Social Justice

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Framing the Issue

Similar to other educational contexts around the globe, for some 30 years there has continued to be an increase in the amount of focus placed on social justice within TESOL. As with other fields that are concerned with building agency, equity, and self-determination through education, social justice efforts in TESOL often reflect issues of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, privilege, migration, colonization, and imperialism. With its strong ties to globalization and the information technology boom, English continues to be the most dominant language of power. Current TESOL research, theory, and practice speak to the growing diversity and ever-evolving issues of social justice within the teaching of English.

Social justice in TESOL has been influenced by social and academic movements led by and/or for indigenous peoples, women, lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) communities, people of color, working-class families, immigrants, and other marginalized populations. These social movements have pushed the TESOL field to be more inclusive, diverse, and empowering in its conceptualization of English and Englishes, and how to teach it to those who do not speak it as their first or primary language. As English has been one of the major languages of imperialism and power for over three centuries, social justice efforts within TESOL have been concerned with issues related to racism, patriarchy, and colonization for some time. The recent explosion of digital technologies along with the Internet has allowed for unprecedented access to people, places, and information that facilitate new methods and analyses with TESOL. Yet the same explosion has also facilitated a push for standardization and commodification of knowledge, education, and TESOL that inequitably affects the marginalized populations mentioned above (Ramanathan & Pennycook, 2008). These developments have been referred to as a "flattening of the world" where what is considered language and culture (e.g., "Standard English"), knowledge and research (e.g., "scientific empirical study"), are brokered by a shrinking few and this consolidation leads to inequitable power distributions and social injustices (Luke, 2008).

For TESOL there are some social justice issues in recent years that have existed for decades. In South Korea, a native-English speaking Korean woman from Canada is

passed up for a Head of English Department position to a white male, despite her having a higher degree, stronger teaching record, and more experience. Around the globe, parents make the painful decision to not teach their children their native language, as faculty and administrators encourage families toward "English-Only" (Corson, 1999). The logic here being that children abandoning their native cultures and languages will learn more efficiently and receive higher marks on standardized tests, which in turn will enable the school to obtain more funding and resources. Despite being sold on this narrative of English fluency as a golden ticket to success, many of the families that come from low-income backgrounds will not see their children "succeed" through the public schooling-university-promising career pathway. These same children and parents often struggle to communicate with, understand, and respect one another as well. While English-language hegemony and the myth of meritocracy are not new issues in TESOL, the advent of standardized testing as the sole indicator for "high-stakes" evaluations (e.g., student matriculation, school budget allocations) has become a growing problem in the era of globalization. At an ever-increasing pace, students, teachers, and schools are labeled, tracked, and retained based on narrowing standards of English, literacy, culture, and achievement. Who decides these standards, and how they are regulated, are issues of critical importance to social justice in today's TESOL. What is already apparent in the research, is that those deemed illiterate, uncultured, or low-achieving, are often from the same populations that have been historically marginalized in TESOL and education.

Making the Case

As TESOL has continued to grow as a field, the amount of theoretical frameworks and their findings that engage in social justice has also grown. Since the 1970s, critical pedagogy has been one of the most significant frameworks that addresses issues of social justice in education. Its origins have been most commonly associated with the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, with roots in critical theory (e.g., Marx, Gramsci, Frankfurt School), the decolonizing tradition (e.g., Memmi, Fanon), and liberation theology (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Early applications of critical pedagogy often utilized Freire's notions of education toward developing one's critical consciousness and agency, the centering of the experiences of the oppressed, and the dialogical relationships between colonizer and colonized. As Freire's work became more widely translated and known in English, enthusiasm and critique of critical pedagogy in TESOL also grew. Two of the most significant critiques came from feminist and poststructural frameworks, which pointed to how patriarchy, the heterosexual male body, and Eurocentrism were embedded throughout critical pedagogy and actually reified certain forms of oppression. Both feminist and poststructural scholarship pushed critical pedagogy to examine its blind spots and look at more diverse forms of oppression and agency, and how education and TESOL can be used to challenge such limitations toward social justice (Amin & Kubota, 2004). Over the last decade or so there has also been a surge of critical approaches, often by scholar-practitioners of color, that builds on

feminist and poststructural scholarship but also recenters issues of race, ethnicity, imperialism, and white supremacy through fields like critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and whiteness studies (Kubota & Lin, 2006).

Action research, which can be tied to certain strands of critical pedagogy in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Americas, has also been a significant body of literature contributing to how we conceive of and improve TESOL (Burns, 2005). Action research often challenges Eurocentric notions of detached objectivity and elite knowledge in science as it looks to gather knowledge in local contexts toward improving education and developing agency among marginalized groups. Action research has most often been discussed in the contexts of classrooms and schools to improve pedagogy and outcomes, usually with teachers, students, and administrators examining their own practices: this often categorized as participatory action research (PAR). PAR and other forms of action research continue to gain traction in both traditional academic and social justice spaces, given their track of record of being able to develop 21st-century academic skills as well as participant agency.

Like with action research and critical pedagogies, sociocultural learning has also developed independently and concurrently with the other frameworks and influenced TESOL in recent decades. With roots in diverse fields like applied linguistics and cultural psychology, what is often lumped together under the sociocultural umbrella is scholarship that views learning as a situated, historically-mediated process where language and culture are spoken of as linguistic and cultural practices (Singh & Richards, 2006). While still considering issues like class, race, and gender, a sociocultural framework pushes TESOL practitioners and researchers to more dynamically look at the processes of teaching and learning, and the development of Englishes across contexts as well. Given that sociocultural frameworks emphasize learning that is locally contextualized, constructed, and ever-changing, the framework is highly tied to scholarship concerned with making meaning, such as critical literacy and New Literacy Studies (NLS). Over the past two decades or so, critical literacy and NLS have pushed the TESOL field to consider much of teaching, learning, and educational outcomes as literacies and literacy practices. Returning to critical pedagogy's heavy emphasis on critical consciousness and agency, which can be difficult to operationalize and study, critical literacy and NLS have developed methods that can help critical teachers and action researchers re-envision and focus TESOL (Pennycook, 2010). Perhaps the most dominant research method within these frameworks of TESOL has been critical discourse analysis (CDA), with its focus on social and linguistic practices constituting and reifying each other, within the context of power relations.

Pedagogical Implications

Utilizing frameworks like critical, poststructural, feminist, sociocultural, and New Literacy frameworks among others, the TESOL field has been engaged in social justice efforts as English continues to thrive as the most dominant language of business and power. As the teaching of English is on this global scale, social

justice-oriented frameworks inform us that there is not one pedagogy, or one combination of pedagogies for that matter, that all practitioners can employ with their students toward equity and empowerment. Three pedagogical areas or themes that have been shown to be effective in promoting social justice in TESOL are processes of recognition, collaboration, and solidarity.

Social justice pedagogy in TESOL can be thought of broadly along themes of *recognition*, *collaboration*, and *solidarity* with diverse communities and peoples (Chang, 2015). This can mean recognizing and understanding the different types of linguistic and cultural practices, histories, and epistemologies, that the teachers and students come from. Instead of evaluating and assigning students according to pre-determined standards and perceptions of ability and achievement (which often follow lines of British or US English superiority and white supremacy), teachers and students take an active role in critically recognizing their identities, what they bring to the classroom or educational space, and how they can contribute to those spaces. Contexts in which these interrogations and recognitions can take place are the devaluing of World Englishes (particularly those of people of color), and the placing of students with a perceived lack of English fluency on programs that are not intended for futures in tertiary education. Beyond a surface-level multiculturalism, it is here that feminist, poststructural, and critical frameworks are particularly useful as they help "non-native" and "native-English" speakers to interrogate their own worldviews and recognize knowledge and experience beyond that defined by the state and the status quo (Norton & Toohey, 2011). This process can take time in planning and implementing as it challenges the official curriculum. However, the long-term benefits are transformative as the active *recognition* and understanding of participants facilitate more humanizing interactions and relationships in social justice TESOL.

The inclusive process of recognition can often lead to forms of *collaboration* among participants in educational spaces, including administrators, parents, and other stakeholders. Sociocultural frameworks instruct us here to see that learning often occurs most effectively in experiential and collaborative environments where participants, with their different forms of expertise, can help each other come to more holistic understandings of language and literacy and push themselves beyond what they could do individually (Pavlenko, 2003). Action research frameworks help TESOL educators understand how they can teach critical inquiry to students, as well as study and improve their own pedagogy. Examples of *collaboration* that can further social justice are PAR and youth PAR (YPAR) projects like in-service TESOL educators doing ethnographies of their teaching, or primary students studying the World Englishes of their classroom members' families. These action research projects present interdisciplinary opportunities for new or revised *collaboration* with parents, administrators, university researchers, and others as they cannot only build academic English skills within official curriculum (e.g., digital literacy, qualitative research), but also raise critical consciousness through applying inquiry methods like CDA. A common critique of collaboration in TESOL holds that such pedagogy is time-consuming and requires an unusual amount of physical resources. Yet it has been shown that the types of collaboration

discussed here raise the capacity of all participants as they keep students more engaged, connect teachers to the support of other invested stakeholders, and reduce teacher burnout.

Through processes of recognition and collaboration, social justice efforts in TESOL can also build *solidarity*, or a sense of purpose and community, among participants. At the heart of many social justice pedagogies in TESOL, is getting participants to be in *solidarity* with each other toward goals beyond individual access to forms of capital like high marks on standardized tests, entrance to universities, and more elite forms of socioeconomic status. A collective sense of empathy, belonging, and support are emphasized in this form of *solidarity*, to withstand and overcome the ongoing effects of fast capitalism, imperialism, and heteronormative patriarchy. *Solidarity* here is informed by various historical movements that have tended to privilege grassroots or "bottom-up" approaches to bringing people together toward human rights, equity, and justice (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). *Solidarity* in TESOL can take the form of students working with the teacher to develop a more inclusive curriculum for minority students in the class, or standing up to administration for the rights of an unjustly-ousted teacher. *Solidarity* can also come about when various stakeholders of a TESOL space set aside their differences, recognize their respective needs and greater good, and support one another in their efforts to change their respective institutions. Such efforts at collaborating and building power have become more essential as educational institutions have adopted neoliberal forms of management that try to flatten out diversity in learning and teaching, and eliminate students' and workers' rights to organize themselves and voice their concerns (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005).

While this section on pedagogical implications for social justice in TESOL is not meant to be exhaustive, the themes of *recognition*, *collaboration*, and *solidarity* can provide a useful template through which to understand the growing body of work within the field. As new problems of technology and access emerge alongside centuries-old issues like racism and sexism, there is a rich tradition of theory and practice in TESOL to call upon toward transformation and social justice.

SEE ALSO: Action Research and Teacher Inquiry; Critical Pedagogy; English Dominance on the Internet; Globalization and the Dilemmas of Linguistic Identity; Globalization, English Language Teaching, and Teachers; Sociocultural Aspects of English Language Teaching Through World Events

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