A Call for a Critical Perspective on English Teaching in Mexico

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In Mexico there is a saying: "¡Pobre México, tan cerca de los Estados Unidos y tan lejos de Dios!" ("Poor Mexico - so close to the United States yet so far from God!"). For us, this piece of popular wisdom conveys some of the issues that the students of English in Mexico confront: they are so close to English by virtue of being so near to the United States, yet so far from English because of the assumptions about the standards of English, the accepted styles of English usage, and the ghost of the native speaker which hovers so close to their pursuits. Furthermore, the phrase "so close yet so far" captures the essence of our need to look at the global and local dynamics of agency, identity, and culture in the pursuit of English as an additional language (Angeles Clemente and Michael Higgins).

Thus, in this collective statement we want to subvert the dichotomy of these locations of nearness and distance and (re)position the role of English language teachers in terms of the socio-political and cultural factors that have influenced the construction of this profession in Mexico. This involves exploring a set of critical questions, such as 1) Are we inevitably reproducing/maintaining English hegemonies? 2) Does focusing only on techniques of language teaching encourage the continuing domination of English? 3) Is it possible to focus on the social and cultural issues which constitute language learning? 4) How do we become aware of, understand or question the connection between language learning and the social realities of gender, class, ethnicity and other social locations? 5) How can we construct social spaces within this profession so that we are represented by our own voices? 6) How can we close the social and political distance between the statuses of native speaker versus the non-native speaker of English?

One means of exploring these questions is to look at what have been the stories of English teaching and learning in Mexico. One story of English in Mexico is of how language can act as a vehicle of globalization and cultural imperialism. It appears on billboards, children's backpacks, teenagers' T-shirts, and in the proliferation of little schools promoting *inglés y computación.* Second language acquisition and teaching (SLAT) theory and methods developed in the core are spreading Western-value laden "McCommunication" (Block, 2002) to the periphery, and in the process finishing the job started by Cortes' *conquistadores*

by destroying Mexico's linguistic ecology. As a result, it could be said that English teachers in Mexico are the modern incarnation of *La Malinche*. To make things more complex, we need to keep in mind that the Mexico that we envision is a Mexico where linguistic and cultural diversity is valued. In this sense we should, first of all, reject the notion of one "unified" Mexico[1]. Along the same lines, and in order to view multilingualism and interculturalism as something positive and valuable, we need to start seeing ourselves beyond the narrow notion of "English" teachers. For instance, in Oaxaca, the graduates of the B.A. program have the potential to become Spanish teachers, Zapotec teachers, Mixe teachers, etc. Therefore, we need to start seeing ourselves as *language teachers* or, better, *language educators*. If we truly want to work critically, we need to see that hegemony is embedded both in the Spanish and English language. We have the potential to uncover this hegemony hidden in languages. Many graduates of TESOL programs end up teaching in private and public schools (at elementary, secondary, *bachillerato* levels) and even universities. It is in those places, where we need to bring a critical eye.

However, English in Mexico is also a story of how the country is successfully acquiring the global linguistic currency of English. Education reforms promoting Mexico's *macroacquisition* (Brutt-Griffler,2002) of the language will better position the country, as ex-President Salinas de Gortari promised[2], to enter the First World. The spread of English, in this version, is an expression of Mexico's agency. Not only does this linguistic capital better enable the country to compete in world markets, but Mexico will also be able to communicate its culture to the rest of the world. Above all, through English the local can affect the global as much or more than the global affects the local.

The stories of English in Mexico are conflicting, even contradictory, yet all are "true": Mexicans hold versions of these different perspectives all at once. Learning English in Mexico is framed by and imbued with these social meanings, the linguistic ideologies constructed through (among other things) Mexico's colonial past and the historical relationship of their country with the US. As in other English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts throughout the world, English is a bittersweet pill linked to domination, but also with the potentiality to be used as a "weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1990).

Where are we as teachers of English in these stories? What have been our contradictions in the process of providing English language instruction? Historically, external language and political organizations have been influential in the professionalization and legitimatization of ELT in Mexico. It is clear that in the past we had little ownership of what English was and how it was to be taught. We are now in a better position to take an active role in the construction of this professional field by creating a more autonomous, localized, and structured network of academic agents who continually reflect critically on their learning, using and teaching of the language in order to work towards social justice in Mexico. In other words, the objective is to question through an ongoing national dialogue the position of ELT in Mexico and to carry out research which impacts

the teaching of English positively in Mexico. Furthermore, from these positions of social assertiveness, our voices as educational actors (students, teachers, teacher trainers, administrators, policy-makers) will be heard as representative of our profession in Mexico.

Now, while realizing the relevance of being autonomous, we need to find a way to connect the local with the other "local" EFL contexts without having the gatekeepers of the global, who tend to come from dominant countries, regulating our interactions (Free Local Journals on the web maybe a way for us to start doing that). To locate ourselves in these social dynamics, we need to use our collective voices to address the cultural and political issues surrounding the learning of English in Mexico. These include:

1. What is the relationship between language and culture? Whose culture and whose values as cultural statements are transmitted in the instruction of English?

2. How can we encourage both a critical learning of English and a respect for the diversity of social locations in terms of social class, gender, sexuality, age and ethnicity?

3. What are the social, political and cultural roles of the English language teacher? Are we just teachers of a neutral subject matter? Or are we embedded in a conflicting field of political and cultural confrontation? And how can we critically address those contradictions?

4. In what creative and affective way can we *mexicanize* both the learning and the use of English in Mexico? That is, how can we maintain and reproduce Mexican English?

5. Mexican English raises questions about language learning, language teaching, and language use. Within this framework, the issue of native/non-native teachers shifts to novice>expert (Canagarajah, 2002) teachers. How will we create a context for understanding and determining who is a novice and who is an expert?

6. How do we struggle against the hegemony of nativespeakerism? That is, how do we subvert the political and social values that invoke the omnipresent ghost of the native speaker of English?

These questions can be answered by collecting the personal histories and reflections of both students and teachers regarding their experience learning and teaching English in a Mexican educational context. We contend that through the use of ethnographic or realistic narrative we can explore and define these and

other issues in a critical and productive way. In doing so, we can step out of our fixed terrain of linguistics and applied linguistics and venture into other disciplines such as sociology and domains such as feminism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism, or perhaps better, we can activate such disciplines and domains directly within our belief systems as EFL educators (Pennycook, 2001), with the intention of forming and acting upon "an ethical, epistemological, and political attitude toward all questions in language education, literacy, translation, or language use in the workplace" (ibid: 176). Yet, as Pennycook would maintain (2001), we should never become caricatures of any discipline or domain, nor accept any supposed finality of knowledge; rather, we should constantly reconsider, question, and transform our perspectives as well as our roles as critical applied linguists. As such, our task could be guided by the following objectives (suggested by Pennycook, 2005):

1) Transgression: political and epistemological tools to go beyond the boundaries of mainstream thought and politics;

2) Reflexivity: a stance that maintains a constant scepticism towards cherished concepts and modes of thought;

3) Engagement: an ability to engage with the competing demands of dominion, disparity, difference, and desire; and

4) Flexibility: ways to adapt to linguistic, somatic and performative turns in language use.

It is our belief that the papers presented in this special issue represent the beginning of this exploration of how to create critical applied linguistics in Mexico. We hope that the readers, teachers of English in Mexico, would be motivated to reflect on these issues and make a change in their own everyday contexts.

NOTES:

1. We cannot forget that for the sake of "unity," many different linguistic and cultural groups have been and are still being discriminated against. If we are to fight against English hegemony, we must acknowledge first that Spanish historically has been extremely hegemonic in Mexico. We believe that acknowledging that fact will give us more credibility with other fields, such as anthropology and ethnolinguistics.

2. We have all probably seen Mexican products which have made their way into American supermarkets. Even though their labels are in English, these products remain in the "Mexican Food" aisle. We wonder how much profit these companies have gained and how much of this profit has made its way

down to the people. Sierra and Padilla (2003) have also argued that the leaders like Salinas and Zedillo who were educated in English have brought the American way of doing business to Mexico. Having said all this, we think English does still have an important role to play in Mexico. The power English can give to people like the Zapatistas makes our profession worthwhile. It is through English and technology that the world has learned about these injustices. Because of this, the international communities have pressured Mexican officials to respect indigenous communities.

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