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Narrating ESOL Teachers' Experience: Critical Reflections on the Global English Language Industry

ABSTRACT: In the context of English as a global language, access to teaching and learning it has become an important issue in the industry that powers communication around the world. My research, based on the experiences of ESOL teachers, explores how they navigate the ethics of the changing global landscape of English language teaching and the inequalities involved in the global English language teaching industry. I am interested in how teachers negotiate the divergent positioning of the English language as a means of personal and local empowerment and global hegemony. The study is based on biographical interviews with ESOL teachers and their critical reflections on their practice.

KEYWORDS: TESOL, language instruction, English language, globalization

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I focus on the experiences of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, native speakers of English who, through their pedagogical practices, engage in intercultural communication and negotiate the divergent positioning of the English language as a means of personal and local empowerment and global hegemony. I aim to show the consequences of their ambivalent feelings toward the position of English as a global language and understand how this ambivalence influences ESOL teaching performance in a global context.

My biographical study draws on interviews with ESOL teachers whose teaching careers were specifically built and shaped by the fact that they were native English speakers. I explore how this fact challenged them in effectively helping their students, whose first language is not English and whose first culture is not the culture of English-speaking countries, in becoming international communicators. The interviews were reflective descriptions of the teachers' experiences, which included their struggles with reconciling ethical dilemmas tied to teaching English which is a global and hegemonic language. I explore how, because of the English language dominance, the global industry becomes a gateway for building teaching and learning opportunities. At the same time, I show how it simultaneously generates inequalities and contributions to the marginalization and disappearance of other languages.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE DOMINANCE

Important to my work is the larger context in which English language teaching practices emerge. In today's competitive world, the importance of English cannot be ignored. English has become the language of global commerce, international diplomacy, education, and science (Crystal, 2003; Guo & Beckett, 2007; Swaan, 2001). English is the language of the internet and social media. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization highlights that 90% of the internet's web pages are published in just 10 languages (English, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, Persian, French, German, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Mandarin) and that more than half of them (60,5 %) are in English (Ibrahimova, 2021). Because of its use as a second or for-

eign language, the total English language users account for 1.268 billion (Ibrahimova, 2021; What Are the Top 200 Most Spoken Languages? 2020).

While some languages have an advantage as a medium for communication for a majority of the world's population, others are marginalized and even disappear. An estimated 6,000 to 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today (Crystal, 2003, 2015; Fleming, 2020; Maurais & Morris, 2003). David Crystal contends that "because of major dialects, this number runs as high as 10,000" (Crystal, 2015, p. 107). Jacques Maurais explains: "The expansion and retraction of languages is a social phenomenon, which reflects a position of power. The disappearance of a language always has nonlinguistic causes, which are the result of a balance of forces." He argues that while most people are aware of the threat of environmental destruction and animal and plant species extinction, they are not aware that 90% of all languages may vanish or nearly vanish in the twenty-first century (Maurais, 2003, p. 28). The growth of some languages goes hand in hand with the extinction of others and has implications for the loss of heritage languages (Mustapha, 2014).

English is the most desired foreign language to learn (Global Industry Analysts, 2021), and it is considered a powerful international language that can allow people to be part of the globalized world. The hegemony of English is a consequence of a historical process resulting from the slave trade, colonization, and its aftermath, as well as continuing globalization that enables the language to spread and assume its hegemonic position. As Peter Ives puts it, "anyone who wishes to have control over their own conditions of life must speak English and acquiesce to these power structures" (Ives, 2010, pp. 95–96). For those who know it, English opens doors to prestige and positions of wealth. It is the medium through which the unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and know-how operate (Pennycook, 1995, p. 55). Robert Phillipson acknowledges that this dominance is "asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47).

As a global language, English has become a currency that can be traded for access to better employment, financial security, and social status in various parts of the world. According to the latest (2021) reports, in 2020, the worldwide market for English language learning was worth \$9.6 billion and is projected to reach \$27 billion by 2027 (growing at a compound annual growth rate of 15.8% over the period 2020–2027). It has become a booming growth industry valued \$2.8 billion in the U.S. alone. It is forecasted that the market in China, the world's second largest economy, will reach \$5.4 billion by the year 2027. Among two other important geographic markets are Japan and Canada, each projected to grow at 11.5% and 14.1%, respectively, over the 2020–2027 period. Within Europe, Germany is forecast to grow at approximately 12.6% CAGR. The reports also indicate that "after an early analysis of the business implications of the pandemic and its induced economic crisis, growth in the segment is readjusted to a revised 12.9% CAGR for the next 7-year period" (Global Industry Analysts, 2021).

It is in this complex socio-economic and global context that I consider the work of ESOL teachers, native speakers of English. In the following sections, I first outline my methodology. I then explore the experiences and narratives of the teachers, focusing on their critical reflection regarding inequalities embedded in their profession.

METHODOLOGY

My methodological approach is inspired by the tradition of biographical research, which draws attention to and studies a single person (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 1011). Biographical research highlights social and personal meanings and is conducive to my goal of understanding the experiences of ESOL teachers through their narratives and considering how the global context promotes their efforts to reshape their careers.

The material for this article comes from my doctoral research¹ in which I focus on how the ambivalent position of English as a global language impacts the experiences and biographies of ESOL teachers. This research, in turn, grows out of my long-term work experience in administrating teaching practicums for TESOL candidates organized jointly (2007–2018) by the International Institute for the Study of Culture and Education at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, Poland, and the English Language Studies Department at the New School in New York. The interviews were collected between February 2020 and April 2021, and a total of 12 teachers participated in the study.

The main conceptual components of my study draw on three thematic areas: globalization, language, and hegemony. Framing my research in the debate on the cultural dimensions of globalization, I focus on the ways culture travels through global scapes (Appadurai, 1996) and language functions as a cultural tool of both increasing global interconnection and deepening inequalities. I ground my project in research on the cultural aspects of teaching and learning languages, in particular how social and cultural processes are negotiated in significant part by language and how language education can empower marginalized communities.

Through the interviews, I try to understand how teachers navigate teaching English, which can be perceived as a means of strengthening Western dominance but also as a means of empowering communities through foreign-language skills and knowledge. For the purposes of this article, I selected two individuals with whom I conducted in-depth interviews on their extensive teaching practice in Armenia, China, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and Russia. These two interviews were conducted online in April 2021, and each lasted approximately two hours. The interviews were transcribed, and content was analyzed for major themes outlined below.

¹ The doctoral research was supported by the University of Lower Silesia as a part of a project that has received funding from the National Center for Research and Development under Integrated University Programs grant agreement no. POWR.03.05.00-00-Z215/17

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND INEQUALITY

At the time of the interview, Sean was looking for a teaching position, applying to public universities across Ireland and the United Kingdom. A year before, he had returned to Ireland from Armenia, where he established and ran a private English language school. Since returning, he had been trying to find a job in an area of expertise outside the ESOL field. He was hoping for a position as an assistant director of studies in an educational center, working with students from disadvantaged areas.

Sean started teaching English as a volunteer in Nepal in 2008. He finished high school in Ireland and wanted to take a “gap year” before moving ahead with his education. In Nepal, he helped teach English in a local school that did not have an English language teacher at all.² Three years later, Sean graduated in sociology, and in his last year of university, he decided to obtain a certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). After graduation, he went straight to work teaching English in a government program in the Republic of Georgia; his university degree and the certificate were the only requirements for getting the post. There, he taught basic English to children and teenagers at a public school. When he arrived in Supsa, a village on the Black Sea, no one in the village was speaking English. He said: “Even the English teachers did not speak very much English. The students were all beginners.”³

The next step in Sean's teaching career was a position in a local private language school in Korea. There, for a year and a half, he taught English classes to young learners. It was in Korea that Sean started to feel he was adding to the global English language industry and began to have doubts about further engagement in the practice: “In Korea, it was harvesting money from young education. My job was much more about what their work and progress appeared to their parents than what their work and progress actually was.”

There, he noticed that teaching English was actually much more than the instruction itself. He found there was a commercial push to learn English. This experience resonated with him for a long time, and by the end of his stay in Korea, he decided he did not want to be a teacher anymore; he wanted to immerse himself in a local community. At his next stop, in Kyrgyzstan, he started to learn Russian. This was a life-changing time for him: “I look back and say there was a change, absolutely change in my life, primarily due to learning Russian, the friends there and as well meeting my partner. (...) Definitely, Kyrgyzstan changed that for me because I liked my job, and I liked my students, and I learned to teach really. I learned teaching in Kyrgyzstan.”

From Kyrgyzstan, Sean moved to Kazakhstan when he wanted to combine teaching English and continuing to learn Russian. He found a job in a private company

2 He later reflected on his teaching experience in Nepal in a short memo published at *Where are they now?* Sean McGann tells us how his life has changed since his time in Nepal – Oyster (oysterworldwide.com)

3 This quotation, along with those to follow comes from an interview with Sean on April 19, 2021.

where he had a chance to teach without any pressure to pass exams. There, Sean started to like teaching again and decided to raise his teaching qualification and do the Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (DELTA).⁴ After receiving the certificate from the University of Cambridge, Sean moved to Algeria, where he set up a school that prepared Algerian students to apply for admission to British universities.

From 2018 to 2021, apart from being an academic director of the study center, he taught English for Academic Purposes, Society and Politics, and Research Methods. This experience was, again, transformative. After three years working in Algeria, Sean decided he did not want to teach the English language anymore: "I think I did damage. I was setting up a system that is not good for Algerian society. (...) There is an analogy between what I do and what the old British colonialist did when they went to India or West Africa. When I go and teach English in Central Asia or Algeria, I almost embody Western values that Western countries demonstrate to the world. The only way to not do that is to not go abroad and teach."

He comments on the university program of which he was a part: "The U.K. universities charge really high prices, so centers in Algeria, Nigeria or Vietnam have to charge high prices, which means that only the richest in the country can study. The U.K. is exporting that model of education and class-creating system that simultaneously only allows the elite to study but also gives the impression of English as a necessary step toward success. However, that necessary step is very expensive. And it is a never-ending treadmill of money harvesting."

Sean's comments revealed that he was aware of the various inequalities and the tensions he felt while teaching English abroad. He makes a direct link between contemporary ESOL teaching and the history of colonialism. He also shows awareness of how the economic structures – monopolized certificate exams, access to textbooks – that have been built up around English language learning and teaching "are an enormous contributor to inequality." As a result, Sean is changing his career. Deciding not to teach English anymore, Sean is fleeing the global economic structures that he feels create inequalities among learners and teachers.

Similarly, Kate was feeling disenchanted with her ESOL teaching experience. In particular, she found it difficult to justify her future teaching career in the English language industry. Holding a B.A. in English language and literature from the University of Brighton and an M.A. in language documentation and description from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, Kate found it difficult to sustain engaging with English language teaching. She said it was just getting harder and harder to justify her work: "I was well aware of the kind of inequalities in the industry.

4 DELTA, the Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, is an advanced qualification. It can only be taken by qualified English teachers with a few years of teaching experience who are looking to advance their qualifications. This qualification is provided by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). (Retrieved June 7, 2021, from <https://www.tefl.org/blog/tefl-tesol-or-celta>).

Between teachers and also between students. I was just getting less and less happy with that idea.”⁵

Kate completed her Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA)⁶ between her undergraduate work and her master's program. The certificate came in handy when she finished her studies and had no job opportunities in England: “I remembered that I had this CELTA and I decided to go away for six months. (...) I found my job at [tefl.com](https://www.tefl.com). There was a job in Kyrgyzstan. I liked this one because it was kind of a bit unusual.”

In Kyrgyzstan, she taught general English classes in a private language school. That teaching experience led her to search and apply for a job in new places. She moved to Yakutsk in Siberia, where she taught general English to children and teenagers. She also led a conversation class for university staff members. From Yakutsk, Kate moved to Shanghai. At that point, she had been teaching for about three years, and she started to specialize in a university-age group, teaching academic English. In 2018, Kate moved to teach in Algeria, where she was working with local and international management teams to set up and run one of the British Study Centers. The process involved preparing and implementing a multi-disciplinary curriculum that would enable students to meet the entrance requirements for undergraduate and postgraduate university study in the United Kingdom. She was teaching Algerian students who wanted to go to a university in the United Kingdom. This quote from Kate illustrates the struggle she experienced as an ESOL teacher there. She was experienced enough to be aware of the necessity for people all over the world to learn English, but it also became apparent to her that there were inequalities entangled in the process: “I became very aware of not just the value of English, but the perceived value of a degree from an English university. I have always been very conscious of language endangerment, which obviously goes hand in hand with colonialism. I have always been aware that the job is somewhat at odds with what I have studied. It is quite an interesting contrast, but then at the same time, I am also aware that in some cases, you are giving people opportunities as well.” In her comments, Kate shows her awareness of the double-sidedness involved in ESOL teaching. On the one hand, by teaching English, she contributes to her students' empowerment, while on the other hand, she promotes the further spread of the dominant language strengthening its hegemonic position. Ultimately, she felt these tensions could not be reconciled.

After leaving Algeria, Kate decided she did not want to teach anymore and needed to retrain. From 2020 to 2021, she was a student teaching assistant at an Irish university. Currently, she is a Ph.D. candidate in linguistics. “I came to enjoy teaching much more towards the end of my time doing it (...). It is nice to find that I do actually enjoy teaching. It might just be the subject teaching that I need to change.”

5 This quotation, along with those to follow comes from an interview with Kate on April 21, 2021.

6 CELTA stands for Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, a qualification provided by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). (Retrieved June 7, 2021, from <https://www.tefl.org/blog/tefl-tesol-or-celta>).

Both Sean and Kate have decided to stop teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages because they saw themselves as instruments in furthering hegemony and deepening global inequalities embedded in the ESOL industry and profession. Sean believes his status as a native English speaker has opened more doors on his path to becoming an ESOL teacher: “If you go to Asian countries, you can have a Black American or a Black English person, and they are not considered as native teachers. (...) The fact of being a native teacher has, without doubt, opened a thousand more doors than it has for a Polish person who is a hundred times more qualified and more capable than me. I will get a job before that person in many, many cases.” His reflection shows an awareness of the prejudicial and, in fact, racist system of ESOL teaching – native English-language speakers are more valued not because they would be necessarily better teachers but because of where they were born and where they came from.

Kate’s confidence as an experienced and competent professional was also challenged by the inequities and injustices embedded in the institutional approach to employing ESOL teachers. She comments on inequalities in treatment and pay between native and non-native speakers that have provided her with some confrontational experiences that influenced her view on the ESOL teaching profession. In Yakutsk, she was working in a very small school with only one other teacher, a native Russian who spoke English very well and who was also a well-trained primary school teacher. Kate was aware that her Russian colleague was a much better teacher, but it was her who was being paid three or four times more: “The difference in the way that foreign teachers and native teachers would be treated in that school was really bad. (...) it was awful, especially because I am not good at teaching kids; I have got no training and experience at teaching kids. But the biggest earner for the school was parents wanting to send their kids to be taught by native speakers. So that was what I ended up doing because that was just the most they could get to have me.”

Kate’s story shows how in ESOL teaching, local teachers are often considered inferior to native speakers – illuminating the entrenched injustice of the global TESOL industry. She adds: “I have always found it quite a backwards logic, preferencing just someone who just speaks English natively. Certainly, a native English speaker who has been trained in linguistics or in teaching would be a very good teacher, but the same thing goes for a non-native English speaker who has had that training as well. I definitely do not think there would be any particular natural advantage for native speakers.” Her view on the profession has been challenged by “the ideal native speaker” TESOL industry promotes. Teachers coming from non-English speaking countries always aspire to be like native speakers but are considered to never be as good as them (Waddington, 2022).

Being aware of all the inequalities in the industry, both Sean and Kate were finding it increasingly hard to justify teaching EFL: “We were just getting less and less happy with that idea.” The growing discomfort in promulgating English – and a certain type of English – was a reason they decided to shift their careers. They were aware of the unspoken benefits of accepting jobs they were offered merely because

of the type of passport they had, but they could not ignore the problem that they remained more central and important than their students. At the beginning of their careers, the main inspiration and deciding factor to teach was the opportunity to travel the world. The travel component is very important for many novice ESOL teachers (Jakubiak, 2020). Unskilled teachers work in exotic places without any awareness of social and economic inequalities, without critical reflection about their own culture and resources in relation to the local communities they teach. Sean and Kate evolved from teachers coasting in Nepal or Kyrgyzstan with no real interest in the geopolitical and economic issues surrounding them to teachers with a critical eye on teaching ESOL. Findings from their interviews complicate the common view on the innocence of ESOL teachers' work and show the inequalities involved with the global language spread.

Teachers who have spent time preparing for the ESOL profession acknowledge that knowing the language is, of course, important but not enough. A teacher needs to know how people learn and how language is shaped in society because an English language teacher especially does not teach just grammar or vocabulary but also the semiotic life system that people use to relate to one another.

CONCLUSION

The market value of English is associated with the symbolic power of language. English has grown and expanded so much in the last few decades, and its range of action has become so wide that the incentive to study other languages has decreased (Crystal, 2003). My interviews with Sean and Kate provide evidence that experiences in ESOL teaching both enhanced and frustrated their attitudes toward the English language-teaching industry and influenced their future career choices. Their biographies show that they were not blind to the fact they were teaching the global and hegemonic language. Data showed that they drew on a range of experiences gained from different jobs in eight countries. This teaching experience contributed to their critical view of learning and teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. The teaching practice (six consecutive years for Kate and five for Sean) challenged many of their existing beliefs. Both of them revealed that they were disappointed in many aspects of teaching, particularly struggles with injustice and the issue of economic access to learning English which reveals and perpetuates global inequalities.

The findings from these interviews highlight important factors that contribute to thinking critically about English language learning and teaching. The data show that Sean and Kate's difficulties with the industry are an essential part of their identity as language educators. Both had to reconcile the rewards and challenges. By drawing on their personal experiences, they recognized that teaching English as a global language has its benefits but also disadvantages. They recognized that they helped their students gain valuable and relevant skills and competences, but at the same time, they found it difficult to face growing disparities between those who have the opportunity to learn the language and those who do not.

Languages have a decisive impact on issues of equality, diversity, and sustainability in local and global contexts. Language is a key factor when it comes to access to education and socio-economic mobility in multilingual societies. Not all languages have equal value and importance. English is capital that has been invested much more than other languages whose status is marginalized. The economy of English affects income and trade, as well as the costs and benefits of language planning options and the preservation of minority languages (Maurais, 2003; Pennycook, 1995).

English is an important passport to success. The demand for English as a commodity in the international market of foreign languages, the size of the industry that supplies it, and the shares of gross national product that are spent on the global level to acquire it, prove not only its economic but also its societal value (Swaan, 2001). In the context of rising expectations, the acquisition of English is perceived as a *sine qua non* for participation in economic growth. The ESOL teachers I have interviewed in my research show their awareness of the benefits and contributions they make to their students' success while at the same time demonstrate critical self-reflection regarding inequalities embedded in the profession.

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**DOŚWIADCZENIA NAUCZYCIELI JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO JAKO OBCEGO:
KRYTYCZNE REFLEKSJE NA TEMAT GLOBALNEGO RYNKU JĘZYKA
ANGIELSKIEGO**

ABSTRAKT: W kontekście języka angielskiego jako języka globalnego, dostęp do jego nauczania i uczenia się stał się ważną kwestią na rynku napędzającym komunikację całego świata. Moje badania, oparte na doświadczeniach nauczycieli języka angielskiego dla osób mówiących innymi językami (English for Speakers of Other Languages, ESOL), pokazują, jak poruszają się oni po kwestiach etycznych związanych ze zmieniającym się globalnym środowiskiem nauczania języka angielskiego oraz nierównościami związanymi z globalnym rynkiem nauczania języka angielskiego. Interesuje mnie, jak nauczyciele negocjują rozbieżne pozycjonowanie języka angielskiego będącego, z jednej strony, środkiem osobistego i lokalnego upelnocnienia, a z drugiej globalnej hegemonii krajów anglojęzycznych. Badanie opiera się na wywiadach biograficznych z nauczycielami języka angielskiego jako obcego i krytycznych refleksjach na temat ich praktyki.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: TESOL, instrukcja językowa, język angielski, globalizacja