

LOCALLY SITUATED FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TEACHING: PROMOTING ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNING THAT REFLECTS MEXICAN REALITIES

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Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Mexico rarely takes into consideration locally situated language functions as teachers often promote a one-size-fits-all approach to foreign-language (FL) learning. Locally situated functions can be described in bilingual, bicultural and transnational terms which reflect a struggle with potentially conflicting patterns and practices as language users engage in both global and local uses of the target language as highlighted in the teaching of English as an International English (EIL) (McKay 2002). EIL opens up the debate regarding which language standards and norms should be adopted. Transnationalism creates another set of challenges for ELT as language is no longer limited to geographical borders. Through examining ELT in bilingual, bicultural and transnational terms, I argue that EFL use in Mexico reflects a fluid and changing environment as language users appropriate the target language for their own use and do not necessarily adhere to American varieties of English.

Resumen

La Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés (EII) en México rara vez toma en cuenta funciones del idioma situadas localmente, pues con frecuencia los profesores promueven un enfoque generalizado para el aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero (AIE). Las funciones localmente situadas se pueden describir en términos bilingües, biculturales y transnacionales lo cual refleja una lucha con patrones y practicas conflictivos potenciales a medida que los usuarios del idioma se involucran en usos locales y globales del idioma meta, justo como se resalta en la enseñanza del Inglés como idioma internacional (McKay 2002). El Inglés como Idioma Internacional abre un debate con respecto a qué estándares y normas del idioma se deberían adoptar. El transnacionalismo plantea nuevos retos para EII pues el idioma ya no se limita a fronteras geográficas. A partir de un análisis de EII términos bilingües, biculturales afirmo que el uso de AIE en México refleja un ambiente fluido y cambiante a medida que los usuarios del idioma se apropian del idioma meta para su propio uso y no necesariamente se adhieren a las variedades estadounidenses del inglés.

Key words: Critical Pedagogy; Local Practices; Linguistic Imperialism

1. Introduction

Approaches to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Mexico is marked by a host of pedagogical factors and concepts that have been imported lock, stock and barrel from what Holliday calls BANA environments 'commercial British, Australasia and North American private language schools/cultural centres' (Holliday 1994, 2005). Whilst developments and research in applied linguistics have long questioned the search for the ideal teaching method (Brown 2001), BANA pedagogical principles and commercial concerns dominate Mexican EFL teaching practice as they seek to pigeonhole learner needs, proclaim the right methodology, explain student motivation, promote standard language practices and rehearse decontextualised communicative functions and the four skills. In this paper, I examine why the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession in Mexico often continues to

indiscriminately follow BANA practices without evaluating their relevance or usefulness in the local ELT context. Furthermore, I argue that ELT in Mexico should respond to both the global context and the local EFL environment by examining English language use in terms of bilingual, bicultural and transnational language uses rather than trying to replicate BANA teaching methods. Furthermore, I maintain that localised EFL teaching makes English as a Foreign Language relevant to the actual needs of Mexican students rather than reflecting idealised communicative scenarios.

2. BANA teaching concerns

BANA concerns and teaching principles strenuously maintain that there is a right way to teach and thus promote a positivist approach to language teaching. A positivist approach to EFL teaching explains and predicts the best methods for teaching and learning and promotes the concepts of the ideal teacher and the ideal student. In contrast, a situated activity approach examines the 'dynamics of face-to-face interaction' (Layder 1993: 8). Layder argues that:

The dynamics of interaction stress the way in which gatherings of, or encounters between, several individuals tend to produce outcomes and properties that are a result of the interchange of communication between the whole group rather than the behaviour of the constituent individuals viewed singly.

In contrast to a positivist approach which calls for the application the correct classroom techniques and the use of appropriate textbooks and materials, a situated activity approach focuses on the local emerging context that responds to the immediate needs of EFL learners. I will now discuss why BANA approaches towards ELT may not be appropriate for the local Mexican EFL context and subsequently argue for a localised approach to EFL teaching in Mexico.

3. Learner needs

Generally in ELT, learners' needs and wants are categorised in terms of language or communicative functions. Quoting Brindley (1984: 64), Finney argues that needs should be defined in terms of identifying the language needed by learners and through gathering information about learners' motivation and learning styles. This can be achieved through constructing

- 1. a narrow, product-oriented view of needs which focuses on the language necessary for particular future purposes and is carried out by 'experts'.
- 2. a broad, process-oriented view of needs which takes into account factors such as learner motivation and learning styles as well as learner-defined target language behaviour. (Brindley 1984: 64 quoted in Finney 2001: 75)

A product-oriented approach may not function in the Mexican context where a language-based approach aimed at satisfying students' needs and identifying the source of motivation may fail to understand the learners' communicative reality especially when it is not always obvious why students are learning the target language. A product-approach that identifies language needs potentially invites teachers and syllabus designers to cut language up into discrete linguistic units e.g., grammatical structures, communicative functions and language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). So, whilst the Mexican FL user may be given the necessary components of language usage, she may not enjoy the indispensable pragmatic and discursive experience and knowledge to employ these resources in meaningful transactional and interactional language uses that are relevant to the local context.

In contrast, Brown argues that FL teaching needs to centre on the learner rather than on the language:

A principled approach to language teaching encourages the language teacher to engage in a carefully crafted process of linguistic diagnosis, treatment, and assessment. It enables us initially to account for communicative and situational needs anticipated among designated learners (2001: 13).

A principled approach means ignoring pre-packed methodological solutions and seeing language teaching as a responsive and considered 'crafted process' (Brown 2001: 13). Furthermore, diagnosis means identifying situational needs and taking into consideration

'The socioeconomic and educational background of the students, the specific purposes the students have in learning a language, and institutional constraints that are imposed on a curriculum' (Brown 2002: 14).

In the Mexican context, needs analysis are rarely carried out or, if they are, they are given lip service since most teachers have to follow a pre-determined set programme and use pre-selected textbooks and supplementary materials. The Mexican reality is that teachers are in an extremely limited position to respond to learners' needs.

4. The search for the method

Contemporary teaching practice in Mexico dictates that teachers should follow a prescribed method. This is, more likely than not, to be the 'communicative method' and is actively promoted by the federal Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) for use in the public sector. The term 'communicative' tends to be defined in terms of speaking and listening skills as opposed to reading and writing skills. The danger of only focusing on speaking and listening is that students are able to successfully communicate in the 'here and now' but not engage in more reflective and analytical language usage which often characterises reading and writing.

In the search for method, as far back as 1985, Stern (quoted by Brown 2001: 10) bemoaned the "century-old obsession" (1985: 251) with methods and, in 1990, Prabhu questioned the whole idea of searching for 'the best method' which assumes that, by following a method, teaching outcomes could be predicted:

A method, in this view, is a set of procedures that carries a prediction of results; the fulfilment of the prediction depends only (or mainly) on an accurate replication of the procedures, not on any perceptions of those who do the replication-rather in the way the replication of a procedure in chemistry yields the predicted result, regardless of the chemist's thoughts or feelings about it. (1990: 171)

Prabhu argues that instead of trying to find the method that will never accord predictable results, teachers need to focus on the learning process and his or her involvement with students. Arguing that learning can be best promoted by the 'teachers' subjective understanding of the teaching they do.'(1990: 172). Prabhu maintains that:

Teachers need to operate with some personal conceptualisation of how their teaching leads to desired learning with a notion of causation that has a measure of credibility for them. The conceptualisation may arise from a number of different sources, including a teacher's experience in the past as a learner (with interpretations of how the teaching received at that time did or did not support one's learning), a teacher's earlier experience of teaching (with similar interpretations from the teaching end), exposure to one or more methods while training as a teacher (with some subjective evaluation of the methods concerned and perhaps a degree of identification with one or another of them), what a teacher knows or thinks of other teachers' actions or opinions, and perhaps a teacher's experience as a parent or caretaker (1990: 172).

The question arises then why does ELT teaching in Mexico still pursue its search for a best method when its futility was exposed more than 20 years ago. The answer is not to be found in ELT literature written by local teachers and teacher trainers. For instance, drawing

on her teaching experience in Mexico, Lethaby (2006) called on Mexican teachers to 'look at their reality and situation and find methods that are suitable and appropriate for their learners' (2006: 57). Meanwhile, Davies, a long-term ELT veteran, argues with Fraenkel that teachers need to examine principles in relation to classroom practice; but they also add a word of warning:

One general principle might be: *Put communication first*. But even that may not be possible in some teaching situations, for example, with three hours a week, groups of fifty reluctant adolescents and passing formal grammar tests as the main objective' (2003: 190).

Whilst Lethaby and Davies have appealed for local solutions and critical responses, their call seems to have gone unheeded. I argue that BANA interests seem to wield an overwhelming influence in Mexico which has counteracted any attempts by local professionals to provide home-grown pedagogical solutions. I will further this argument examining the ELT teaching tenets identified by Phillipson (1992).

5. BANA Pedagogy & Mexico

The influence of the BANA pedagogy on Mexico can be clearly seen by examining how the ELT tenets identified by Phillipson nearly twenty years ago still largely hold sway in Mexico. Phillipson identified these tenets as:

- English is best taught monolingually.
- The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker.
- The earlier English is taught, the better the results.
- The more English is taught, the better the results.
- If other languages are used much, standards of English will drop.

(Phillipson 1992: 185)

For questions of space, I will only deal with the first four tenets in this article. The fifth tenet raises the question: Why are indigenous languages not taught in Mexican schools – a question outside the scope of this paper but extremely relevant in the Mexican context where indigenous languages are fast disappearing.

Besides promoting a BANA pedagogy and having an overpowering influence on ELT in Mexico, these tenets are an economic and social burden since they undermine the FL students' use of their first language. I will therefore briefly discuss each tenet in relationship to the Mexican EFL context.

5.1. English is best taught monolingually

First of all, in order to reinforce the monolingual teaching of the target language, the use of Spanish is largely frowned upon in the Mexican EFL classroom as students are expected to leave their first-language knowledge, insights and experiences regarding linguistic patterns, interpersonal language use and communicative patterns of use outside the classroom. The monolingual justification appears to be related to both FL pedagogy and to commercial marketing strategies. Pedagogically, the insistence on English-only is supposedly justified since the classroom is a communicative context which should be used for not only learning and practising English but also for using English for real-life communication. The argument goes that if teachers and students cannot use English to interact with each other what chances do learners have outside the classroom. From a marketing point of view, schools and language institutions that advertise that classes are taught completely in English have the competitive edge over their rivals. However, as Phillipson argues, there is no evidence that all-English classrooms are any more effective than classrooms where the mother

tongue is used for clearly identifiable, limited and specific reasons as argued by Lethaby (2006). I would argue that translation can help students understand how grammatical structures are used discoursally and pragmatically differently in the target language. For instance, the present simple is often used at the beginning of telephone conversations in Mexican Spanish: e.g. ¿Quien habla? (Who's talking?) with the possible answer Habla Sergio (Sergio speaking). Meanwhile English-language telephone users appear to have a preference for the present continuous e.g., Who(m) am I talking to? and I am calling about... Another example can be observed when asking an interactant how long they have been doing an activity e.g. living at their present location. English-language speakers seem to prefer to use the present perfect as in I have lived in Mexico for six years or I have been living here for six years. In contrast, Mexican Spanish-language speakers will often use present tense structures such as Tengo seis años viviendo en México. By drawing comparisons between the L1 and L2, students' attention can be encouraged to focus on potential interference errors such as giving one's age *I have seven years which is a direct translation from the Spanish Tengo siete años.

5.2. The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker

The second tenet which demonstrates a preference for native-speaking teachers is still prevalent throughout Mexico as they are seen as the 'authentic' language speaker. Little importance is given to whether the native-speaking teacher can actually teach the target language. This problem in Mexico was pointed out over 15 years ago by Hubbard when describing private language institutions' hiring practices: 'Much more weight is placed on prospective teachers' level of English, especially their pronunciation. Mexicans with a good level of English are recruited, but native speakers are received with open arms' (1995: 12). Furthermore, Hubbard argues that the native-speaker has the competitive edge: "Language teaching institutions seem to regard ability to speak the language as the most important qualification available. If the prospective teachers have a native speaker-like accent, this will almost certainly guarantee them a job' (1995: 14 - 15). Supporting Hubbard's stance, Mexican veteran JoAnn Miller, also writing in 1995, asserted that "In reality, a non-native speaker is probably a better teacher than many native-speakers. The majority of native speakers don't even know what the present perfect is, even if they might (just might) use it correctly' (1995: 7). So the question remains: Why is the native speaker still so heavily prized over the non-native speaker after all these years?

5.3. The earlier English is taught, the better the results

The third tenet, the earlier-the-better-tenet, is actively promoted by a plethora of private kindergarten and primary schools claiming to be bilingual. Phillipson (1992) argues that foreign language learning has two facets: the language itself and English as the medium of instruction. In the Mexican context, English is seen as giving students a head start up the academic ladder and opening up more study and job opportunities. However, scant research has been carried out in the Mexican context to evaluate whether young learners achieve higher levels of English than those who begin their English-language studies at a later age. Anecdotal evidence from teachers and language coordinators suggests that students who start English at four or five years old in young learners' classes, will still be placed in elementary levels when they move to children's levels when they reach eight years old and again at basic levels in adolescents' groups when they reach twelve or thirteen. It is rare to see an eight-year-old EFL student with three years of English under his/her belt to be placed at advanced level.

5.4. The more English is taught, the better the results

There is no evidence *per se* that being exposed to more English, e.g., five hours a day, is any more effective than studying three hours a day. The futility of cramming students with more hours of English is regularly witnessed on a weekly basis by unprepared and inexperienced Saturday morning teachers who attempt to fill their students with grammatical structures, vocabulary, communicative functions, readings and listenings from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Another Mexican veteran Pearse (2000) argues that the focus needs to be on content rather than language.

6. Motivation

Another problem with regards to responding to the local EFL context can be seen in the area of motivation. With her finger on the academic pulse in Mexico, Lethaby neatly sums up a common problem with motivation in that 'it is not uncommon in Mexico for negative feelings towards English-speaking cultures and the language associated with them to be expressed as an unwillingness to learn English (2006: 51). So while teacher training courses emphasise the importance of exploiting extrinsic motivation (e.g. instrumental motives such as getting a good job) and intrinsic motivation (e.g. identifying with the target-language community), the classroom reality is very different.

Language learners may consider studying English to be a futile exercise which is only useful for graduating – as it is now a growing requirement in both public and private universities – or just to be yet another school subject. Students who just want to pass international examinations such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or who study English as an academic requirement may consider communicative learning approaches to be of very little value or relevance.

This is not to say that English is not a vibrant and diverse language resource in Mexico. It is, but it often has little to do with EFL English or as Widdowson argues: "What is taught is not English as such, but English *as a foreign language*, and this, by definition, cannot be the English of native speakers" (his emphasis, 2003: 114). In contrast any visit to Internet social sites will show how the English language is used and how it reflects bilingual, bicultural and transnational language uses.

7. English for Mexico

In order for the EFL teaching and learning to respond to the local Mexican context, pedagogy needs to move away from the current BANA influenced approaches. Such a call was made in 2006 by ten authors representing four public universities: '... we need to find a way to connect the local with other "local" EFL contexts without having the gatekeepers of the global, who tend to come from dominant countries, regulating our interactions' (Clemente, Crawford, Garcia, Higgins, Kissinger, Lengeling, Lopez Gopar, Narvaez, Sayer & Sughrua 2006: 15). Clemente et al. (2006) seem to be reacting to the influence of the BANA countries. A local approach to language teaching and learning pitches itself against globalised EFL and ESL methodologies which promote a one-size-fits-all pedagogy that can be applied and practised throughout the world and which 'ignore the diverse constraints and motivations that learners have to negotiate to communicative effectively' (Canagarajah 2005a: xiv). Mexican language learners have their own goals, challenges and difficulties which may not be catered to by EFL/ESL textbook and materials writers who are trying to reach a global market and which may have little interest in, or knowledge of, the local needs. For instance, at a micro level, the identification of cognates and false cognates are rarely dealt with by EFL/ESL textbook authors. However, for the Mexican FL user cognates are a rich source for boosting learner knowledge since there are few true beginners in Mexico in the sense of basic level students that know no English whatsoever. Since Mexican EFL learners often bring this

knowledge and resource into the classroom, it is important that EFL teachers help students identify false cognates such as *actualmente*, *compromiso*, *sensible*, and *simpático* in order to clear up potential miscommunication problems. At a macro level, Mexican FL users are regularly called upon to use their language skills to translate letters, e-mails, instructions, brochures etc. whether it be at work, socially or even within their families. Global approaches to foreign language learning do not help students to develop their knowledge of translation techniques and practices which are an everyday requirement for thousands of Mexican FL users. For instance, instead of being told to reject the use of Internet translation tools such as Google Translator, FL learners can be taught how to use them as an initial and useful resource but also to understand their capabilities and limitations.

A local approach examines the teaching and learning of English in relation to the learner's immediate context and motivational perspective. It is not so much focused on linguistic content e.g. structures, standard language, and communication function as on the 'context-bound, community-specific, and non-systematic because it is generated ground-up through social practice in everyday life' (Canagarajah 2005: 4). Moreover, Canagarajah argues that local knowledge and practice is not a substitute for global approach to English but rather a cause for celebration:

Celebrating local knowledge refers to adopting a practice. We treat our location (in all its relevant senses: geographical, social, geopolitical) as the ground on which to begin our thinking. Local knowledge is not a product, constituted by the beliefs and practices of the past. Local knowledge is a process – a process of negotiating dominant discourses and engaging in an ongoing construction of relevant knowledge in the context of our history and social practice. What is important is the angle from which we conduct this practice – that is, from the locality that shapes our social and intellectual practice' (Canagarajah 2005b: 13).

8. Community-Specific English

Whilst Clemente et al. (2006) call for action in macro terms, I attempt to follow up on their work by outlining a more micro approach which builds on the work of McKay (2002) regarding the English varieties that can be taught in the classroom and Canagarajah (2005a) and Pennycook (2010) who posit the learning and teaching English as a foreign language in local terms. In the Mexican context, locally situated language functions and needs can be described in bilingual, bicultural and transnational terms since English is not used in order to interact in a monolingual speech community but rather as a communicative resource which involves adaptability code-switching and creativity

Bilingual and bicultural approaches to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reflect the struggle that FL users have when faced with the 'English-only' dictates of teachers in the EFL classroom when the reality is different. One needs to look no further than EFL teachers themselves who often admit that they regularly code-switch professionally and socially but rarely permit their students to code-switch inside the classroom. One pedagogical answer to the potentially conflicting patterns and practices of English language use at a local level is forwarded by McKay (2002) who calls for the teaching of English as an International English (EIL). EIL recognises that language users engage in both global and local uses of the target language and that EFL teachers need to help their learners communicate at both levels. For instance, students may need to know such words as beckon, garrulous and heed (Bruce2002) into order to take international exams – interestingly many native speakers often do not know what these words mean - whilst such vocabulary does not reflect every day local usage. One key question is why do Mexican students take exams that do not relate to their local language needs. Follow-up questions may open up a debate regarding which language standards and norms should be adopted by EFL users. One answer to these pedagogic conflicts is provided by EIL as teachers not only help students with their professional, work and academic needs but also with their colloquial use of the target language. Furthermore, it raises another question: it is possible to talk about Mexican English as a language variety in its own right? English as an International Language (EIL) involves teaching and learning a variety of English that can be used both for global purposes (e.g. travelling abroad, taking international examinations, working for transnational companies) and also responds to local uses of English. McKay argues that EIL

Is used by native speakers of English and bilingual users of English for cross-cultural communication. International English can be used both in a local sense between speakers of diverse cultures and languages within one country and in a global sense between speakers from different countries (2002: 132).

To understand how English is used as an International Language, one needs to adopt a discoursal approach which examines how is English employed in a variety of contexts: socially, culturally and in the workplace. Such a stance charts in which contexts FL users need to follow BANA norms and in which ones they need to develop their own practices and patterns of use. Locally situated practices and patterns can be described in bilingual, bicultural and transnational terms. Bilingual discoursal approaches take into consideration the different varieties of English employed by FL users. For instance, what variety of English is used when Mexicans communicate with relatives in the United States, interacting in English at call centres in Guadalajara or chatting during down time at an outsourcing office in Mexico City? Meanwhile, bicultural approaches take into consideration the cultural varieties of English used in Mexico which may range from Spanglish through to the standard General American (GA) English. On an everyday cultural level, the use of English pervades Mexican social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and these may be much more relevant contexts for students to develop, practise and maintain their English language skills rather than asking them to read novels, read newspapers and watch the news.

Given Mexico's close proximity to the United States, English-language use and culture combines, mixes and is integrated into everyday communication, especially along the border and in virtual social networking. Transnationalism can therefore be physical or virtual but in either case reflects '...a ceaseless back-and-forth movement, enabling migrants to sustain a presence in two societies and cultures and to exploit the economic and political opportunities created by such dual lives' (Portes and de Wind 2008: 9). Consequently, the fuzziness of language use and transnationalism create another set of challenges for ELT teachers as language is no longer limited to geographical borders. Transnational language use is marked by code-switching as language users may not see the need to keep to any one particular variety and it may be difficult to know whether interactants are speaking in Spanish or in English or looking for what Kramsch (1993) has called 'a third place'.

9. Conclusion

Through examining ELT in Mexico in bilingual, bicultural and transnational terms, I have argued that English language use in Mexico reflects a fluid and changing environment as language users appropriate the target language for their own use and do not necessarily adhere to American or British varieties of English. As a consequence, ELT teaching patterns and practices need to clearly identify both the global and local needs of Mexican students and follow up on the work of Mexican EFL teaching professionals and develop a pedagogy that is relevant and responsive to developing and evolving local needs.

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