Exploring the Role of Spirituality in the Ecology of Language Learning

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Abstract
With the presence of many Christian missionaries in the field of TESOL, numerous educators have raised concerns about the ethical issues surrounding evangelistic outreach via English language teaching (ELT). Christian English Teachers (CETs) in the field of TESOL have faced criticism for manipulation of student-teacher relationships, unethical religious coercion, and cultural insensitivity. Current positivist views render religious discussions in the classroom as detrimental to ELT. While proselytizing via ELT is a serious ethical issue, the backlash against religion and spiritual beliefs is also quite alarming. Disregard for the spiritual underpinnings motivating and influencing the way students learn limits how complex we perceive second language learning to be. This article examines how spirituality can positively benefit learning in the second language classroom. It also seeks to raise awareness and highlight the need for more research on how faith and spirituality influence the second language classroom.

Key words: Christian English Teachers, ecology, faith, language learning, spirituality

The Current Dilemma: Defining A Place for Spirituality Within TESOL

As expressed through thirty-one TESOL professionals in an edited book by Wong and Canagarajah (2009), there are a number of discussions emerging on the nature and role of spirituality in English language classrooms. Recent criticism directed against Christian missionaries utilizing English language teaching (ELT) as a cover for evangelism has opened up larger discussions aimed at defining the political, ethical, and moral issues surrounding the field of TESOL (Edge, 2003; Pennycook, 2009; Ramanathan, 2009). In many of these discussions, Christian English Teachers (CETs), as a whole, are seen in an unfavorable light; they are characterized negatively as “arrogant” or described as “bigots” and fundamentalists who use “stealth conversion” and “covert proselytizing” (Phillipson, 2009, p. 66). In addition, CETs are criticized for working in the classroom with minimal professional training, manipulating power in student-teacher relationships (Chamberlain, 2009; Kubota, 2009; Mahboob, 2009), showing a lack of cultural sensitivity (Kubota, 2009), perpetuating English language dominance (Edge, 2003), and infusing Christianity and “American Civil Religion” in the classroom (Edge 2003; Stabler-Havener, 2009).
This stigmatized view of Christians within TESOL not only undermines the hard work of many dedicated Christians who are not “deceptive,” “manipulative,” or covertly evangelizing via ELT (Edge, 2003), it also has larger ramifications of how religion and spirituality are treated in relation to second language learning. There now pervades a common sentiment amongst educators that religious values hamper pedagogical decisions and well-informed instruction. Religious people are described as narrow-minded, “hopelessly blind” (Ramanathan, 2009, p. 74) and “handicapped” by their certainty of faith (Edge, 2003, p. 720). Their belief in an almighty being is seen as a “desperate regression” (Pennycook, 2009, p. 60). In addition, religion is linked with language dominance, colonization, and imperialism (Varghese & Johnston, 2007, p. 8). Such unsympathetic presentations of religion, especially Christianity, amongst the scholarly perpetuate an ill-conception that religious faith is problematic and debilitating for conscientious and responsible teaching. Yet religion cannot be cut out and separated from the ELT classroom since it is central to the lives of many students and their cultures. Religious and moral beliefs will continue to exist in both learner and teacher identities, and to ignore the implications on learning and teaching is neglecting a major factor that influences the learning process.

The Ecology of Second Language Classrooms and How Spirituality Fits In

An ecological perspective of language learning considers the event of language acquisition occurring within an intricate web of relationships where “the learner is immersed in an environment full of potential meanings” (van Lier, 2000, p. 246). Language learning, in the ecological perspective, is far greater than cognition; it develops in the inner and outer world of the learner, in observable and unobservable things. An ecological view opposes positivist perspectives, which sees all experiences as “an incidental by-product of information processing” (Brooke, 2013, p. 430) and draws attention to the multitude of factors influencing language development. Further, an ecological view considers language as it is embedded within symbolic, natural, sociocultural, and cognitive parameters (Steffenson & Fill, 2014), and it places it on a multidimensional “dynamic,” “complex,” and “nonlinear” scale (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, p. 147).

In an ecological perspective of language, minute details have the potential to become prominent stimuli for language development. Spirituality may often be pushed aside and treated as irrelevant to learning, yet it is one of those minute details that potentially play a large role in learning. While a person’s spiritual identity does not always play a visible role in language
acquisition, it can be an unseen driving force for learning. Religious beliefs and values influence a student’s approach to learning. They are also inseparable from each individual’s identity. In addition, students are often curious and intrigued by discussions on faith and religion. In learning about other people’s beliefs and values, students become more informed on why people make the choices they do, and they learn to articulate abstract notions greater than themselves, like the meaning of life, death, the universe, who we are, and how we have come to be the way we are. Those who are spiritually intelligent are also eloquent and expressive with language, compassionate, forgiving, mindful, reflective, and kind. In TESOL we work with a global community, and it is important that we are also teaching our students language that will help them build relationships and connect with people unlike themselves. As teachers, we strive to empower our students to fully express their “whole” selves in relation to a larger world of ideas and beliefs. If we are to do so, we need to not only consider how the mind and body function to produce language, but also how the spirit is active in linguistic expression.

**Spirituality and Its Role in Second Language Acquisition**

Not much research has been conducted on the direct impact of faith and religious beliefs on second language learning. Yet it is evident that identity development serves as a major source of motivation in language learning. An individual’s “vision” of his or her second language (L2) self may dictate his or her goals (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). Spiritual beliefs can be central to this vision of oneself. In addition, students are eager to communicate their beliefs via writing and conversations in the classroom. Oftentimes teachers will find that religious practices, personal beliefs, and values are one of the first things students reveal about themselves in class.

Spirituality is also another domain of intelligence which aids linguistic development. While the application of spiritual beliefs is often discouraged and dismissed, they can actually be relevant to learning (DeBlasio, 2011). Azizi and Zhamaniyan (2013) note that “spiritual intelligence” can positively influence the strategies individuals use to acquire new vocabulary in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. Spirituality can positively affect the executive function in cognition, which is the brain’s command center for managing tasks and solving problems, and “it integrates the qualities of flexibility and emotional resilience” (Azizi & Zhamaniyan, 2013, p. 853). Spirituality is not something we consider at all stages of life development, but it is something that emerges into the foreground depending on the experiences
and conditions in which we find ourselves. Spiritual identity is like currents of water constantly moving under a bed of ice. It is constantly there and continually moving; its movements are subtle until a visible crack has formed through the ice. Spiritual beliefs, such as the Christian faith, are an underlying energy contributing to the development of language within individual learners.

Spirituality can also positively affect the nature of relationships in the classroom since it shapes perceptions and understanding of the environment. Bradley (2011) defines spirituality as “humanity’s search for connections beyond the ego” and places relationships at the center of spiritual pursuits, which is also true of the Christian faith (pp. 6-7). He also notes that the spiritual beliefs of educators influence their level of care and desire to nurture students’ growth and development (Bradley, 2011, p. 4). For instance, within the Christian faith there is a notion of hospitality towards strangers, a sense of welcoming those who are unlike ourselves (Burwell & Huyser, 2013; Smith, 2009a, 2009c). Christians are called to “love one another as [Christ] has loved [us]” (John 13:34), and we are beckoned to treat all with an attitude of respect, openness, non-judgement, and genuine care. Faith, such as Christianity, can influence the level of care and responsibility we feel towards each other in the classroom. In classrooms where students feel cared for and nurtured, there is notably a higher quality of learning and increased motivation.

Smith (2009b) states that we need to “invite consideration of how belief and spirituality affect the ecology of the language classroom” (p. 242). When viewing things via an ecological perspective, we realize that we cannot dismiss faith and religious beliefs from learning because it is a core part of many of our students’ identities and our own identities. Educators should be more reflective on how faith influences student learning. In every language exchange, we have the opportunity to connect with and encounter the spirit of another individual. As Smith (2009a) puts it, learning a new language teaches us how to “hear the voices” of the people who embody the language, who they are, and what they are like (pp. 8-9). In learning a new language, learners are also developing new L2 identities, adapting to new cultures, connecting their sense of self to their new language surroundings (van Lier, 2004, pp. 96-97). The process of discovering speakers of a new language and encountering our own self can be enriching towards the spiritual development of those involved and lead towards more interactive and engaging language classrooms (Smith, 2009a).
Smith (2009b) envisions a type of language classroom that accounts for the “spiritual preoccupations” of students who “do not leave their spirits at the doors” (p. 242). Such a classroom is characterized by “attentiveness to a wide and unpredictable range of human factors” (Smith, 2006, p. 89). In the ESL/EFL classroom, learners are striving for self-actualization through the acquisition of a second language. An ecological approach to learning can “awaken in students (and teachers) a spirit of inquiry and reflection, and a philosophy of seeing and hearing yourself, thinking for yourself, speaking with your own voice, and acting jointly within your community” (van Lier, 2004, p. 99). TESOL is a field centered on human relationships via the medium of the English language. It connects a vast world of learners and forges intercultural relationships. In essence, the intricate webs of relationships in our classrooms are spiritual experiences, if we allow ourselves to see them that way.

Possible Areas for Further Research and Study

Since there is so much variation in what spirituality means to each individual, it is difficult to pinpoint how religious beliefs and values manifest themselves in the classroom. Perhaps one way to deepen our understanding of the topic is to expand the volume of localized studies and action research on the subject of faith and learning. This may help us define the topic with more clarity. Furthermore, we can examine how spiritual topics emerge in the language learning classroom. The following is a list of possible questions to probe in future research:

1. What direct impact does a learner’s spiritual beliefs have on the choices made when learning a second language?
2. In what ways and at what frequency do students voluntarily bring up topics of faith, religion, spiritual beliefs, and core values in the second language classroom?
3. What language functions are used to describe religious experiences and spiritual beliefs?
4. How do students perceive and relate to other people’s spiritual stories? Does the exposure to spiritual literature affect the way a diverse population of students converse and interact with each other?
5. Is there any correlation between text materials that discuss religion and spirituality and the level of motivation in learning?
6. How does a teacher’s religious identity influence his or her pedagogy (i.e., instruction, lesson planning, classroom management, curriculum selection, etc.)?
7. How does encouraging transparency of religious identity influence learning?

By undertaking more studies on the subject of spirituality and language learning, perhaps we can observe if there are any patterns and trends that may elucidate spirituality’s role in the classroom. We can record ways students communicate their religious and moral beliefs in the classroom and the effect it may have on the quality of conversations and instruction. There is a wealth of learning that may come from exploring spirituality’s role in language learning.

Conclusion: Shifts in Our Pedagogical Perspectives

An ecological perspective of language learning shifts educators away from the traditional notions of language classrooms being places for only linguistic transactions and communicative exchanges. Instead, learners are seen as complex and existing in unfinalized timescales; they are “social actors” engaging in “symbolic competence” who have potential for “creating multiple meanings and identities” (Kramsch, 2008, pp. 400-402). Moreover, as Smith (2009b) suggests, an ecological perspective invites “consideration of how belief and spirituality affect the ecology of the language classroom” (p. 242). Such a shift in pedagogical approach is welcomed since it preserves a holistic conception of the learner that is inclusive of the intricate dimensions of being part of humanity. The second language classroom should be an interactive environment that engages the dimensions human experience including issues of spirituality, ethics, and morality.

In addition to developing a conception of the learner, an ecological perspective further develops the notion of what the role of the teacher is in the language learning environment. Many educators, especially a number of CETs, hold to the idea that teachers are “agents of change” (Brown, 2007, p. 513) and that “all teaching aims to change people” (Wicking, 2012, p. 37). Yet upon considering all the dimensions and facets of the language learning environment, who can really claim to be the instigator of change? Doesn’t an inclination for change already exist within the learner? How much change is really caused by the teacher? The perceived role of the teacher as the “agent of change” represents an unequal perception in power relationships (Ferris, 2009, pp. 211-212). While change is constantly occurring in classrooms, perhaps the notion of “agents of change” is unreasonably attributed to one party, especially since so many factors are at play during the learning process. After all, in an ecological system, every organism is interwoven and affecting each other. Perhaps a continued exploration of an ecological
perspective of what language teaching and learning really means will benefit future discussions of the role of spirituality in the ESL/EFL classroom.

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References


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