

Online Forum Report

Teaching English as a Missionary Language

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This is a summary of some of the issues raised in a recent online discussion forum organised by the IATEFL Global Issues Special Interest Group.

Two types of discussion generally take place within the IATEFL Global Issues Special Interest Group on-line discussion forum – those which emerge in an unplanned manner when an issue catches the interest of list members, and those which focus on pre-arranged topics chosen by list members and which are fielded by an expert or participant with a particular knowledge of the issue. Our discussion of the teaching of English as a Missionary Language (TEML) caught the interest of list members who, after a period of intense informal discussion, invited Dr Don Snow to field our exchange of ideas, opinions and perspectives.

Getting started

The need to address the topic sensitively and distinguish between institutions and people was clarified at the outset, with participants then examining the role of Christianity and Christian-based organizations in both the spread of English around the world and in the English language teaching profession today.

Some key references were identified at the outset, including Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2005) who raise concerns about the scale and cultural politics of TEML and argue that it provides implicit support for the global spread of English. They go on to argue that TEML 'forces us to confront ethical questions to do with preferred futures and pedagogies', but also suggest that the moral project of TEML 'all too often lacks an adequate ethics...[and]..does little more than promote moral absolutism'. The Christian Educators TESOL Caucus website was also highlighted (www.cetesol.org) as was that of the South Korean KOTESOL Christian Educators SIG whose purpose is to 'inspire Christian teachers to seek excellence in their teaching, integrity in their lifestyle and service to others by providing role models who integrate their faith with their profession-sharing resources for teaching and personal spiritual growth-encouraging one another through fellowship and worship' (http://ca.groups.yahoo.com/group/KOTESOL_CT_SIG/).

Empire, history and English

The discussion started with a simple and direct question: did religion/Christianity or the attempts to spread it lead to English becoming an international language, or vice versa? The role of religion in the development of English as a language with a global reach was discussed, and participants made inescapable links with the development of the British Empire. A series of examples illustrated the debate, ranging from the 16th Century state enforcement of standard English in lowland Scotland (and the subsequent decline of Scots as a language) through to the role merchants and the military in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries played in the spread in English around the world. The point was made that religion, like many other fields (i.e. science), took advantage of the status of English as an International Language.

Reference was made to those organisations which have both a religious and research function. The excellent work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics was highlighted. SIL is 'a faith-based organization that studies, documents, and assists in developing the world's lesser-known languages [i.e. the tribal languages and their oral dialects]. SIL's staff shares a Christian commitment to service, academic excellence, and professional engagement through literacy, linguistics, translation, and other academic disciplines' (<http://www.sil.org>). Some participants suggested a subtle dividend here - these people are perceived as marginalised, minority groups and therefore fertile ground for missionary work.

The discussion broadened to consider research into languages and linguistics more generally, with issues such as ethics, transparency and the accessibility of research findings being raised (e.g. are research findings usually published in the language of participants?). For example, it was suggested that one of the consequences of Western dominance in scholarship is that some of the key editions of Sanskrit texts are only available in libraries in European libraries with Sanskrit scholars from India and Nepal finding that they may have to go to Europe to study their own ancient literature. Such forms of scientific imperialism are discussed by Canagarajah (2002).

Christianity and the profession

A number of points were made about the relationship between the ELT profession and Christianity. Many students from universities have difficulties finding employment and this often leads them to mission programs where they teach EFL during their gap years; churches may advertise themselves as attractive environments for practising English and meeting L1 English speakers. There was an acknowledgement that there is nothing wrong with this *per se*, but the motives for such projects were discussed. Fundamentally, are Christian-based organisations aiming to teach English or preach religion (using English as an incentive or cover)? This argument is examined by Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2005) who stress that 'issues of disclosure [by teachers] and trust' are vital in such learning and teaching situations.

Debates with Don Snow

It is worth noting the differences implied by Snow's terminology ('English as a Christian Mission') and the initial title of the discussion (and this account) – 'Teaching English as a Missionary Language'. Outlining his links with the Presbyterian Church USA, Snow summarised his 2001 publication as follows:

My starting point is the potential problem inherent in the dual role of English teacher (promoter of a Western language and culture) and missionary (ambassador of the Christian faith). Many Western Christians who serve abroad as English teachers work in countries which have experienced Western imperialism or other forms of conflict with the West, and which are very sensitive to mission work carried out by Western Christians. [My book] 'English Teaching as Christian Mission' argues that Christian English teachers from Western countries who are sensitive to these issues can make a special mission contribution by working and living toward reconciliation between Western Christians and the people of host countries, but that in order to do this effectively teachers must take the legacy of the past into account. I then go on to argue that appropriate mission roles for Christian English are:

- 1. showing respect and giving face to the host nation and culture through learning the local language(s) and culture(s)*
- 2. bearing witness through the quality of one's teaching*
- 3. ministering (caring for) students as they cope with the demands of language learning*
- 4. serving disadvantaged communities by attempting to ensure that they are given equal access to opportunities to learn English*
- 5. peace-building through building better international understanding*
- 6. bridge-building between Christian churches in the host country and churches in the teachers' home countries.*

Initial questions focused upon the dual role of an English teacher and Christian, as well as the question of how our beliefs interact with our teaching. Fundamentally, how can we understand the work of a mission without proselytizing?

Replying that it is important for teachers to be honest with their students, Snow continued by outlining his view of 'mission' as being more than a restricted sense of evangelism, rather a broader sense of loving and serving God and indeed a sense of service where service itself is a goal. He suggested that:

While service can have the effect of causing people to be more favorably disposed toward or even attracted to the Christian faith, it need not be carried out with that purpose in mind.

Some participants acknowledged the service provided by Christian mission, but suggested that conversion and baptism are cornerstones of Christianity, not simply 'witnessing'. In response, it was argued that whilst there are certainly Christian groups for whom service is intended to serve the goal of evangelism, it is important to note that the broad spectrum of Christian groups and agendas makes it difficult to apply conclusions drawn from one group to all others. Thus whilst evangelism is obviously a major theme in the Christian faith, there is also diversity in how much it is emphasized or pursued:

My point about witness and quality of teaching is basically that one should strive to be a good ambassador of whatever they represent (whether a faith, a nationality, etc.) and that for English teachers an important part of this is trying to do the best job we can as teachers...

modern Western culture [has] a fairly strong tendency to view the workplace as a 'public' domain and religious faith as a 'private' domain. If this is carried to an extreme, religious faith is walled off into a sealed compartment where it is largely irrelevant to how one lives one's life or does one's work. In contrast ... the idea of vocation [is] that what we believe can and should inform how we carry out our work, and that our work can even be an expression of our beliefs i.e. we should practice what we preach.

Links were also made between TEML and teaching values. The theme developed with discussion focusing on the representation of values (religious, political and cultural) in the TEML and ELT more generally, and the need for teachers and learners to think critically about images, opinions, values and events in the classroom.

In summary

The following contribution by a participant perhaps summarises the views of many as the discussion drew to a close:

I agree with Edge that covertly hijacking English classes for missions is repellent ... but we all have opinions on things [and] I find there is plenty to talk about well within the limits permitted. But I think disclosure of purpose is extremely important. If your mission is Christianity first and English as a way to do it, make it clear and be prepared for rejection. If the motive is English first and you happen to be a Christian, I find no problem with that.

References

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Estelle Angelinas and Graham Hall - CALL Review in association with the Global Issues Special interest Group.
IATEFL, University of Kent. ISSN 1026-4280
February 2006

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