

TESOL at Sammy's Bar

A Play in One Act

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Introduction

Like many loners, I spend much of my time seeming to avoid people, while avidly spying on them from a safe distance. I transcribed the conversation which follows from one I overheard perched on a barstool in Sammy's Bar, an imitation middle-American cocktail lounge smack in the heart of Santiago de Chile and a favorite meeting place for Gringos away from home. I frequent Sammy's for two reasons. First, laconically exchanging dispersed comments, timed about one every five minutes with the Australian barman, makes me feel a little like Humphrey Bogart; and second, along with the overpriced draft beer comes an unlimited quantity of unshelled peanuts which I often make into a free, organic, evening meal.

I hope the text of the conversation will be of interest to English teachers in general, especially US English teachers in Latin America who identify themselves as politically progressive.

I don't agree with everything I transcribed that night, and worse, I'm not sure what I agree with and what not.

Re-reading the text, I notice that some of the speakers contradict themselves. It may be that they noticed I was listening in and changed their opinions accordingly. None of them are any special friends of mine. Generally, my philosophical position is that people get the government and the English courses they deserve but this morning I'm not so sure.

Bill: I feel really confused. You know, I left the States to try to get away from the American way of life, and here I am teaching English to employees of big U.S. corporations, the same damn corporations I swore I'd never work for in the States. And those corporations are behind the U.S. foreign policy of backing every rightwing general here in Latin America.

Dan: Take it easy. Teaching English is a job like any other. People here want to learn English--they need it for their work.

Bill: That's just what I was saying. The multinationals dominate the economy of Latin America. That's why we're here: to train obedient, underpaid workers for the multinationals, the big banks, the local companies that do business with them.

Dan: Why mix politics in with your work? I'm just trying to earn a living, and as underpaid as half the people I teach at those banks you hate so much.

Jack: Dan, I think Bill's right. Teaching is very political. The textbooks we use do nothing but idealize life in the States. They're full of characters without existential or economic problems. They never mention the racism, violence, and buy-more consumer rat-race that, like Bill says, I left the States to get away from.

Dan: The textbooks have material people like to read. No one likes tragedies, but you two guys and the ancient Greeks. Attractive characters motivate the students.

Bill: Yeah, but they motivate them to imitate models which have no relation to their lives, like the characters in the textbooks or those on the TV series imported from the US. And so the students end up doomed to fail or living in an unreal dreamworld where they think they're the Chilean Michael Jackson, unaware they're being deceived, even thankful for the deception.

Jack: The movies have really done a job on people here, given them some sort of inferiority complex about us Gringos. Many Chileans really believe they're underdeveloped, as people. I don't know what the word "underdeveloped" means, if anything, when it's used to describe people. The word makes some sense in economics. The guy that sells me fruit told me the other day he'd seen some program on TV and was convinced we North Americans were smarter than Chileans. I said we just had more technology.

Dan: Could be true, but I'm sick of feeling guilty because I'm a Gringo. I've got as much right to earn a decent living as anybody else.

Jack: Hey man, nobody said you didn't. But you live here too and suffer from the same problems, the low wages, censorship, class system, government corruption, and machismo as, say, a Chilean teacher.

Bill: I'm not sure that's true. We North American teachers receive better wages.

Dan: Look, I got no interest in politics here. I vote Democratic back in the States.

Bill: Dan, everything you do is political, not just voting. Politics are the relations of power which exist between men and women, nothing else; and to be apolitical is simply to say "Yes" to the world as it is.

Jack: Yeah, our students aren't learning English to read Shakespeare in the original or even to sing Beatles lyrics with a Liverpool accent. Compare the number of people who study German or French, two economically useless languages, with the number who study English--the difference between the figures roughly indicates the number who study English for economic reasons.

Dan: People everywhere study for economic reasons.

Jack: Sure, but no one in the US except Spanish teachers and the border patrol learns Spanish to obtain employment. Students here are forced to learn a foreign language in order to work in their own country. This produces all kinds of conscious and unconscious resentment in the students, which generally manifests itself as classroom apathy. What is incredible is that so many Latin Americans study English without a word of protest! Why don't they simply tell the North American executives of the First National Bank of Bugum to learn Spanish?

Bill: They can't. The US is the boss throughout Latin America, and the boss decides what language you're going to use. When a country says no to Uncle Sam, the result is predictable: direct or indirect intervention. Look at Grenada, the Bay of Pigs invasion or the coup here in Chile.

Dan: I'm not in favor of intervention, but I'm no communist either.

Jack: Dan, that's not the point. What we're talking about is that our students learn English because their country is dominated by an English-speaking foreign power and what our relation is to that power, our country.

Dan: With the exception of the CIA and those guys, most of the Gringos here have good intentions, you can't deny that.

Jack: I'm not sure that's the case. A lot of Gringos are here just to pocket a fat profit, but good intentions are not enough. School decentralization, for example, a well-intentioned idea which may yield excellent results in Wisconsin produces chaos in a country as corrupt as Chile today, but made-in-USA ideas dominate all the culture here, from things like school decentralization to blue jeans and the idea that blonde is beautiful.

Bill: Right, it's like the Hollywood movies. They always have a hero full of good intentions and capable of settling all problems

with one solid punch. And people end up believing that we Gringos are like that, better than them and larger than life.

Dan: Maybe the size of the screen gives the larger-than-life impression. I agree that if the textbooks gave a truer image of the US, we'd have better communication with our students. That's why the exchange student programs are so important: they let people see each other as they really are.

Jack: You know, I think this stuff about exchange students in the texts (and if a Latin American appears in an English text, he generally is an exchange student) just sells our students another illusion. First of all, the possibility of studying abroad is open for economic reasons to only a small percentage of Latin Americans. Chile is full of people without money to mail a letter to apply for a scholarship in the first place. Really, the prize of a scholarship to study in the United States functions among the Latin American middle class like the lottery does among the proletariat: something few will win, but a hope to keep them happy and unthinking. It's like Bill said before: the texts create models of lifestyles nobody in Latin America can aspire to, giving the student the idea that learning English, especially as an exchange student, will allow him to participate in the dream world of the texts, that the solution to his economic condition is identification with those who dominate him. And by the way, why is it that when the so-called exchange students speak English on the tapes provided by the textbook publishers, they speak perfect unaccented English? Can't the publishers take the trouble of hiring a real-life Spanish speaker to record their tapes?

Bill: Speaking of tapes, those teachers who, to be "in," bring rock or pop tapes to class only reinforce the tendency to make students believe that everything of worth in life is made in the USA.

Dan: You geniuses are forgetting one little thing. We're English teachers, and bringing songs in Quechua isn't going to help anybody learn English.

Bill: Do you really believe all you've been saying?

Dan: No. But you got to learn to play a little stupid in life. Why should I make noise if nobody else does? If our students want to listen to Michael Jackson instead of Violeta Parra, read Harold Robbins instead of García Márquez, why shouldn't we let them be?

Bill: What you say, Dan, bothers me a little. Who am I, a North American to tell Latin Americans to prefer their own culture? Aren't I just as imperialistic as the multinationals which tell them to prefer Coca-Cola?

Jack: If a doctor sees a patient's swallowed poison, he administers an antidote, doesn't speculate about the right to suicide.

Bill: No, Jack, we have no business telling these people what do do one way or another. We're not doctors anyway. I've heard the slogan, "Yanqui go home" once too often. I've heard it emerge in too many friendly arguments, in a form that hurt me deeply, made me feel guilty and useless, guilty for having had so much, for having eaten so well for so many years, useless for having tried to integrate myself in a culture that doesn't need me, for having lost a little of my own culture in the futile effort at integration and ending up a Yanqui without a home to go back to. And even when the slogan arrives in the form, "Yanqui go home, but not you, you're different," it hurts, because I'm not so, so different from other Yanquis. Maybe I speak better Spanish, maybe I eat my big meal at mid-day, but I'm still a privileged Gringo.

Dan: Everyone on the planet came from somewhere else, even the Native Americans. And the Spanish didn't exactly come here like lambs either.

Jack: Yeah, Bill, there's no original sin in being born in the USA.

Bill: Being North American, you assume, in some way, responsibility for all the US does.

Jack: That's like saying all Chileans are responsible for Pinochet! You seem to want absolution for your sins. There's too many people

concerned about justifying themselves to a God that may or may not exist and too few concerned with effective action. That is, if you're only interested in winning pardon from the so-called "revolutionaries" here for being a Gringo, you contribute nothing. Actually, it's very selfish to worry so much about the cleanliness of your soul.

Bill: You're exaggerating. What happens is that the most intelligent and lucid students I've met here protest against the economic and cultural dependence of their own country and force us, their teachers, to take a position regarding that protest, - that in Latin America today to attack US cultural domination is a step towards lucidity, and, for me at least, lucidity is a good in itself.

Alan: I've met a lot of lucid business executives that don't share our political position.

Jack: I think my entrance in the political process starts from my personal grievances, not from an abstract compassion for the poor of the Third World or from a love of something as subjective as lucidity. For example, my approach to the struggle against cultural domination arises from my reaction to English textbooks: that given texts which distort the reality I see, I'm alienated as a professional; I can't deliver to my students all I have to deliver. The texts frustrate me intellectually. I can't teach.

Alan: Better to keep your mouth shut. Nobody here wants to hear criticism, especially if it comes from a Gringo.

Bill: That's because we have no right to criticize people we've been exploiting for the last century.

Jack: For you, the oppressed are somehow closer to God. Do you think oppressed people are always right? No, part of the process of oppression consists in mystifying people about their lives. There's lots we must criticize.

Dan: Yeah, the macho man syndrome down here offends the few moral sensibilities a corrupt character like me has got left.

Bill: Machismo is part of the cultural ecosystem here.

Jack: You're being patronizing. You wouldn't accept machismo in the US--why accept it here? There's nothing revolutionary about it, even if it appears consciously or unconsciously in men and women that call themselves revolutionaries. Rather, it's a throwback to a stage of human history in which powerful men competed with one another to dominate the largest number of women and male slaves. Machismo manifests itself as power worship, both by men and women; and this power worship is one of the reasons countries plagued by machismo cannot throw off ties of dependence. They secretly love the Big Brother that crushes them.

Bill: Wasn't Cuba full of machismo? And didn't they successfully liberate themselves?

Jack: Yes, and the Cuban revolution consisted of trading dependence on Uncle Sam for dependence on "El Comandante" Fidel, which I admit is a positive change for the Cubans.

Dan: Look, no one listens to us--we don't make the decisions either here or in Washington. Let's relax. We're just a bunch of exploited slobs.

Jack: The guy that obeys, naturally, has less responsibility than the guy that commands, but that doesn't change the situation any. It's all too easy to decide that since I'm exploited, not an exploiter, I'm morally justified in doing nothing: I continue teaching the same pointless or even psychologically harmful lessons as before, but I'm morally justified in my passivity by my status as a victim. Many Marxist thinkers contribute to this by a kind of false glorification of the working class: since the working class is oppressed, it can do no wrong.

Dan: Great. Now what are your prescriptions, doctors?

Bill: I think a teacher's job is consciousness raising, increasing students' lucidity with respect to their situation.

Dan: We're not philosophy teachers. What we teach is neutral. A language has no value system attached.

Jack: A language in itself may be neutral, but a language never exists in itself, except perhaps in the pages of a text on theoretical linguistics. A language in the so-called real world is a historical product that serves the communicative needs of a certain group of people at a certain time. Communicative needs, by the way, may be positive or negative, ranging from telling someone you love him or her to radioing orders to a helicopter gunship to napalm a village of unarmed peasants. English in Latin America serves the communications needs of the multinational corporations we mentioned before, serves to train an obedient workforce to produce, and willing consumers to buy.

Dan: Are you so sure you and only you know why people study English? Sometimes I ask my students, and they give me a pretty broad spectrum of good answers.

Bill: It's that the real reasons are subconscious or semi-conscious. You've got to probe for them like a psychoanalyst.

Dan: Why not accept the reasons they give you, that they need to read technical material in English, that their company receives many foreign visitors, that knowing English will give them a chance at a promotion, that they want to travel abroad? How the hell do you know there's a "real" reason behind the ones people think they have?

Bill: People are brainwashed by the mass media.

Dan: How do you know you're not brainwashed?

Jack: Look, I have to act upon what I see, and I see a whole industry brainwashing people that English is the road to success, and that success can best be defined as slavish imitation of the lifestyle of middle-class North Americans, or worse, as an imitation of a false image of that lifestyle.

Bill: I've tried to talk about these problems, but sometimes the students accuse me of being a spy, a CIA agent.

Dan: Judging from the way you live, you're the worst paid spy in the history of covert operations. When I look a little closer, I see the agency hasn't bothered to send you to a dentist for some time now.

Jack: Ironically, those guys that think you're some sort of spy are just continuing the tendency to glamorize all Gringos. For them a Gringo has to be somebody from the movies, a cowboy or a spy-- he can't be just a simple English teacher.

Dan: Kidding aside, nobody's going to tell you what they really think. Once when I was teaching a group of three IBM technicians, one, an ex-pilot, launched into a discourse about how the present military government of Chile is the only thing protecting the free world from a "Red" takeover of the entire solar system. Another student seconded all he said with a tired and ironic cynicism, and the third just kept silent. When I asked Student Number Three what he thought, he replied that he didn't like to talk politics during working hours. And when I asked him why he didn't, he told me he had to make a phone call and left the room. I'm not sure my pressing Student Three did him any good.

Bill: Maybe it made him sufficiently ashamed of himself to speak out the next time.

Jack: I've generally had positive experiences, but when the conversation opens up to what English is doing in Latin America, a lot

hostility comes out, naturally directed against me. I've even had to defend myself against the charge of massacring the North American Indians. Luckily, my ancestors hadn't arrived in the States from Europe at that time.

an: Yeah, they blame you for all kinds of ridiculous things, like the war in Vietnam. Hell, I was against the war. In a way you guys are right: the English texts give the students the idea that all North Americans believe in the Fourth of July and that God created the first supermarket.

ll: One danger is defending yourself too well, of convincing hostile students that you and me and the rest of the North Americans and people are a great bunch of freedom-loving folks constantly deceived by the evil masterminds in the Pentagon and the CIA. You have to let them know that, consciously or unconsciously, the average North American lives a privileged life with respect to theirs and that his privileges come at the expense of theirs; that the First National Bank can pay its secretaries a decent wage back in Peoria because it pays starvation wages and reaps an obscene profit in Sao Paulo; that the electric wiring in your house in the States is A-1-OK because the US gets its copper cheap in Chile, where the miners work for cheap.

an: You guys are masochists. But if you really want to suffer along with the copper miners, why don't you go work in the mine? At least donate half your salary to the nearest exploited peasant.

ck: I'm a teacher, not a miner, and as I said before, my need to take action comes precisely from my role as a teacher.

an: And exactly what action do you take besides griping to me about working hours?

ck: For example, in one class we analyze the text, lesson by lesson. We see what the hidden ideological content is behind a lesson about "polite requests," for example. I ask a student if he

or she would request something from a garage attendant in the same way he or she would make a request to his boss, and what this difference reveals about class structure or about relations of power. If the lesson talks about a typical North American family, I try to point out to what extent this typical, problem-free family is mythological and how the myth of the unending prosperity, health, and happiness of this non-existent North American family is designed to sell the student a set of ideas: that he should buy the same consumer goods North Americans do; that he should support the United States against its supposed enemy, international communism; that he should work ever-harder for his multinational employers, since working there in contact with the American Way of Life is somehow a privilege, somehow more glamorous, than say, working in the local public library.

Bill: I agree, but you know what happens--the class becomes a kind of group therapy-cum-complaint session: we're all underpaid, we all have ulcers, the big companies rob us, etc.

Dan: One little, little problem so far, good buddies. Putting these theories into practice is likely to cost a teacher his job.

Bill: Maybe I'm helping myself and my students more if I get fired than working like crazy to convince them of something I don't believe in myself.

Dan: Fine, if you get fired, you go back home to Boston and write a magazine article about imperialism south of the border. I've got two kids to support and nobody to pay my plane ticket back to the States. Not to mention the Chilean teachers who are stuck here for good.

Bill: Precisely because he's got somewhere to escape to, a Gringo here can speak out more freely, can take more risks.

Dan: Hey, I'm not the Statue of Liberty in blue jeans.

Jack: Nobody said you were, but do you feel good about teaching English, given the texts we use and the illusions our students have?

Dan: I feel good when a chick with tight pants sits down in the first row of seats.

Bill: Can't you take anything seriously! I'm sick of your cynicism. And you're the one always complaining about machismo.

Jack: Bill, can't you see Dan's playing the devil's advocate? He's hit at every hypocritical weak point you and I have made.

Dan: Hell, just call me Socrates.

Bill: Countries with the streets full of begging children don't need Socrates or communicative courses in English. When will they put the notion of exploitation in the notional-functional curriculum?

Jack: Surely when the publishers realize the "notion of exploitation" increases their sales.

Bill: When the students learned grammar, they at least had a tool to help translate technical or philosophical works in English which might be of use in their country's development. With the notional-functional approach all they learn are detached phrases like in the phrase-books for tourists. They learn to say, "I would like a hamburger," but they have no idea what "would" means.

Dan: Tell me what "would" means, Bill.

Bill: Look, if a student can translate a word, in some sense he knows what it means. The majority of English students are never going to have to ask for a hamburger in New York; they might need to translate a manual of auto mechanics.

Dan: Then you admit students here need to learn English.

Bill: All right. They need English, they need Japanese, they need Arabic, Russian and Chinese. What they don't need is to be sold on the United States along with their English.

Dan: So I have a function to fulfill in life. I can breathe again.

Jack: Amen, brother.

Bill: Amen.