

From Ideology to Inquiry: Mediating Asian and Western Values in ELT Practice*

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This paper argues that while ideology may play a decisive role in choosing materials as well as methods, teachers can mediate ideological differences and become innovative, creative through a change of mindset. In this process of ideological mediation, teachers need to free themselves from methodological dogmatism and cultural stereotypes and look for alternatives which blend the best practices from their own and Western culture. In order to mediate ideological differences in language teaching methodology, I recommend an imitation-indigenization-innovation model for teachers to try out in their classroom. In the conclusion I argue that teachers determine educational quality and play a central role in educational innovation. For successful change, it is critical that teachers' continuing professional development be improved in ways that ease their fears that their cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs are being threatened or attacked.

For good or ill, the dominance of English as the world's preferred second or foreign language has been increasing in recent years. One key reason for its inclusion in the school curriculum of Asian countries is the recognition that it can contribute to students' personal, linguistic, social, and cultural development. English can help prepare them for their future careers and

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provide them with access to information, especially concerning science and technology, which matters greatly to Asian countries seeking modernization and economic growth. English language teaching is thus seen to be instrumental in preparing younger generations for life in the present-day global village. Put simply, English teaching can serve individual, national, and international needs and desires.

While a healthy attitude toward English as an instrument for scientific and technological advancement and economic growth has emerged in Asia, English teaching in Asian countries remains far from satisfactory. This has many causes, the most important of which is inadequacies in teaching methodology which is grammar-based, textbook-focused, and examination-centered. Grammar-based language teaching is no longer sufficient. English language teaching in Asia needs to redefine its objectives, placing greater emphasis on the cultivation of practical communication abilities as well as intellectual growth. This requires innovation in teaching practice. Unfortunately, innovative initiatives must struggle against tradition, cynicism, and claims of cultural differences. In this paper, my discussion focuses on the following issues: (1) the role of ideology in ELT practice in Asian context; (2) the role of teachers in relation to this issue in Asian context; (3) solutions to mediating conflicting ideologies in ELT practice; and (4) measures to improve teachers' continuing professional development.

IDEOLOGY IN ELT PRACTICE IN ASIAN CONTEXT

Education does not exist in a social and political vacuum. Teachers and learners and all stakeholders in an educational system are part of the ideology dominating the social system in which they operate. In the Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995), ideology is defined as "a theory, or set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party or organization is based." From this definition, we can understand educational ideology to be a shared body of principles and beliefs concerning

the nature of knowledge, the nature of teaching and learning, including cultural assumptions about the roles of teachers and learners, and the purpose of education. This means that the way we teach reflects our fundamental, but implicit and subconscious, assumptions about appropriate classroom behaviors. In other words, educational ideology determines how teachers interpret classroom events. It is “involved in the process of setting up contexts that construe meaning for particular teaching acts” (Tollefson, 2001, p. 49). Ideology thus becomes a part of language pedagogy simply because language is bound up with ideology (Prabhu, 1995). Therefore, different ideological positions lead to either acceptance or rejection of a particular teaching method, or the preference for a particular classroom interaction pattern on the part of both teachers and learners. It is natural that teachers, when deciding what materials and methods they are going to employ, base their choice on models they have already experienced, are familiar with, and expect to function in future. If methodological initiatives contradict their established ideology, they resist on account of contextual factors (Ellis, 1996; Hird, 1995; Holliday, 1992; Li, 1998; Sampson, 1984).

The most outstanding difference between Western classical humanism and Asian educational philosophy is that the former places greater emphasis on the cultivation of intellectual skills to foster the next generation's leaders while the latter is primarily concerned with the development of moral virtue to promote a static social order. The educational philosophy prevailing in most of East and Southeast Asian nations is deeply rooted in Confucianism. Shen (2001) points out three major influence of Confucianism on education: (1) examination-oriented instruction, (2) book-based instruction, and (3) greater emphasis on social rather than individual development. These characteristic features of Confucianism remain the backbone of the contemporary educational philosophy in most Asian countries. Meritocracy and egalitarianism are the two most influential elements of Asian education, which have driven Asian students toward academic achievement through hard work. The neglect of oral ability in Asian educational practices is in fact the legacy of the earlier age.

Confucian teaching provides the theoretical principles underlying the present-day perspectives on education: the emphasis on vertical relationships, the focus on a transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner, repetition and rote learning as a means of achieving academic mastery. Teaching aims at mastery of a subject, as measured by what learners say about the subject in knowledge-based, norm-referenced examinations. Such teaching is heavily structured and constrains the dynamics of the teaching and learning process—it is presumed that intelligence is already developed and learners' mastery of the subject is the main goal. In language classrooms, this paradigm results in rote learning of rules, with little or no encouragement of using English for communicative purposes and little development of creative or independent thinking. English has been viewed as an academic subject through which students can develop the ability to analyze a foreign language and build up the skill of reading (Sabatini, et al., 1997). As a result, in Asia the grammar-translation method remains the most dominant method, although the audiolingual approach and communicative methods have also been introduced. Exams are the driving force in this, as teachers feel compelled to use the grammar-translation method to prepare students for grammar-centered examinations. Briefly described, the teaching of EFL in most Asian countries is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). These traditional approaches to teaching have convinced the students that knowledge is something that is transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by themselves. Liu and Littlewood (1997) found that students "listening to teacher" was the leading activity in senior English classes of Chinese schools.

TEACHERS' ROLE IN RELATION TO IDEOLOGY IN ASIAN CONTEXT

Brownrigg (2001) makes a point that eastern educational philosophy

“places the teacher in a position of absolute authority (p. 4).” This differs from the Western perspective, which views teachers as those who “encourage their students to think and learn independently, as well as to develop analytical and questioning abilities.” The confrontation between Asian and western educational ideologies lies in opposing views of the teacher’s role. If Asian teachers are expected to be transmitters of culture who are to maintain the status quo in schools and transmit prevailing culture, western teachers are considered to be the transformers of culture.

The widespread belief in the indispensable role of teachers, and students’ unquestioning acceptance of information presented by them, remain at the core of most Asian education systems. Since education is viewed as a means for moral cultivation, the teacher is expected to be the exemplary model of a virtuous person. What’s more, the respect for vertical relationships leads to the belief that teachers are wise authority figures whose word carries great weight (McLaren, 1998).

Since Asian cultures are characterized as xenophobic, initiatives underpinned by western ideology that recognize that “intelligence” is not one-dimensional—that people have “multiple intelligences” (Gardner, 1983), and that learning is an active process in which students construct knowledge by themselves sound exotic and hard to accept because they run counter to teachers’ established beliefs and implicit values.

Of course, there are many Asian teachers who do believe that classroom language acquisition is best fostered in positive affective conditions in which stress is facilitative, not debilitating, and in which the atmosphere is nurturing yet challenging and motivating. These teachers believe that the classroom must provide input and opportunities for interaction and student output. They believe that while the goals of English teaching and learning can be diverse according to various contexts and purposes, affective, social, and humanistic goals apply across the board. However, when these teachers try out the alternatives to the traditional teaching model, they fail usually because of both internal and external factors like inadequacy of training in using the new models, out-dated examination methods, prescribed textbooks, etc. As a

consequence, they get frustrated believing “our context is different,” and therefore return to native models.

In the real world, meantime, students’ needs in learning English have changed radically. For most of them, English will deliver access to technology, information, further study, professional development, and interaction with others. Given these purposes, English teaching must be a capacity-building tool. It should go beyond being a skill-based, functional activity to become a vehicle for intellectual development and intercultural communication. Teaching English today is all about opening doors and opportunities to engage and participate in a larger outside world.

In order to accommodate these emergent needs, we English language teachers are expected to be able to help students develop critical thinking skills, grapple with current global issues, gain a sense of their social responsibility to contribute productively to a better world, respect the moral and cultural heritages of others, and enrich their own traditional values. This required change in the practice of English language teaching and learning in Asia constitutes a departure from canonical views of curriculum and from textbook-centered or recitation-style teaching. It demands a greater facility among EFL teachers for organizing student opportunities to learn. It represents, on the whole, a substantial departure from teachers’ prior experience and established beliefs, as well as an expansion of their present practice. Indeed, it holds out an image of conditions of learning for students that their teachers have themselves rarely experienced. This entails demands on teachers to move on many fronts at once so as to take on the role as ideological mediators in alternative pedagogic discourses and practices.

TEACHERS AS MEDIATING AGENTS OF CONFLICTING IDEOLOGIES IN ELT PRACTICE

Since at least the late 1980s, the American Psychological Association has embraced the notion that cultural differences limit the possibilities for human

understanding. It is now an unchallenged tenet of professional psychology that clients' cultural backgrounds must be an important factor in deciding on appropriate treatments. Barrett (2002) distinguishes between weak and strong models of cultural effects. A weak model of culture states simply that people of different cultures differ; in statistical terms, cultures differ in their mean values on certain variables or in their probabilities of demonstrating certain characteristics. Cultures are known to differ also in modal behaviors, attitudes, or abilities. But both professional psychology and education have gone beyond this weak model of cultural influences. The strong position is that persons from different backgrounds differ in their fundamental psychological processes, including how they learn, how they experience and cope with anxiety, and how they respond to social environments. All psychological interventions are thus culture-specific in their effects, which also means that all instructional strategies are culture-specific in their effects. In education, this strong position implies that teachers should consider using different methodologies depending on learners' backgrounds. In other words, learners' cultures determine which instructional interventions are effective or ineffective.

The picture that often emerges from educational research on Asian learners is a caricature of rote learning, memorization, and passivity, and Asian cultures are characterized as low on individualism and high on collectivism. However, there have been success stories about customized applications of western teaching models into Asian contexts. For example, Coleman (1987) reports success in changing the behavior of Indonesian teachers and students in English classrooms, and Ho and Crookall (1995) describe how Hong Kong English students achieved a high degree of autonomy in the context of a simulation. Similarly, Marshall and Torpey (1997) have succeeded in involving Japanese students in "actively co-constructing a syllabus."

Furthermore, Littlewood (2000) notes that "Asian students do not, in fact, wish to be spoon-fed with facts from an all-knowing fount of knowledge (p. 34)." They want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers. Most of all, they want to do this together with their fellow students

in an atmosphere which is friendly and supportive.” So the claim that Asian students are passive does not stand up to close examination. Their passiveness in learning is a product of traditional teaching. Once teaching methods are adjusted toward acceptance of student autonomy, Asian students are certain to become more active in the learning process (Canh, 2001).

Students’ emerging needs of learning English as a capacity-building tool acknowledge that the transmission of knowledge is no longer sufficient for an educated citizenry. Moreover, in the age of the learning society, education is seen as a process, not a product. During the teaching and learning process, students should learn how to think and to listen, how to participate in dialogue, how to analyze issues and how to read critically. They should learn how to write so that others can follow their thinking. Most importantly, students need to be able to solve problems in a rational manner, to experience compassion towards others and to be willing and able to acknowledge conflict and contradiction and resolve differences in a satisfactory manner. Such a perspective on language education requires us - EFL professionals - to model learning based on experience, expanding experience through engagement with multiple perspectives, and integrating multiple perspectives and existing knowledge to make our own decisions about what to believe and practice. Such teaching is not determined by particular methods but rather by the way we view knowledge, authority, and learner capability.

There is no denying that language teaching is not just methodology, but a political act of cultural production and reproduction which is linked to cultural ideologies (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). However, ideology is never one-way, and ideological interaction helps teachers keep their teaching from becoming stale and overly routinized (Prabhu, 1990). This mediation process broadens teachers’ vision, helping them take foreign educational ideas and adapt them to their own purposes. It is through this movement from ideology to inquiry that English teachers come to realize that western insights into language teaching are a resource to be contextualized rather than a universal blueprint (Maley, 2000). Teachers who know how to customize and indigenize western “products” for their own “market” have a balanced

perspective. This outlook stresses the need for a comprehensive philosophy of life which creatively synthesizes and integrates the highest cultural values of Asia and the West, and reconciles the economic, political, scientific, and humanistic values of the West with the psychological, ontological, and spiritual values of Asia. Within this climate, multiple ways of teaching and learning can be fostered. This is an idealistic picture, but one worth striving for in practice.

For the successful implementation of our role as mediators of ideological differences in ELT in Asian context, I would recommend a three T's model of learning to teach - imitation-indigenization-innovation - for every ELT teacher to try. To start with, motivation to become the teachers we most want to be is of primary significance since it allows us to change our mindsets and to adopt or imitate models of teaching that are promoted globally. The application of new teaching models should be gradual, beginning with an identification of student assumptions about the nature of language learning, their interests, concerns and goals in language learning. The gradual introduction of new models is critical to assure student achievement. Usually, if students can see their achievement with the new teaching models, they will become more confident and this will, in turn, be a great encouragement for teachers. Then students are allowed to make their own choice of their preferred model. In addition to student reactions to the new models, we need to revise them by following a recurring cycle of activities familiar to action research viz. planning classroom activities, implementing and observing those activities, reflecting on them, and then indigenizing or localizing them. The indigenized models will be then be revised again and made explicit in an articulation process involving colleagues to innovate them. The observation of the imitation- indigenization-innovation model, I believe, will enable us to critically re-examine not only the alternative models of teaching, but also our current practice, and thereby developing our competence in seeking new solutions to problems. Professional growth is achievable only to those who are strongly committed to change. If we do not accept the need for change, for renewal and reform, we deny dynamism to our profession (Widdowson,

1986, p. 86).

By following such a model of learning to teach, we can realize that “change” does not mean breaking traditions, but that rather it means building on traditions, combining what is best from tradition with the newly acquired knowledge. Put another way, change requires our active engagement in learning about new perspectives and new options—we are ourselves learners who seek to integrate new perspectives into our thinking and beliefs. “We need a recognition that what is at the heart of teaching is intellectual inquiry and experimentation, operational research which uses various techniques to test out principles explicitly spelled out” (Widdowson, 1986, p. 88). As we have moved into the “post-method” age, we need to take initiative to find out what works best for ourselves and for our learners. This process of self-inquiry gets us involved in working out new ideas and methodology, testing them, and revising their perceptions of teaching and learning by asking ourselves questions regarding our learners’ needs, motivations, beliefs, and attitudes as well as our own. We need to question ourselves the cultural, political, social and economic implications of English language teaching and the world that English language teaching can open up to our students.

To achieve this goal, it is imperative that opportunities for on-going professional development be fostered with a view to helping teachers theorize and conceptualize their own practice, as a basis for articulating, examining, and revising their perceptions and beliefs.

PROVIDING SUPPORT THROUGH ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The teacher as a mediating agents of change plays a pivotal role in the teaching-learning process. Educational quality cannot be raised beyond the level of the teachers. While external factors such as salaries and working conditions have occupied much attention, we must also stress internal factors, especially the desire of teachers to do quality teaching. It is critical that

teachers' subject knowledge be strengthened and their vision of teaching broadened. Teachers' poor knowledge bases lead to poor pedagogical practices, which, in turn, result in students' poor learning. With a better knowledge base, teachers would be in a better position to examine their pedagogical practices and inquire into new strategies to maximize learning. Unfortunately, in Asian countries a focus on mere professional skills does not result in teachers who are agents of change. As a result, they often lack the preparation to feel comfortable adopting and adapting new teaching styles.

A recent shift of focus in the field of English language education puts more emphasis on teachers than on methodology. Like world peace, poverty reduction, or anti-terrorism, continuing professional development is something it is difficult not to be in favor of. Teachers who give up ongoing development will sooner or later—probably sooner—cease to be competent. Teachers committed to professional development need encouragement, motivation, and support. While the benefits from such development are clear, it is nonetheless true that a majority of Asian English teachers do not have access to professional growth opportunities due to financial incapacity. In fact, 'fly-in-fly-out, or quick-fix in-service training has been provided by most Asian countries, but this method of professional development can, at best, bring about surface change. In order to enable teachers to function effectively in the role of agents of change, I would recommend the following measures are considered to be of primary importance for the improvement of teachers' continuing professional development.

1. *Motivation is the key to effective professional development.* Motivating teachers to get involved in continuing professional development is critical. The low status, low salaries, and poor working conditions of teachers result in a depressed profession with poor motivation. While it is still hard to improve teachers' working conditions and salaries in many Asian economies, incentives should be provided for any success in teaching innovation. Incentives can be provided in the form of a bonus or an opportunity for promotion, further study or for participating in international professional

development events like professional workshops or conferences. Another way to motivate teachers to engage in continuing professional development is to empower them so that they can have a say in the decision-making process behind the change in syllabus and materials. Of course, Asian society remains hierarchical, yet it will be a great encouragement to teachers if they know their voice is heard before any top-down, coercive decision is made.

2. *Among others things, observation is an effective tool of improving instructional practices.* Each school should create a healthy environment in every school for teacher participation in non-judgmental observation. As Edge (1993, p. 12) put it, “The single most important change we can hope for in teaching is for teachers who trust each other to visit each other’s lessons, not to evaluate, but to share.” Face is an important value shared by many Asian cultures. Non-judgmental observation helps teachers do away with their threat of “losing face.” Also, such type of classroom observation is a powerful way to impact classroom behavior. The observer not only acts as another set of “eyes and ears” for the teacher, but also learns as he or she views his or her colleague in action.

3. *Networking is of great help.* While most of Asian EFL teachers have no or limited access to agents of change, the networking of EFL teachers across the country and the region provides a good forum for teachers to share their experiences and to learn from each other. It helps to keep teachers abreast of the latest developments in their field on the national, regional and global scale. Such networking is a catalyst for teachers to change their practice.

4. *Support should be combined with pressure.* The possibility of change is increased when support and pressure are combined in a seamless way. “Pressure without support leads to resistance and alienation; support without pressure leads to drift or waste of resources” (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 91). This requires each school should to set up regulations to institutionalize teacher change and teachers’ inquiry, which involve implementing mandated

change, exploring their own teaching and their own classes to seek ways of improving their teaching processes. Individual teachers need to be guided in how to implement the coercive change, how to formulate questions about their own practice and how to pursue answers to those questions. In this process, not only teachers' personal theories but also the mandated changes can be challenged, evaluated, and revised so that the new policies can be modified based on local responses. This approach combines top-down and bottom-up change, thereby avoiding both non-commitment to mandated change and unstructured local changes.

5. *Training and development are on the same continuum.* Teachers implementing change need in-service training. Before teachers can be expected to engage actively in real professional development activities, they must be trained sufficiently in core teaching skills and competencies, as well as in new skills and a more sophisticated understanding of what teachers do. Thus, professional development is an on-going process, rather than a quick-fix workshop or in-service course. Perceived this way, in-service training must at first be prescriptive to a large extent, demonstrating clearly what is required in this new approach to teaching and providing opportunities for teachers to experience and practice it. Once they have mastered basic teaching skills, they should be credited with maturity and intelligence to adapt, throw out, or stick with whichever elements they choose. Only at this point does real in-service teacher development work begin. My assumption is that beliefs about teaching will change once teachers experience success with the new techniques. Considerable evidence (see, for example, Fullan & Watson, 2000) indicates that before teachers can be expected to become reflective practitioners they need to develop a solid repertoire of teaching skills. Too many such training initiatives from Western countries are transferred inappropriately to countries in which teachers have not yet mastered the basics of subject knowledge and pedagogical skill. This is one of the prime causes of resistance to adapting the new approaches, though such resistance is often mistakenly attributed to differing cultural values.

That is, the resistance experienced to “Western methods” is very often due to professional shortcomings, not cultural differences. Once properly trained, teachers can become innovative and creative practitioners who are able to modify Western approaches to suit their own contexts.

CONCLUSION

The economically and culturally dynamic context of Asia requires us to move away from ideology to inquiry in order to approach English teaching with an open mind. We must remain professionally self-aware, so as not to be trapped by stereotypes or knee-jerk political or cultural reactions. We can look for common ground or common potentials. Western language teaching perspectives may carry a lot of cultural and ideological baggage, but the door swings both ways. By mediating ideological differences in teaching and learning through inquiry, we can create more pedagogical choices, thereby contributing actively to the regional and international development of our profession.

Teachers determine educational quality and play a central role in educational innovation. For successful change, it is critical that teachers’ continuing professional development be improved in ways that ease fears that their cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs are being threatened or attacked. This kind of program seeks a balance between top-down and bottom-up change by combining coercion—that is, requiring or mandating change—with a more participatory approach. Within the balance, teachers cannot simply reject change, but are encouraged to evaluate, modify, and try again. This empowers teachers, reducing potential feelings of resentment while still holding them accountable.

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