Native English-speaking teachers in Vietnam:
Professional identities and discourses of colonialism

by David Bright

Abstract

This article draws on postcolonial theories of discourse and identity in an attempt to understand the ways in which native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) in Vietnam position themselves discursively in enacting professional relations with students and colleagues. The study was conducted within a tradition of critical approaches to TESOL which have suggested that the work of teaching English is complex, at times problematic, and has the potential to reproduce patterns of inequality, injustice and exclusion. Based on interviews with four NESTs in Vietnam, the article describes the ways these teachers imagined their own language and that of their students, and examines how these representations of language differentiated and subordinated 'the Other'. In negotiating their identity as TESOL practitioners, these teachers drew upon discourses of colonialism to reproduce images of the superior 'Self' and inferior 'Other', suggesting the need for a more ethical approach to engaging with difference.

Introduction: Native English-speaking teachers and the politics of TESOL

Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) continue to play a significant role in global TESOL, both in terms of their numerical preponderance and their cultural significance as native speakers of 'prestige' varieties of English and representatives of the developed 'centre' nations. The global demand for English language, the status of particular 'centre' varieties of English and the social and cultural capital afforded to the native-speaking language teacher continue to provide opportunities for international mobility for NESTs, with work available in private language teaching colleges, public and private schools, international schools and kindergartens, private and public universities, religious organisations, volunteer programs and state-sponsored language programs in Asia, Africa and South America.

Although there is a prevailing view within TESOL that English is natural, neutral and beneficial (Pennycook, 1995), and that classrooms are non-political sites insulated from broader political,

cultural, social and economic issues (Auerbach, 1995), this is not necessarily the case. English may be beneficial but it also has the potential to oppress and exclude. English can be used as a gatekeeper to positions of power, can lead to a dependence on Western forms of knowledge and it can threaten and displace local languages and cultures (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Furthermore, it has been argued that the spread of English is not necessarily natural or neutral, but rather has been deliberately promoted by English-speaking countries and governments to serve their own political and economic interests (Phillipson, 1992). In this view, classrooms themselves are not neutral, but are sites characterised by power and dominance as teachers and students negotiate whose languages, voices, practices and knowledges are valued and preferred (Auerbach, 1995).

These politics have their material effects on people within TESOL. In Vietnam, where the current study was undertaken, NESTs, including those with minimal or no qualifications or teaching experience, enjoy greater access to jobs with vastly superior benefits and conditions than do many Vietnamese English teachers who have completed higher degrees in Western English-speaking countries. In addition, access to English language education is unequally distributed in a country of nearly 90 million people, with a gross national income per capita of USD$1032 (United Nations Statistics Division, 2012), and where a 100-hour English program can command fees in excess of USD$700 (Australian Centre for Education and Training, 2012). Who is actually benefiting from global TESOL in Vietnam and whose interests are being served by the work of Western NESTs are important questions in this context, but they are questions which often go unasked and unanswered.

TESOL practitioners are implicated in these politics of language and education. Education generally has the potential to transform or reproduce social relations in ways that both influence and are influenced by broader social, cultural and political issues (Canagarajah, 1999; Lin, 1999; Martin, 2005). TESOL in particular has the potential to either transform or reproduce colonial relations of dominance and subordination, particularly where contact occurs between foreign teachers and local students and when characterised by struggles over whose language, knowledge and practices are valued in the classroom.

Theoretical framework: Identity in TESOL

In this study I used identity as a theoretical lens (Gee, 2000) through which to examine the pedagogical relationships between Western NESTs and Vietnamese students. Identity is most usefully thought of as a practice, a process which is never completed, always conditional and always contingent (Hall, 1996). Rather than something fixed and internal, unchanging across time, identities are viewed as fragmented, multiple, conflicting and contingent on time, context and practices. Identity is constituted through discourses – 'ways of being in the world' (Gee, 2011: 4) – which enable us to

recognise ourselves, and be recognised by others, as particular kinds of people. Discourse makes it possible for individuals to talk, think and act so that they will be recognised in particular ways, but discourse can also constrain these possibilities. It is within the confines of socially accepted and recognised words and actions that we are assigned identities as particular kinds of people. Importantly, access to these discursive resources is not equally distributed. Indeed, it is 'usually the powerful who are entitled to and have both more and the right kinds of capital and resources for constructing for themselves advantageous identities' (Lin, 2008: 1).

Identities achieve meaning through difference:

> This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed. (Hall, 1996: 4)

Difference, then, is essential to the production of meaning and to our recognition of identities. The idea of 'the Self' can only be recognised and understood in relation to 'the Other', thus difference – our idea of who we are not – is critical to the production of social, cultural and professional identities – our idea of who we think we are (Woodward, 1997).

If it is through its relation to 'the Other' that 'the Self' is given meaning, then postcolonial theory can provide us with a framework for understanding the ways that Western NESTs negotiate their identity through the production of an 'othered' student. Edward Said's notion of Orientalism theorises the process via which difference has historically been constructed by the West during its encounters with the non-Western world (Said, 1978). He argues that the ways in which it was possible for Europeans to think about, write about or act on the Orient were constrained by the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism – 'the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice' (73). He perceives the essence of the discipline of Orientalism as 'the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (42). According to Said, it is through these discourses of Orientalism and the representation of the Orient as stereotypically inferior that the West was able to not only to subjugate the Orient as 'the Other', but also to produce its positive 'Self' identity as rational, enlightened, civilised and modern.

The significance of colonialism to TESOL has been well established, both in terms of the history of the expansion of the English language and as the site in which much of Western European knowledge and culture, including knowledges and practices influential to TESOL, were produced (Pennycook,

1998, 2001). Pennycook further demonstrates how the discourses of colonialism, of the superior 'Self' and inferior 'Other', have adhered to English and continue to permeate TESOL, seen in the ways English is represented as superior to other languages, in the assumptions and generalisations made about problematic learner cultures and behaviours and in the dichotomisation of TESOL practitioners into native and non-native speakers (1998, 2007).

Without denying the constructive potential of Self-Other dichotomies in colonial and postcolonial discourses, and the possibility of hybrid positions (Bhabha, 1994), the current study sought to understand the ways that colonial discourses of English are employed by Western NESTs working in Vietnam in their negotiation of identity, and whether these identities act to subordinate their students. The specific research questions investigated included the following:

- What constructions of difference do Western NESTs employ in constructing their identity as teachers?
- Do these constructions of difference serve to subordinate 'the Other' in the creation of a positive 'Self' identity for Western NESTs?

The study
Methodology

This paper reports on part of a small-scale exploratory study which examined the ways that four Western NESTs in Vietnam constructed their personal and professional identities. The participants were living and working in Vietnam teaching English. Three were Australian and one was American. One teacher taught in a private kindergarten, two in international primary schools, and one in a public secondary school. Data were collected by means of qualitative research interviews conducted with the four teachers which were transcribed and analysed by coding and identifying themes. The paper focuses on the ways that these teachers used representations of language to construct difference between themselves and their local context. The interview transcripts were analysed by identifying van Dijk's 'negative Other-presentations' and 'positive Self-presentations' in teachers' representations of language to reveal the underlying ideology behind the construction of difference though language (van Dijk, 2006).

Constructions of difference: Images of English

Language, along with other representations of difference in terms of such things as education systems and learning styles, emerged as a fundamental means of constructing difference for these teachers. The study revealed that the responses of participants contained overwhelmingly positive 'self-presentations' of English language. The respondents (identified here by pseudonyms) consistently

associated English with notions of development, modernisation, opportunity, employment, participation, competitiveness, advancement, globalisation, economic prosperity, privilege and superiority, as exemplified in the following extracts:

> It's important for their future … If they don't have English it cuts off opportunities for their future, like with … globalisation … opportunities for education, opportunities for employment, success … (Mary)

> I recognise what the kids don't recognise … the only way they are going to be successful, and by successful I don't mean making a lot of money necessarily … I mean that … if they need a job, they will have lots of options in the country, in a country like Vietnam, if they speak and write English effectively. (Michael)

What emerged from the interviews is that the teachers' representations of English were limited to these positive, functionalist representations in which English was seen to be useful and advantageous to their students. These representations were founded on the presumption that 'people can only benefit by gaining access to English and the world it opens up' (Pennycook, 1995: 37). English was presented as necessary for success, but it was never specified who needed English or what would happen to those who did not acquire it. The role of English was never problematised nor was the potential for English to result in negative consequences discussed. This represents an ideologically limited perspective of the role of English and TESOL which does not question the place of English in society, does not examine who stands to benefit from English and English language teaching, and does not acknowledge the possibility of negative impacts from the spread of English in Vietnam.

Constructions of difference: Images of Vietnamese

The study indicated that in contrast to the consistency of positive images of English, these teachers' representations of the Vietnamese language were more ambivalent. Despite living and working in Vietnam, none of the participants was proficient in Vietnamese. While all the participants recognised that being able to speak Vietnamese would be useful, none felt that learning Vietnamese was necessary. Only one participant, Michael, associated Vietnamese with any functional benefit:

> In order to be marketable in Vietnam, which is growing in leaps and bounds … um … I become much more marketable … if I'm able to … converse … somewhat … conversationally in Vietnamese.

It is of interest that Mary, who at five years had lived in Vietnam the longest, consistently positioned Vietnamese language as inferior to English. Mary's representations of Vietnamese clearly reflected the influence of colonial discourses of 'Self' and 'Other', simultaneously celebrating the intrinsic superiority of the English language and characterising the language of 'the Other' as its inferior:

> There's also, like, the amount of the words in the Vietnamese language are … much, much, much, much, much, smaller than in English …

> Trying to get things translated into Vietnamese, like, for marketing and stuff at schools they're like, 'we just don't have any way to say that', 'it is impossible for us to say that because it doesn't exist' …

> I worked with, like … 60 English teachers, Vietnamese English teachers, worked with at _____ School with great English, and they're like, 'I can say it to you in English, but I can't … there is no possible way for me to … even convey this idea in Vietnamese', so …

Here, the data clearly indicate that, in the respondent's opinion, the Vietnamese language, and by extension those who speak it, are subordinate. In Mary's view, not only is the Vietnamese language unnecessary, but it is also incompetent. Only by speaking English can Vietnamese people adequately describe, participate and succeed in the modern world.

Mary's assumptions were based on the fact that English has more words, the notion that it is able to express ideas that the Vietnamese language cannot, and a belief that it represents the only way for Vietnamese people to access and participate fully and constructively in the modern world. Underlying all of this is the implication that the excellence of the language reflects the excellence of the people who speak it (Pennycook, 1998).

Discussion: Constructing difference in TESOL

In summary, this study indicated that at times these teachers drew upon colonial discourses of English and negative constructions of difference in negotiating their identities as NESTs. The English language was consistently represented as superior to the Vietnamese language and necessary for success. None of the participants questioned why English was superior, who benefited from English, how this benefit was realised or who needed English to succeed. Ideas about Vietnamese language were more ambivalent. Although Vietnamese was acknowledged to be potentially beneficial to teachers living in Vietnam it was also seen as unnecessary. Vietnamese was differentiated by way of deficit in relation to English, elevating English language, knowledge, culture and practices to a position of superiority. These representations of language revealed the persistence of discourses of colonialism which celebrate English as the language of civilisation and modernity, while the language of 'the Other' is disparaged as underdeveloped and primitive (Pennycook, 1998). Furthermore, in addition to the representations of language presented here, the teachers also drew upon generalised assumptions about learner culture to differentiate a problematic 'Asian' student (Bright & Phan, 2011). The present study demonstrates the continuing potential for discourses of colonialism and of

the 'Self' and 'Other' to be employed by Western NESTs in their negotiations of identity, and the potential these discourses have to produce unequal pedagogical relations in the classroom.

Implications: An ethical response to difference

TESOL practitioners from the English-speaking West necessarily work in direct contact with students who they may perceive to be different. These teachers face an important task in forming ethical and equitable pedagogical relationships with their students*,* in order to develop classrooms which promote justice, equality and opportunities for social transformation. This task, however, is made difficult by the persistence of colonialist discourses which adhere to English and TESOL. How, then, can teachers negotiate their identities in ways which recognise difference in an ethical manner and do not create or perpetuate oppressive learning environments and practices?

John Paul Gee proposes two conceptual principles should govern ethical talk and interaction between humans: firstly, '[t]hat something would harm someone else … is always a good reason (though perhaps not a sufficient reason) not to do it' (Gee, 2011: 19); and secondly, that '[o]ne always has the ethical obligation to try to explicate (render overt and conscious) any social practice that there is reason to believe advantages oneself or one's group over other people or other groups' (Gee, 1993: 293). Advantage in this context, Gee argues, simply means to 'bring oneself or one's group more of what count as goods, in the society one is in, whether this be status, wealth, power, control, or whatever' (Gee, 2011: 20). Following on from these principles, I argue that NESTs have an obligation to make clear – firstly to themselves and then to their students – how they and their students are positioned by discourses of English. This represents a significant challenge for global TESOL, particularly where the demand for English continues to create opportunities for teachers who, perhaps, have a limited understanding themselves of the ways they are positioned within a discursive hierarchy of language, culture and identity.

Dealing with difference and negotiating relationships ethically requires 'bold critical reflexivity … raising uncomfortable questions that anticipate no easy answer' (Lin & Luke, 2006: 66). It calls for a refusal to remain isolated from the political, a skepticism towards naturalised ideas and assumptions, and constant questioning and problematisation of our work as TESOL practitioners (Pennycook, 2001). Understanding teacher identity as a process of identification constructed through language, and understanding how competing discourses impact on these identities, can help us to understand the nature of the relations we form with students. Gee offers a final comment on his conceptual principles governing ethical human discourse, which is that in making clear the ways in which social practices confer advantage on certain groups, people should, given the first principle, find it necessary to 'morally condemn' their own behaviour and change their practices (Gee, 1993, 2011). It is my belief

that if we can find effective ways to engage teachers in the task of clarifying how they construct difference between themselves and others, we can compel them to engage ethically with the difference they will inevitably encounter in their work as TESOL practitioners.

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