

# The Political Dimensions of Language Teaching and the Participatory Approach

## Introduction

In this chapter, we look at the politics of language use and language teaching. We also discuss one language teaching method, the Participatory Approach, which pays particular attention to the political dimensions of education.

## The Politics of Language

Learning a language is a political act. Those that know a language are empowered in a way that those who do not know the language are not. These days, because of its status as an international language, it is English that is seen to be the language of power.<sup>1</sup> Many people around the world want to learn English because they believe that it will help them to get a good education or job. They feel that knowing English gives them a greater chance for economic advancement. ‘On the one hand,’ Graddol (2006: 22) notes, ‘the availability of English as a global language is accelerating globalisation. On the other, the globalisation is accelerating the use of English.’

This view sees English as a tool that benefits the individual who learns it. Other people, however, express concern about what is lost when an individual learns English or ‘adds’ an English-speaking identity. They worry that learning English might mean losing some ability in another language—even an individual’s native language—or that a new identity as an English speaker might cause another identity to fade or to die. They are also concerned about the educational inequality that results. After all, not everyone has the opportunity to study English. More generally, some worry about English dominance leading to the loss of **endangered languages**, such as those spoken by indigenous people and immigrants living in countries where English use predominates, especially when ‘English only’ policies are adopted.

<sup>1</sup> Although Graddol (2006) suggests that other languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish may increasingly play a role as international languages.

## Whose English Should be Taught?

Related to these issues is the political question of whose English is to be the language of instruction. Should it be native-speaker English as spoken in the United Kingdom? The United States? Or what Kachru (1992) calls other ‘inner circle’ countries (Anglophone Canada, Australia, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand, South Africa, and certain countries in the Caribbean)?<sup>2</sup> There are clear differences within and among these varieties, so a choice must be made. Then, what about the variety of English spoken in other countries where English is commonly used and is often an official language—countries such as India, Nigeria, and Singapore—which Kachru refers to as the ‘outer circle’ countries? These former British colonies have evolved their own varieties of native-speaker English, which have become established, among others, as **World Englishes**. Should these varieties be the target of instruction as well? The truth is that there are many different forms of English, which are mutually intelligible for the most part, but which also have unique characteristics. Even within a country, this is the case. For example, in Singapore, there is Standard Singaporean English used for education, and there is ‘Singlish,’ often used for communication within families and among friends.

### English as a Lingua Franca

Then there is the fact that there are millions of users of English in Kachru’s third circle, ‘the expanding circle,’ who have learned English as an additional language. They use it primarily to communicate in multilingual contexts, sometimes even those within the same country. In other words, English is used primarily as a contact language (Canagarajah 2006). This variety has been called **English as a Lingua Franca**, ‘English as an International Language,’ or ‘Global English.’ English as a Lingua Franca or ELF has features that are different from the English spoken in countries belonging to the inner or the outer circles, whose norms are controlled by native speakers.

It might be asked who ‘owns’ the English language? (Widdowson 1994) One answer to this question (Cummins and Davison 2007) is that English ‘belongs’ to those for whom it is a mother tongue, those who speak it from childhood. Another answer is that English is owned by whoever uses it regularly, for whatever purpose. This second answer is the answer that Seidlhofer, Breitender, and Pitzl (2006) give. They recognize that a common language like English is needed for a sense of community, but they also recognize that a common language can be a threat to multilingualism. In order to have both

<sup>2</sup> Languages other than English are spoken in these countries, of course, and sometimes English is only spoken as a native language by a minority of the citizens. For example, Crystal (2003) estimates that only about 10 percent of South Africans are native speakers of English.

a unified community and at the same time protect the rights for speakers of all languages, their answer is to consider English as no longer a possession of native speakers of English. As with all languages, then, the norms for English as a Lingua Franca are determined by its users (Walker 2010).

Of course, as it is widely spoken around the world, ELF is not a homogenous language, and there is certainly no single culture with which it is associated. Scholars who accept the second answer to the question about the ownership of English have identified features of ELF that would not be considered accurate by inner circle native speaker standards, but they are ones that are regular in ELF. One example is that ELF speakers frequently omit the 's' on the end of third person singular present tense verbs. They say 'He walk to school every day,' rather than 'He walks to school every day.' Omitting the 's' would not be seen as an 'error' if comprehensibility is more important than conformity to native-speaker norms. The fact is that few learners aspire to be or need to be native-like speakers of English.

Because ELF is a natural language, it is variable just like other natural languages. Therefore, not all ELF speakers omit the 's.' Nevertheless, the recognition of ELF has prompted teachers to ask questions about which form of English is correct. Some teachers point out that while the omission of the 's' does not seem to affect the substance of a message, it may affect how the speaker is perceived (Ur 2010). Others (Kuo 2006; see also Bruthiaux 2010) argue that one of the 'dominant models' should be the starting point, including one of the World Englishes, if that is the dominant model in a particular place. Indeed:

ELF does not at all discourage speakers from learning and using their local variety in local communicative contexts, regardless of whether this is an inner, outer, or expanding circle English.

(Jenkins 2006: 161)

Of course, no one outside of the local educational context can really answer the question of which English should be taught in a particular place at a particular time.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

**Critical discourse analysis** is the study of how identity and power relations are constructed in language. Critical discourse analysts (such as Fairclough 2001) observe and comment on how language is linked to social practice and the implicit message that is sometimes conveyed. For instance, Stubbs (in Batstone 1995) cites the example of a headline from an apartheid-era South African newspaper. Upon the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, the headline read: 'Jubilant Blacks Clashed with Police.' It would have been possible for this headline to have had a different word order: 'Police Clashed

with Jubilant Blacks,' but this would have assigned responsibility for initiating the confrontation to the police not to the Blacks. In other words, texts are not ideologically neutral. The lack of neutrality extends to other aspects of identity besides race. Gender discrimination occurs, for example, when language teaching materials present women as always being subservient to men.

Of course, these issues can apply to languages other than English as well. We would find that in most countries that have been at one time dominated by another world power, questions and issues about language use and power dynamics would be present, be that language Dutch, English, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, or another. No one is suggesting that teachers not teach the language that their students want to learn. What, then, can teachers do about the politics of language?

### **Critical Approaches to Pedagogy**

A minimal answer to this question is that it is important for teachers to develop an awareness of political issues around the use of language. Language teachers are not merely teaching language as a neutral vehicle for the expression of meaning. **Critical pedagogy** is an approach to teaching that aims to create a more egalitarian society by raising awareness of social injustice as a necessary part of the curriculum. What you should do about critical pedagogy should not be determined by someone else, who may be unfamiliar with your teaching context or your own political orientation. However, if you wish to become more 'critical' in your teaching, here are a few ideas that have been discussed.

### **Literacies**

Some educators (Gee 1996, Luke 2004) have explored **literacies** as a plural rather than singular concept, stressing the fact that participation in a literate English culture means more than being able to read English—learners need to gain access to the specific English language norms, grammar, and vocabulary used by those in power. So students are not just learning to read in English; they would also be learning the discourse of politics, or education, or business. Learning the unique forms, vocabulary, and norms of different discourses is empowering. Teachers who embrace this idea will find themselves examining their teaching practice, choice of texts, activities, and assessment tools, looking for when and how power is explicitly and implicitly expressed. In addition, they may decide to work with students on a sample of language, looking at the author's word choices, what grammar structures are used, and other aspects of language use. This activity might increase students' ability to make vocabulary and grammar choices within the range available to them.



### **Plurilingualism and Multicompetence**

To keep one language from complete domination, teachers can foster positive attitudes towards all languages. All language learning should be additive, not subtractive. In other words, the language being studied should not replace any other language, but should rather enrich the learners' language capacity. Many learners of English are plurilingual, which refers to an individual's ability to speak more than one language to the extent that they need to, without sacrificing any language they have acquired (see Council of Europe document, 2007). Teachers need to respect their students' identities as plurilinguals. In addition, according to Cook (2002), the goal of language teaching should be successful language use and **multicompetence**, not trying to get students to imitate monolingual native-speaker use.

### **Non-native Speakers as Teachers**

Another political issue is the one regarding the speaker status of a teacher (whether native speaker or non-native speaker). Many language education programs prefer to hire native speakers, presumably for the model they provide and the access they have to intuitions about what is correct and how the language works. However, in actual fact, non-native speakers bring a great number of strengths to language teaching, not the least of which is that they are role models of successful learning themselves. Besides, if they speak the language of their students, they know the obstacles to acquisition and how to surmount them. The teacher's status is a political issue, then, not an issue of competence. It is not whether or not they are native speakers of the language they are teaching that makes for a good teacher.

### **Hidden Curriculum**

Another topic has to do with a teacher's awareness of the hidden curriculum of a language class—what is being taught and learned that is not explicit. What do teachers indicate, for example, when they move their students' desks into a circle formation rather than leaving them in rows? When a teacher asks the students what they want to learn in the class, what message is sent? How is this message different from a teacher presenting a carefully-planned syllabus on the first day of class? What if a teacher does not choose to do certain activities in the coursebook and instead replaces them with activities with students' backgrounds and interests in mind? What meaning might be attributed to these actions by the students (and potentially those concerned observers such as parents and administrators) and is that meaning something positive or negative? In order to answer these questions, you may need to think differently about both what you teach and how.

As we have seen, the politics of teaching and learning English has become a conversation—and often a debate—in English programs as well as English teacher education programs worldwide. To conclude this introductory discussion, here is a question and some suggestions to consider. First the question:

Do you see English as something helpful in allowing people from around the world to communicate with each other or as something that is potentially a problem—the problem of English taking over the world (Phillipson 2008)? You might want to find out what your students think about this question. You might also want to explore which form(s) of English and English literacies to include in your classroom, especially ones that are not included in the curriculum or textbook you have been given. Finally, you might think about the extent to which your students' lives, issues, and struggles related to learning English could be discussed in your language classrooms. It is this last point that our lesson in this chapter addresses.

### **The Participatory Approach: One Response to the Politics of Language Teaching**

Although it originated in the late 1950s with the work of Paulo Freire (perhaps the most famous of all critical educators), it was not until the 1980s that the Participatory Approach started being widely discussed in the language teaching literature. In some ways the Participatory Approach is similar to content-based instruction in that it begins with content that is meaningful to the students. The language that is worked upon emerges from it. What is strikingly different, though, is the nature of the content. It is not the content of subject-matter texts, but rather it is content that comes from issues of concern to students. The Participatory Approach is based on a growing awareness of the role that education, in general, and language education, specifically, have in creating and perpetuating power dynamics in society. As Ann Berthoff has written:

Education does not substitute for political action, but it is indispensable to it because of the role it plays in the development of critical consciousness. That, in turn, is dependent on the transforming power of language.  
(Berthoff 1987: xix)

In the late 1950s, Freire, a Brazilian, developed a Portuguese literacy program for illiterate adults living in slums and rural areas. Members of Freire's literacy team spent time in the communities engaging adults in dialogues about the problems in their lives. From these dialogues, members of the team developed vocabulary lists of words that were important to the people in the communities. Certain of these words became **generative words** that were

used to teach basic decoding and encoding skills, the first steps in becoming literate.

Since then, Freire's ideas have been adopted by adult literacy programs around the world. The central premise of Freire's approach is that education and knowledge have value only insofar as they help people liberate themselves from the social conditions that oppress them. The dialogues, therefore, not only have become the basis for literacy development, but also for reflection and action to improve students' lives. Education is not value-free—it occurs within a particular context. The goal of a Participatory Approach is to help students to understand the social, historical, or cultural forces that shaped a particular context, and then to help empower students to take action and make decisions in order to gain control over their lives in that context (Wallerstein 1983).

Like John Dewey, Freire (1970) criticized what he called the **banking method** of teaching in which the teacher 'deposits' information in the students, making the assumption that the teacher knows what the students need to learn. Instead, he advocated educational processes where students' lives, local cultural norms, and issues become the content for learning. He encouraged teachers to use these topics to create the basis for all teaching and learning. In this way, the teacher is no longer depositing information but is rather allowing learning to emerge from within the students. A core practice of the Participatory Approach is problem posing. Problem posing involves the selection of real-life issues from the students' lives and engages the students in an open-ended process of problem solving.

## Experience

Let us now see a lesson in which the Participatory Approach is being practiced.<sup>3</sup> The students are recent immigrants to the United States from Central Europe. They are adults who work part-time during the day and study English at night. Although attendance fluctuates somewhat due to family and work demands placed on the students, tonight there are 10 adults present as the class gets underway.

The teacher begins, 'Good evening everyone. How are you tonight?' The students return the greeting warmly and interact with the teacher and each other, only interrupting to greet latecomers. They know from previous expe-

<sup>3</sup> This lesson is based on Elsa Auerbach's presentation at the School for International Training (SIT) on October 18, 1993, entitled "Participatory Approaches: Problem-Posing and Beyond." We have also drawn from Carolyn Layzer and Bill Perry's workshop at SIT on May 28, 1993 and Auerbach (1992).

rience that this is a time to catch up on anything of significance that has happened in their lives since last week's class. One student discusses the fact that one of her children is struggling at school. He never wants to go to school. She does not know what the problem is, but she is worried. Much of this conversation takes place in halting English and gesture since the students are still of low-intermediate English proficiency. Another student discusses the problem she has been having with her landlord. She can never get enough heat to make her comfortable. When she tries to communicate with the landlord, he tells her that it has always been that way. One bit of good news is that one of the student's brothers has just gotten word that he will be permitted entry into the United States soon and so will be able to join the rest of the family.

Having dialogued with the students and having taken note of their issues, the teacher continues, 'Last week, we were talking about why it is difficult for some of you to come to class regularly. Now I know that most of you work during the day and you have your family to take care of in the evening. In addition, several of the women were speaking about choosing not to come to class a few times because of not wanting to be out alone in the city after dark. I would like us to look at this situation a little more in depth tonight.'

The teacher shows the students a picture. It is a drawing of an apartment building.



**Figure 12.1** A teacher using a picture to understand the problem and elicit solutions

In one of the windows of the building, there is a woman looking out. On the street below, three young men are standing around. The teacher tells the students that the woman has an English class that she does not want to miss, starting in an hour. Then she begins a discussion:

‘What do you see?’ The students reply, ‘A woman.’ And one student adds, ‘Men.’ ‘Who is the woman? What is she doing?’ the teacher queries. The students decide that the woman is Lina, one of the women who expressed her fear of being out in the city by herself after dark. The teacher continues with the questions. ‘Who are the men? What are they doing?’ ‘Where are they?’ The students reply as well as they can using the English they know.

Next the teacher asks the students to imagine how the people in the picture feel. ‘How does the woman feel? Is she happy? Sad? Afraid?’ ‘Why?’ ‘How do the men feel?’ ‘Do they like standing in the street?’

The teacher then pursues a line of questioning that attempts to get students to relate the problem to their own experience. ‘Has this ever happened to you?’ she asks. ‘How did you feel?’ ‘Did you leave the house?’

‘In your country or culture are people alone much?’ the teacher asks in an attempt to contextualize the problem. ‘Do women walk in the streets alone?’ Finally, to end this segment of the class, the teacher invites the students to discuss what they can do about this problem. She does this by posing a series of questions: ‘What can Lina do about this?’ ‘What do you think will happen if she does?’ ‘What would *you* do about this?’ and so forth.

Since one of the suggestions for a solution to Lina’s problem was to have more street lighting installed in her neighborhood, the teacher asks the class if they would like to write a group letter to the mayor’s office to request better lighting. The students think that this is a good idea, and they take out their notebooks. The teacher elicits content for the letter with questions such as ‘What’s important in this letter?’ ‘How do you want it to start?’ ‘What do you want me to write?’ ‘What comes next?’ The teacher faithfully records the students’ answers on the board, making sure not to change their words. She reads the text aloud as she writes it and she invites students to read along. When they are through, the teacher asks them if they want to change anything, pointing to each word as it is read. She then points out some changes that need to be made. When they are finished with their changes, each student reads one line. They do this several times with students reading different lines each time.

The students next copy their group letter into their notebooks. Since they actually intend to send the letter out, they want to make sure that the English is good. She asks them to reread and edit the letter for homework. They will read each other’s letters in the following class and incorporate any necessary revisions in the group letter before sending it out. The class concludes with

the students talking about what they liked in that evening's class and what they didn't like. They also respond to the teacher's questions about what they have learned and what they want to learn in the future.

## Thinking about the Experience

Let us now examine the practices and principles of the Participatory Approach.

Observations	Principles
1 The teacher dialogues with students in order to learn what is happening in their lives.	What happens in the classroom should be connected with what happens outside. The teacher listens for themes in what students say that will provide the content for future lessons.
2 The teacher poses a problem that was voiced by several women during a discussion from a previous class.	The curriculum is not a predetermined product, but the result of an ongoing context-specific problem-posing process.
3 The teacher asks a number of questions and leads the class in discussing the problem.	Education is most effective when it is experience-centered—when it relates to students' real needs. Students are motivated by their personal involvement. Teachers are co-learners, asking questions of the students, who are the experts on their own lives.
4 The teacher asks the students if they want to write a group letter. She elicits the content of the letter from the students by asking leading questions.	When knowledge is jointly constructed, it becomes a tool to help students find a voice; and by finding their voices, students can act in the world. Students learn to see themselves as social and political beings.



<p>5 The teacher writes down what the students tell her. She reads the text aloud, and the students do, too. She asks them if they want to make any changes. She offers feedback as well. After the changes have been made, the teacher has the students read the letter out loud several times.</p>	<p>Language teaching occurs with texts that the students have co-constructed.</p>
<p>6 Afterwards, the students copy the letter in their notebooks. They work on editing it for homework.</p>	<p>Focus on linguistic form occurs within a focus on content. Language skills are taught in service of action for change, rather than in isolation.</p>
<p>7 The students are asked to bring their revised versions of the letters to the next class for others to read.</p>	<p>Students can create their own materials, which, in turn, can become texts for other students.</p>
<p>8 The students discuss what they have learned in the class and what they want to learn in the future.</p>	<p>A goal of the Participatory Approach is for students to evaluate their own learning and to increasingly direct it themselves. This is one way that they can feel empowered.</p>

## Reviewing the Principles

As you can see, the language focus in the Participatory Approach is not established in advance. Rather, it follows from content, which itself emerges from ongoing, collaborative investigations of critical themes in students' lives. As Auerbach (1992: 14) puts it, 'Real communication, accompanied by appropriate feedback that subordinates form to the elaboration of meaning, is key for language learning.' Let us now examine the principles more specifically.

### 1 What are the goals of teachers who use the Participatory Approach?

The teachers' goals are to teach language that is meaningful and to raise the political consciousness of her students. Teachers want their students to be empowered to use the language they are learning in order to solve political problems in their lives.

### 2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

The teacher dialogues with the students in order to identify problems they are having. She then looks for ways to incorporate these problems into the



lessons. These problems become the content she focuses on in language instruction. The students are encouraged to share the daily concerns of their lives with the teacher and the class.

**3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?**

The teacher leads the students in a discussion about their lives. From this discussion, she identifies problems that the class can work on as a whole. She then poses these problems to the students. Students learn how to use language in real-world situations in order to address their problems. Knowledge is jointly constructed with the teacher asking questions and the students responding. Collaboration among students is also encouraged. Focusing on language form occurs within a focus on content relevant to students' lives. Students are encouraged to evaluate their own learning.

**4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction?**

The teacher is supportive of her students. She helps them advocate for themselves. She helps the students find solutions to problems while also teaching them the necessary language to understand, discuss and, address these problems. Students work supportively with one another.

**5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?**

The students learn that their feelings are important and that their study of language is relevant to their lives. The students are invited to express their feelings. They are also empowered by directing and evaluating their own learning.

**6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?**

Language is an instrument of power necessary for active and equal participation in society. Language is not a neutral subject. Culture relates to students' daily experiences.

**7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?**

Language is used meaningfully, with a focus on form subordinate to communication initially. Ultimately, correctness of form is taught and valued so that students can be successful in using language with authorities. Literacy is thought to be very important, although no skill is neglected.

**8 What is the role of the students' native language?**

The students' native language is valued. It should not be lost when students learn a new language.

### 9 How is evaluation accomplished?

As much as possible the students are encouraged to direct and to evaluate their own learning so that it is connected with their lives.

### 10 How does the teacher respond to student errors?

Students are encouraged to self-correct. The teacher also points out student errors and provides feedback on how to correct errors.

## Reviewing the Techniques

The Participatory Approach is another example of a 'strong version' of the Communicative Approach. An analytic syllabus is adopted, and the use of meaningful language predominates over learning linguistic items one by one.

Here are the two special techniques associated with the Participatory Approach:

- **Dialoguing**

In the Participatory Approach, teacher and students dialogue about issues in the students' lives that relate to their power and the power of others. Students are encouraged 'to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves' (Freire 1970: 64).

- **Problem Posing**

The teacher poses a problem that she has identified from dialoguing with students. Students are encouraged to examine their own practices and beliefs and to engage in collaborative planning and problem solving around the problem that has been posed. Problem posing helps students to understand the social, historical, and cultural forces that shaped the context in which they live, and then helps empower them to take action and make decisions in order to gain control over their lives in that context.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have investigated the political dimensions of language teaching and learning, and we have had an experience with the Participatory Approach as one way to address these issues through classroom practice. In her Introduction to *Participatory Practices in Adult Education*, Campbell (2001) defines the goal of participatory practices as 'building a just society through individual and socioeconomic transformation and ending domination through changing power relations.'

While this is an ambitious goal, teachers can contribute to meeting it. As North American teacher educators Hawkins and Norton have written:

Because language, culture, and identity are integrally related, language teachers are in a key position to address educational inequality, both because of the particular learners they serve, many of whom are marginalized members of the wider community, and because of the subject matter they teach—language—which can serve itself to both empower and marginalize ...

(Hawkins and Norton 2009: 31)

Of course, in some settings even to suggest that there are social problems is to implicitly criticize the government, which can be seen as threatening. Clearly, whether or not to address the political dimensions of language teaching will have to be determined by each teacher. Whatever you believe about the political dimensions of language teaching, do you see the value of working on issues, if not problems, that are relevant to your students' lives so that your teaching can be a vehicle for their personal empowerment as well as their language experience? If so, you should ask yourself which, if any, of the techniques presented here you can adapt to your own teaching context.

## Activities

### **A Check your understanding of the political dimensions of language teaching and the Participatory Approach.**

- 1 Proponents of ELF suggest that the target language model not be the native speaker of English, but a fluent bilingual speaker, who can negotiate meaning with other non-native speakers. What do you think about this proposal?
- 2 How is the Participatory Approach an example of a method that takes the politics of language teaching seriously?

### **B Apply what you have understood about the political dimensions of language teaching and the Participatory Approach.**

- 1 Much has been written in this chapter about politics in terms of national identity. But educational inequality arises due to other issues as well. One example mentioned in this chapter is gender discrimination. Can you think of others? What should you do about such issues?
- 2 Speak with your students about what is happening in their lives. Are there themes that emerge around which you can plan lessons?

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