goal of English teachers is to help students become bilingual or multilingual language users, English teachers should embody this ideal” (p. 178) and learn another language or take an interest in other languages as well. Showing value for multilingualism and learning about other cultures will give students more respect for us as
educators and as people. With this language power comes the opportunity to reach out to others through humility and the responsibility to teach love, tolerance and acceptance around the globe. Many religions teach acceptance and tolerance, bringing up ethical discussions of cultural and religious acceptance within diverse language classrooms. Educator and author, Kubota (2009), shared the awareness and critical understanding that an additive teaching perspective does mitigate the imposition of discussing religious beliefs in the classroom and is a demonstration of her suggestions that these discussions can add to the diversity and cultural acceptance of students. Whether Kubota’s (2009) views came as a result of religious upbringing or intrinsic moral values makes no difference to me as a language teacher or a CET. If our goal as language teachers is to make our students more culturally aware while respecting, and even valuing, others’ diversity, then topics of faith and religion are bound to come up.

I appreciate that Kubota (2009) brought this concern up because many teachers don’t take the time to reflect on the pedagogical influence of their own belief systems. Failure to be aware of these influences can cause unintentional or ignorant teaching errors at the expense of the students’ personal identities or motivation to learn in our classrooms. Kubota’s (2009) ideas discusses more than just the additive nature of faith discussions in the classroom. They include many points on how teachers should have “a critical awareness of the… [different] cultural power relations that position people at different levels in the hierarchy and engage in a reflexive practice of using one’s power in counter-hegemonic ways” (Kubota, 2009, p. 231). Regardless of a teacher’s faith, belief system or spiritual background, the most unarguable point that Kubota (2009) makes is that “faith and language teaching pose challenging issues that cannot be resolved in simple terms” (p. 23). Teachers need to recognize that, though Christianity may be a dominant religion, it may not be ethical to discuss it or teach it in a language classroom. Additionally,
because English is a dominant language, and often considered a dominant Christian language, teachers need to be aware of the power and influence that naturally comes with their English language teaching positions.

One positive way to take advantage of that powerful influence is to incorporate lessons that teach inclusiveness, break down both cultural and social stereotypes, and attempt to teach moral values. Since these morals are often tied to a teacher’s religion, Christian English teachers need to be cognizant of teaching the intricacies of these values without teaching their religion. For example, consider this situation in an American ELT high school classroom with intermediate to advanced language learners: the students are creating projects highlighting different social prejudices and stereotypes. One group decides to do their project on lesbian and gay rights. Although the teacher disagrees with this lifestyle and it goes against the practices of his religion, this would be an example of a situation where it would be unethical for the teacher to disclose his religious beliefs and practices in relation to the student’s project. In another group, the students decide to do their project on religious stereotypes. One of their examples on the Christian religion includes some offensive references. The teacher is a Christian and is bothered by this. In this case it would be unethical to conceal her knowledge of the Christian beliefs because their project could potentially be offensive to other students and it’s important that the students present information in a respectful way. Sometimes the line of ethics is clear and sometimes it is not. Being educated on the religious backgrounds of my students and being self-aware of how my Christian faith influence my pedagogy can help make that ethical line less blurred and help make the question of appropriate religious disclosure easier to answer.

Robison (2009) discusses the issue of disclosure and questions “the underlying motivations and activities inside and outside the classroom” (p. 256) that teachers design. For
example, was the above project assigned to fulfill a teaching standard or to fulfill the teacher’s desire to create an opportunity to explore faith and religious beliefs? Kubota (2009) on discussing faith in the classroom suggests that “there should be religious freedom for teachers as a basic human right and that it promotes diverse perspectives among students” (p. 230). This of course is an interesting perspective until the issues of negotiating power in the classroom are brought up (Kubota, 2009; Smith 2009) and the moral influence of teachers is reflected upon. I also struggle with the ‘what ifs.’ What if the above course was taught in a country where Christians were being persecuted? Robison (2009) supports concealment if “it might be required to protect the work, or even the lives, of Christian teachers, and perhaps of their students” (p. 256). What if the above course was taught at a private Christian school? Would all project topics be considered? Would it be prudent for CETs who are concerned they can’t objectively compartmentalize their faith from their pedagogy to only teach in Christian institutions? Likewise, would it be unethical for CETs to keep the religious teachings of love, acceptance, and grace, that are derived from their faith, out of the classroom entirely? Robison (2009) responds to some of these ethical dilemmas with the application that “any response must be context dependent. The demands of truthfulness and transparency must depend on the particular requirements, restrictions, and risks of any given teaching situation” (p. 261). Therefore, teachers should be trained in analyzing these situations, knowing themselves and their beliefs and in understanding the negotiation of power that takes place in every academic classroom.

The cultural and language acceptance we strive for in our classrooms should also be extended to our professional leaders and the acceptance of both native speakers and non-native speakers of English as credible English language instructors. Non-native speakers (NNS) still face the challenge of overcoming the bias’ and preconceptions of other professionals in the
TESOL world. One way that native speakers (NS) can be made more aware of this issue is for professional NNS to speak out and share the benefits and credibility of NNS teachers. This can be done through writing articles, books, speaking at conferences or just speaking openly in collaboration with others. Collaboration was an important element where NNS author and writer Liang’s confidence as a teacher grew (Liang, 2009, p. 167). One way those in positions of power can become more “vulnerable” is to be open to and welcome collaboration by both NS and NNS of English. Native Speaking English Teachers (NSET) can be intentional in seeking out opportunities to collaborate or get advice from NNS in order to broaden and strengthen their curriculum. By doing so, Liang (2009) shares that “both the strengths of the native and NNS teacher can be combined to the multiplication of the strengths of both parties (p. 167).

The “markedness” that has developed toward NNS will hopefully be what is invisible as time goes on. Considering the fact that English is developing into a global language and many accents are being accepted and taught world-wide, perhaps the NNS status will be seen as an asset and not a crutch. In fact, one benefit of being a NNS is that speakers that have gone through the process of learning English as an additional language themselves can directly empathize and relay personal experiences and strategies with their students – something a NS cannot naturally do. As a profession, we need to send the message culturally and globally that both NS and NNS teachers can be revered as having equal potential to be good teachers.

These questions can easily be applied to religious contexts because we are meant to love all people no matter their status or religion. This love and acceptance should extend to our students and colleagues of all language abilities. Prior judgments or biases should not have an effect on how we treat someone or perceive their potential in a field. Liang concludes with the encouragement that even though we all “come from different racial, cultural, and linguistic
backgrounds, [we] are in fact one community… that is bound together by love and characterized by grace” (p. 171) and this attitude should be reflected in the humility we show our students and others in our field.
References


