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Addressing Reconciliation in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The extent to which teachers' spiritual identities should inform their pedagogy has been a topic of much discussion among TESOL professionals. Under particular scrutiny have been Christian English teachers (CET), whose faith can be disconcerting to a multicultural field that strongly values diversity. Meanwhile, another conversation continues regarding ways in which language teaching can be used as a means of promoting social justice and global citizenship. This article attempts to add to these conversations by proposing that reconciliation should be addressed in the classroom and by suggesting that it is a topic of interest to both CET and others who are not adherents of the Christian faith. It also discusses possibilities for how teachers could broach this subject in the classroom. Finally, it challenges CET and their critics to consider ways in which a recognition of such areas of shared interest may stimulate greater collaboration between educators who hold to seemingly disparate philosophical positions.

Key words: conflict, critical pedagogy, curriculum, ESL, pedagogy, reconciliation

Introduction

A passionate debate has been taking place within the TESOL profession among Christian English teachers (CET) and Critical Practitioners (CP), arguing the extent to which religion, faith, and spirituality should impact the language classroom (Edge, 2003, 2004; Griffith, 2004; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Purgason, 2004; Wong & Canagarajah, 2009). Meanwhile, a different, yet sometimes overlapping conversation has been taking place discussing the use of language teaching as a means of promoting peace and social justice (Morgan & Vandrick, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). However, one area that is in need of further attention is how areas of agreed upon and universal worth could be addressed in the classroom. This article will argue that the topic of reconciliation carries significance and collaborative opportunities for both CP and CET and discuss ways in which this topic could be addressed in the classroom.

Education is increasingly being viewed as a transformational process. Rather than focusing on the mere absorption of content, many teachers endeavor to change students' "learning-related attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills" (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012, p. 576). Additionally, there is great interest in locating and utilizing learning materials that are relevant

to the lives of learners because of the belief that they enhance learning (Brown, 2007; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Floyd & Hebert, 2010; Titone, Plummer, & Kielar, 2012). Both secular and religiously inspired educators have sought ways of increasing the number of meaningful and transformational curricular materials available in the classroom (Morgan & Vandrick, 2009; Purgason, 2009; Smith, 2008). This notion of educators seeking change and growth in their students is widely accepted, although there is some disagreement as to what types of change should be encouraged and how such change should be accomplished (Ferris, 2009; Morgan, 2009; Purgason, 2009). The use of power and position to impose one's viewpoints on students receives justified condemnation (Byler, 2009; Vandrick, 2009), but educators are encouraged to promote critical thinking and maintain a classroom that can serve as "a model of the world as a context for tolerance and for the appreciation of diversity" (Brown, 2009, p. 267). Helping students think critically and respect others is a commendable goal for the language classroom; however, in the midst of growing in these areas, students are likely to experience conflict and should be equipped to respond appropriately.

Reconciliation in the Classroom

The creation of a safe and supportive learning environment is an important goal for educators. Laudable efforts have been made to equip teachers in promoting greater understanding and acceptance of different races, religions, and worldviews (Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011). The question remains, however, of how to proceed when offenses do occur. Particularly in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom, it is highly unrealistic to expect perfect peace and harmony among diverse peoples bringing unique perspectives, especially considering misunderstandings that can occur simply as a result of unfamiliarity with the target language. Offenses are inevitable. When such wrongs occur in the classroom, what is the appropriate response? Change the subject? End the discussion? Punish the offender? Sweeping such issues under the proverbial rug does not foster a safe learning environment, nor will it encourage the greater efforts at peace and understanding that all teachers, regardless of religious persuasion, should desire.

In describing an account of one student intentionally insulting another in his classroom, Smith (2007) writes that through his response he "would have been implicitly advocating through [his] actions some particular stance on the ethics of interpersonal interaction as well as

on the relative situational merits of punishment and forgiveness, retribution and reconciliation” (p. 35). Smith (2007) chose to address the offending student outside of the classroom, explaining that he would have been less upset if the student had broken something physical in the classroom, and describing how feelings are more fragile and of greater worth. After fighting through tears of his own, the offending student returned to class and apologized. While Smith’s (2007) response could be critiqued and would be more appropriate in some contexts than others, it illustrates the importance of cultivating a classroom environment where reconciliation is encouraged.

It is not only students who harm one another. Despite their best intentions, teachers will occasionally offend students, and students will inadvertently offend teachers. The inevitability of offense is significant because, as Johnston (1999) writes, a foundational aspect of education is “the moral relation between teacher and students” (p. 561). Gebhard and Oprandy (2003) discuss the need for teachers to be genuine in the classroom and how genuineness can lead to trust, describing the “quality of trustworthiness that comes from being less judgmental, by not having to control another person, by not having to be infallible, by being sincere and spontaneous, and by truly engaging oneself with others” (p. 141). Such authenticity can certainly help to establish a fruitful classroom environment. However, in such a classroom a teacher’s imperfections are likely to be revealed, causing inadvertent offense. Equipping students with the language skills necessary to address these offenses with an effort towards reconciliation can provide students with a powerful cultural and linguistic tool while simultaneously helping to balance classroom power dynamics. In this way, the teaching of reconciliation could be viewed as an element of critical pedagogy. Because of the inevitability of conflict in the classroom, equipping students to perform such tasks as respectfully disputing a perceived unfair grade or confronting a teacher who caused offense through an off-handed comment could prove invaluable in regards to creating a safe classroom environment.

Importance for both CET and CP

For Christians, the idea of reconciliation can hardly be overstated. When stripped to its essence, the message of Christianity is about broken relationships being reconciled through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Byler (2009) writes that:

At the heart of the gospel is a vision of reconciliation, a mending and healing of that which has been torn apart. This reconciliation is not only between God and humans, but

it is also concerned with bringing peace between enemies, between groups or of persons and entire cultures. (p. 129)

The Christian understanding of reconciliation is unique since its inspiration for reconciliation with others is a restored relationship with God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This restoration is both the model and impetus for Christian efforts at reconciliation. Those who do not hold a Christian worldview approach reconciliation efforts from other perspectives; however, that does not mean that the hope of restored relationships appeals to only Christians. Efforts at encouraging reconciliation have been undertaken by adherents of other faiths as well as by those outside of any religious faith (Abu-Nimer & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2008; Androff, 2012).

The idea of collaborating with those who do not subscribe to the Christian faith might produce a sense of unease in some. Questions arise about whether there is value in such collaboration and if attempts at finding common ground will lead to a kind of syncretism, where the uniqueness of Christianity is lost. Dula and Epp Weaver (2007) address this concern by suggesting that truths can be found in other worldviews, but “they cannot be allowed to crowd Christ out, to compete with him or to replace him. All they can do is witness to him” (p. 164). In other words, seeking additional input from those who are not Christians does not replace an individual’s faith in Christ, but enhances it. Interacting with those of different faiths challenges Christians to continuously reexamine their beliefs. Such interactions can increase the vitality of one’s faith, leading to “a deeper engagement with scripture” (Dula & Epp Weaver, 2007, p. 166). In this way interacting with the “other” can lead to more thoughtful exegesis. This does not mean that such experiences are always pleasant. Lamb (1984) describes how meeting with those of a different faith “is an exceptionally disturbing event in the lives of many Christians” (p. 156). Such interactions shake one’s assumptions and bring forth challenging questions that test one’s faith. In spite of this discomfort, Lamb does not suggest that we avoid such exchanges, but that “the church must take its critics for its friends, and listen to what God is saying through them” (p. 158). Additionally, through humbly accepting their own faults and striving for restored relationships, Christians provide a living model of what life in Christ should entail. In this way, reconciliation can serve as what D’Souza and D’Souza (1996) describe as “a new mission paradigm” (p. 211).

Putting it into Practice

The first step in equipping learners to respond to conflict is through teaching the language of reconciliation. This is an area of importance for all learners, regardless of their current linguistic ability. For beginning students, we must move beyond “please” and “thank you” and teach students terminology that equips them to deal with inevitable conflict, such as “That hurt my feelings,” “I’m sorry,” “I made a mistake,” “Will you forgive me?” and “I forgive you.” Purgason (2009) critiques the singular dimension of many textbooks, saying that they “teach students the language of buying, but not charitable giving, complaining but not necessarily praising, and *apologizing, but usually not forgiving*” (p. 190, italics mine).

Teaching vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, from the viewpoint of restored relationships has the potential to be intrinsically motivating and beneficial for learners. When students are equipped with the linguistic and cultural tools to respond to offense, they will be better able to discuss important, yet touchy, topics one would expect to find in a communicative classroom. Students who experience post-conflict resolution in their own lives may come away from such experiences with a greater sense of hope and possibility in regards to larger scale reconciliation efforts. As such, teaching about reconciliation is a grass-roots way of encouraging positive world change.

Using Role-Play

The use of acting or role-play is a frequent tool for encouraging creative language practice. While role-play activities may involve basic interactions such as shopping or going to the dentist, Shapiro and Leopold (2012) describe the specific benefits of what they refer to as “critical role-play”:

Critical role-play requires students to embody voices and perspectives that may be quite different from their own. It asks them to speak and write using discourse that may be unfamiliar. It encourages them to explore relationships among people, texts, and contexts. Critical role-play, therefore, is both cognitively and linguistically challenging. (p. 123)

Additionally, Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011) discuss the use of role-play as a means of increasing empathy and building cross-cultural understanding. The use of such role-play has the potential to develop empathy that can serve as a foundation for lessons focusing on reconciliation. In addition, providing opportunities for students to “practice” dealing with

conflict and addressing fractured relationships may reduce their anxiety about committing unintentional cultural *faux pas*, providing them with greater confidence. While ESL students may already be quite adept at dealing with conflict in their own cultures, it is still important to equip them to do so while interacting with members of other cultures. The linguistic skill of reconciling is significant and demonstrates that while mistakes are likely to occur, they need not be relationally devastating.

Reconciliation Among Professionals

Moving beyond the student/teacher interactions, it is important to recognize that conflict occurs within institutional contexts. TESOL brings together passionate people with deeply ingrained and sometimes conflicting values. The recent and ongoing debate among educators regarding the extent to which an educator's religious beliefs should influence his or her pedagogy is but one example. Within this impassioned debate there have been encouraging voices calling for greater dialogue and understanding. Johnston (2009) calls for those on each side of the debate to not give up on dialogue about areas of difference and to "admit that the other side may sometimes be right" (p. 43). Edge (2009) provides models of discourse that allow persons of diverse viewpoints to engage one another respectfully and with a genuine aim of understanding. Critical practitioners Varghese and Johnston (2007) avoid stereotyping by taking the time to interview Christians who will be future teachers of English in order to gain a more accurate picture of the ways in which their faiths intersected with their motivations and goals in teaching and their pedagogical practices. These attempts at understanding were the inspiration for this article.

While these interactions have been encouraging, the lack of collaboration evidences a continued rift between CP and CET. A significant divide continues to exist, particularly in the realm of curricular development. Dialogue is helpful, but it is not a substitute for reconciliation. It is one thing to discuss issues while remaining apart. It is quite another to work together for a shared purpose. Collaboration requires contact. It is through continued interaction with the "other" that we begin to recognize similarities over differences. It does not require complete agreement in all areas, but it does involve seeing individuals as more than the ideas or worldviews that they represent. Levine and Bishai (2010) write about teaching citizenship in the classroom in areas of the world that have experienced significant discord. One method they

suggest for such teaching is the use of collaborative projects. They write that “One point of classroom group work is that building citizenship in the wake of conflict requires students to confront each other across problematic social divides inflamed by histories of violence” (p. 4). They continue by suggesting that having learners work together on tasks that will be graded may help to maximize the impact of such collaborative efforts. Perhaps more immediately applicable would be Geltner and Ditzhazy’s (1994) description of educators striving for collaboration in the midst of institutional change. They describe a group of educators at a midwestern university who, in the midst of a collaborative transformation of a university program, “transformed themselves and their relationships” (p. 2). In describing part of the process and its effects, they write that the experience:

served as an opportunity for faculty to have extended conversations, to share expertise, to better understand others’ perspectives, and to create a culture in which new ideas were introduced, considered and included as part of a new comprehensive whole. (Geltner & Ditzhazy, 1994, p. 12)

In the midst of disputes within the TESOL profession, sincere collaborative efforts would demonstrate an authentic desire for mutual understanding that goes beyond theoretical respect from a distance. While the conversation about the influence of faith on pedagogy should continue, one aim of this article is to suggest that, even within the debate, areas of mutual interest exist between disparate positions. Perhaps considering these areas will encourage future efforts at collaboration and gradually create a greater sense of reconciliation within the TESOL profession.

Conclusion

Conflict is an inevitable part of life, but it need not lead to permanently severed relationships. The pervasive biblical theme of reconciliation makes it of special importance for CET who hope to emulate Christ personally and professionally. Dealing with conflict is a highly relevant topic for English language learners studying outside of their own cultural contexts, and one that can be readily addressed in the classroom. Teachers hoping to address this topic might consider having students work in culturally mixed groups to compare and contrast beliefs about conflict (e.g., What causes conflict? How do people apologize? Is forgiveness important?). This could be followed by a role-play in which students demonstrate what type of interaction would be necessary for both parties to feel that reconciliation had

occurred. In addition, teachers could provide written scenarios involving conflicts between two parties (see the Appendix for one example). Students could describe the situation, determine the cause of conflict, and brainstorm possible solutions. This activity could conclude with students writing a dialogue leading to reconciliation and performing it in a role play for the class. Finally, teachers could challenge students to imagine some type of classroom offense (e.g., the teacher said something culturally inappropriate or gave a seemingly unfair grade) and write a letter to their instructor explaining their feelings. What would be appropriate is highly context dependent, but as I have argued reconciliation has great potential as a stimulating, enriching, and empowering topic for the ESL classroom.

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Appendix: An Example for Working Toward Reconciliation in the Classroom

Scenario

Mustafa is a very ambitious student. He studies very hard and asks a lot of questions in class. Often, his teacher says that he does not know the answer and that Mustafa should look up the information himself. The last time he said that, the class laughed and Mustafa felt embarrassed. He feels angry towards his teacher because the teacher does not seem to take his questions seriously and even seemed to make fun of him. Mustafa pays a lot of money to attend this language school and feels like he should be treated with more respect.

Task 1

Turn this paper over and explain the above situation in your own words. Then re-read the scenario. Discuss the following questions with your small group.

1. What is causing the conflict?
2. What emotions is Mustafa feeling?
3. Do you think the teacher is being disrespectful?
4. What emotions do you think the teacher is feeling?
5. Why do you think the teacher keeps telling Mustafa to look up the information himself?
6. Does the teacher know how Mustafa feels?
7. What should happen next?
8. What will happen if Mustafa talks to his teacher about this problem?
9. What will happen if Mustafa stays silent?

Task 2

It is normal for people to have arguments or to hurt one another’s feelings. It is normal to get angry. Reconciliation is the idea of a restored relationship. People can reconcile when they express their hurt feelings, solve problems, and forgive one another.

Imagine a situation where Mustafa decides to talk to his teacher about the frustration and embarrassment he feels. Create a one-page dialogue that allows both participants to express their feelings. Make sure that the dialogue leads to reconciliation, where both Mustafa and his teacher feel that their issues have been resolved.

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