

Teaching English as a foreign language in accordance with Social-constructivist pedagogy

Enseñar inglés como lengua extranjera en consonancia con la pedagogía socio-constructivista

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Abstract: This article argues that teaching a foreign language (English, in this case) involves a *linguistic obstacle* which, if not negotiated properly, may place this task in contradiction with some basic principles of Social-constructivist pedagogy. After this obstacle is identified and some potential solutions are discarded, the article resorts to some of the didactic advances developed in the field of English as a second language (ESL) teaching during the last two decades, since the latter has remained more attentive to the conflictive nature of social interactions than any other area in English Learning (EL). Resulting from this analysis, the paper finally resorts to examples in recent EFL research and comes up with a model for Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL), the main feature of which is to integrate EFL students' critical reflections on the position enjoyed by English in the international socio-economic arena and the students' relation to it.

Key words: TEFL, TESL, TEIL, social-constructivist pedagogy, critical pedagogy.

Resumen: Este artículo postula que la enseñanza de una Lengua Extranjera (en este caso, del inglés) implica un obstáculo lingüístico que, si no se negocia de forma adecuada, puede hacer esta una tarea contradictoria con los principios básicos de la pedagogía socio-constructivista. Tras identificar este obstáculo y descartar algunas potenciales soluciones, el artículo recurre a los avances didácticos desarrollados en la Enseñanza del Inglés como Segunda Lengua durante las últimas dos décadas, un área ha permanecido más atenta a la naturaleza conflictiva de las interacciones sociales. A partir de este análisis, el artículo extrae algunos ejemplos de la literatura reciente para derivar un modelo de Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Internacional cuyo principal rasgo radica en ser capaz de integrar las reflexiones de los estudiantes de inglés como

Lengua Extranjera sobre la posición que este idioma disfruta en el contexto socio-económico internacional y sobre sus propias relaciones con este contexto.

Palabras clave: enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua, enseñanza del inglés como lengua internacional, pedagogía socio-constructivista, pedagogía crítica.

Introduction: the problematic inscription of TEFL in general pedagogy

“TEFL is not easy; but as long as teachers make the task interesting, it will not become a disaster.” These were the words used by a group of English language graduates to describe the task they were struggling to control, and which they wanted to adopt as a profession. They were uttered in the context of a course I taught as part of a Masters in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and the following paper may well be considered a running commentary, or even a theoretical justification, of those words. Like the class presentation in which they arose, my paper intends to explain why TEFL should be regarded as a difficult task *or* an impossible task—a difficult endeavor or a complete failure—but never an easy *and* a feasible task at the same time. Actually, I will argue that, whenever TEFL succeeds in fulfilling its educational goal, it does so *if and only if* the teacher has previously managed to negotiate (not without extreme difficulty) the whole range of contradictory burdens that constitute it as an educational enterprise.

There is one main obstacle to which TEFL owes, at its best, its difficult character. Actually, it comes into play in the teaching of any foreign language, but I will discuss it only in relation to English education, since this will be the context for which a solution will be presented. While the problem is transversal and common to all foreign languages, we shall see that solutions must be specific to each target language. The impediment I am referring to emerges as soon as we analyze TEFL in a light that, not by chance, is typically avoided by many TEFL practitioners and researchers, for fear that it may distort the self-image of their own practice. I am referring to principles of Social-constructivist pedagogy. For all its specificity, I consider TEFL should not be independent from the pedagogic and didactic standards that apply to any other instance of teaching and learning. This argument, however, is far from being universal since many are the scholars who prefer to theorize and analyze TEFL from the standpoint of linguistics (MADRID & HUGHES, 2004: 38-39), not pedagogy. The notion behind this perspective is that the *linguistic* component is more significant than the *teaching* component in EFL, and must therefore be dominant when defining this practice. Academics that endorse this view, such as Spolsky and Ingram (KAPLAN, 1980), regard language didactics as a field that is internal to Applied Linguistics, and conceive language teaching as one among the many potential applications that derive from linguistics. Consistent with this perspective is the belief that the essential training language teachers need is knowledge of linguistics, and just as much behaviorist pedagogy as allows them to justify the kind of repetitive, drilling language practices that teachers sometimes provide to their students (CUMMINS, BROWN, & SAYERS, 2007: 55-63).

By arguing thus, one runs the risk of underrating the function of pedagogy, either by defending the assumption that expertise in a subject matter already qualifies anyone to teach it (in this case, linguistics) —hence cancelling SCHULMAN’S (1986) key difference between *subject matter knowledge* and *pedagogical content knowledge*—, or by defending the view that pedagogy is superfluous when learning a language is the subject matter involved. According to this latter view, language education (and especially foreign language education) would be unlike any other educational enterprise, exceptional to the degree that it need not abide by the conditions that govern every other instance of teaching. This idea is frequently based on a lack of awareness of the fact that every single teaching and learning endeavor already involves teaching and learning new language (GIBBONS, 2009: 31-39). By reducing the scope of pedagogy to a set of behaviorist commonplaces —if not cancelling the range of the former completely—, language education does not only bring upon itself important teaching deficits but, furthermore, installs negative consequences at every level of education. One example of such effects is sadly experienced in the EFL school syllabus, which reveals a complete lack of articulation with the rest of curricular areas in primary and secondary education. To some extent, this institutional divide is gradually beginning to heal due to the intervention of Content-Based (CB) approaches to English Learning, the most popular of which is Content-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), designed for EFL (MUÑOZ, 2001). For reasons that will soon be disclosed, CLIL provides a valuable strategy for TEFL to circumvent the lack of feasibility that constantly endangers it.

If the purpose of schooling is to educate students, then all teachers must contribute to students’ achievement of curriculum objectives. Language cannot stand apart from content learning just as content may be learned through language. Teachers may no longer be able to afford the luxury of a language curriculum separate from the demands of the larger school curriculum (MET, 1994: 178).

In line with the above statement, foreign language teaching should stop considering itself a case of educational *exceptionalism* and rather acknowledge that it is only different because it is harder, and therefore requires a more complex methodology and planning to succeed. In order to do so, constructivist pedagogies that are attentive to social, cognitive and psychological variables may be of more help than the narrow behaviorist paradigm. This will become a fundamental thesis in what is to follow. Let me put it another way. Rather than detach themselves from some of the key principles of constructivist pedagogy, and rather than remain isolated and search for unorthodox —if not eccentric— methodologies, EFL teachers should devote all their imagination and intelligence to satisfying the basic pedagogical demands that education must fulfill, according to Social-constructivist paradigms and regardless of its specific object. Instead of specific approaches, methods, procedures, and techniques, all of which derive from “theories about the nature of language and language learning” (RICHARDS & RODGERS, 1986: 16), my suggestion is for TEFL to turn directly to Social-constructivist pedagogy.

The linguistic obstacle in TEFL

I cannot think of harder educational obstacles than those that EFL teachers encounter when they try to remain loyal to the general principles of Social-constructivist pedagogy. Why should this be so? The answer is easy to predict. Basically, it has to do with language being the only means through which education takes place. According to Edwards and MERCER (1987), “it is essentially in the discourse between teacher and pupil that education is done, or fails to be done” (101). This idea is at the root of any Social-constructivist and even critical pedagogy, one which does not examine pupils’ abilities and skills as original and *constitutive* realities, but rather as effects that have become gradually *constituted* through exchanges taking place in a multi-leveled, inter-relational context. These exchanges operate as the major —not the only— variable causes of school attainment and, due precisely to the inter-relational nature of pupils’ abilities and skills, it is believed that educational effects can be brought forth via the new communicative situation teachers build through their interaction with their pupils. As CUMMINS (1997) says,

Micro-interactions between educators, pupils and communities are never neutral; in varying degrees, they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power. [...] The ways in which identities are negotiated in the interpersonal spaces created in educator-pupil interactions play a major role in the extent to which pupils will engage academically. Affirmation of the identities of subordinated group pupils necessarily entails a challenge of the societal process of subordination. This perspective suggests that programme interventions aimed at reversing the underachievement of culturally diverse pupils will be successful to the extent that these interventions result in educator-pupil interactions that challenge patterns of coercive relations of power in the broader society (321-322).

The abovementioned statement by Edwards and Mercer summarizes a perspective that was long ago adopted in the field of educational studies, especially in the wake of the reception of Lev Vygotsky’s Social-constructivist orientation by western academia. Accordingly, it has found an echo in a whole variety of pedagogical approaches, strictly Vygotskian or not. In fact, one of the earliest definitions of teaching *accountability* (John Elliott’s) referred to “case studies of patterns of teacher-pupil interaction” as the “only way to determine the causal significance of [good or bad] teaching in particular situations” (ELLIOTT, 1976: 67). This claim bears witness to the ongoing insistence on the importance of teacher-student interaction, for the purpose of determining what makes teaching effective or not, as does the emphasis on *interaction*, not *transmission*, providing the communicative orientation that accounts for most of the students’ learning (CUMMINS, 1986: 181-187). *Recasting*, *contingent response*, and *message redundancy* have been pinpointed by GIBBONS (2006) as efficient strategies for teacher-student dialogue to afford real opportunities for learning (236-257).

For all its importance, however, teacher-students interaction becomes very problematic in the TEFL context. Due to the foreign nature of the language, TEFL somewhat erodes the one tool every other educational undertaking relies on when it attempts to fulfill its specific aim: namely, *student-teacher interaction*. We could thus draw the hypothesis that TEFL faces a communication difficulty. Should we analyze TEFL from the perspective afforded by Edwards' and Mercer's previous words, it could be characterized by the following paradoxical goal: *students have to learn a different language from the one through which they would normally interact with their teacher*, as they in fact do in the rest of subjects. (As opposed to the ESL context, we take for granted that EFL lessons provide students with most of, if not the only, input to the target language.) This is the specific difficulty inherent in TEFL; this is the main linguistic obstacle I have been referring to all along, the one problem that, if not properly tackled, may turn TEFL into an utter failure, into an impossible learning project. It is true that most teachers are familiarized from the start with their pupils' L1 and, if not, tend to do so gradually. At some point in the process they are normally able to resort to this language to solve any comprehension deficit or misunderstanding that may assail communication in the foreign language. However, the fact remains that EFL teachers may not always be familiar with the students' mother tongues, since, despite its pedagogical benefits — especially in English as a Second Language contexts (CUMMINS, 1994: 44)—, this familiarity is not constitutive of English teachers.

How to turn TEFL into an easy, albeit impossible, task

Some of the methods for TEFL could be justified as particular attempts to solve this difficulty. The *Silent way* and *Total-physical* response, for example, try to minimize the dependence on teacher-student problematic *verbal* interaction, by resorting to non-verbal means of communication (HARMER, 2003: 88-90). Instead, this section is going to focus on one strategy that, while intending to solve the linguistic obstacle in TEFL, on the other hand turns it into an impossible task from the point of view of pedagogy, due to its inattentiveness to the latter's basic principles. This ineffectiveness is a result of an uncritical use of commonsensical procedures that are widespread among TEFL teachers. Actually, at some point in language education (even at the highest levels), teachers have to choose from two equally imperfect alternatives, in order to compensate for the linguistic obstacle we have signaled already. The options at hand are the following: either to conduct all of their interactions in a language the pupil cannot yet use, nor understand —and there can be no point in that—, or to develop some of these dialogues in a different language from the foreign one which the student wants to learn —that is to say, the teacher may decide to communicate in the students' L1 (or L2), for example.

The idea normally used to justify selecting the first option is the *time-to-task* hypothesis, that is, the assumption that language learning correlates strictly with time exposure to the target language (CUMMINS, 2000: 188-189). Since class interaction

provides EFL students' only input to the language, teachers try to maximize their use of English in the classroom. From this perspective, the alternative consisting in developing some dialogues in a different language from the foreign one is an unnecessary sacrifice of valuable time exposure to the target language. In spite of that, common sense tells us that the last option is preferable to the first one, that developing a few interactions through a L1 or L2 different from the target, foreign language seems more reasonable than systematically confronting students with utterances they cannot understand —a course of action that, by itself, already leads to TEFL becoming an impossible task. At the other extreme, the option I favor assures communicability, something which, pedagogically speaking —and especially if one is willing to consider key variables in language learning, such as *interest*, *motivation*, and *confidence* (WIGZELL & ALANSARI, 1993: 302)— seems preferable to provoking utter bewilderment among students. One must bear in mind that, according to CUMMINS (1980), “adequate exposure” (122) to a target language consists both of quantitative and qualitative aspects, hence exposure by itself does not guarantee language learning, unless it be also accompanied by meaningfulness.

Still, a disastrous pedagogic short-circuit may also develop as a result of this last option. Such is the case when teachers attempt to bypass those difficulties they perceive in teacher-student interaction, and which are due to the foreign nature of the target language, by placing too much emphasis on the course book. Seen from a pedagogic point of view, this is not a necessary outcome, but the truth is that it is becoming increasingly common. Undeniably, an important modification takes place when teachers place the course book at the very center of the EFL endeavor and the curriculum that it allegedly embodies. Henceforth, EFL teachers' interventions tend to fulfill the only purpose of bridging the comprehension gap that lies between the student and a course book; suddenly, the course book —not the teacher— seems to be responsible for the teaching, and what an authoritarian teacher it is! Far more than any teacher is capable of, for the book cannot be questioned nor spoken to. And, as the course book becomes the constant point of reference in the lesson (the alpha and the omega of all the interventions), teachers start to place themselves farther and farther away from any decision-making locus in the classroom. They relinquish any active role towards language teaching, and assume that their main task is to help students understand the information contained in the course book. The latter's completion —so it is believed— will result in the satisfaction of the learning goals. But once the educators' role is no longer identified with causing language learning, but only with deciphering the book to the students, they gradually start to drift towards the pupils' L1, since it provides the easiest and most natural way to fulfill the translation task they have taken upon themselves. And then, too, teaching may look easy while actually it is just impossible. Such an inter-relational framework, tightly pinned to the pages of the course books, is normally accompanied by additional traits, such as the lack of oral output on the students' part, for instance; or students who become further disabled from taking part in enriching activities, different from the habitual drilling practices, due to lack of habit and specific training. A vicious circle is established thereby, against which many

scholars have repeatedly warned: “ELL’s lack of oral language proficiency has often hindered their opportunity to receive cognitively stimulating and content-level appropriate instruction in school” (CARRASQUILLO, KUCER, & ABRAMS, 2004, quoted in GIBBONS, 2009: 2).

Leaving aside some of the negative consequences related to testing and assessment that necessarily result from a book-centered didactics—*teaching to tests*, for example (GORLEWSKI, PORFILIO, & GORLEWSKI, 2012)—, I would argue that the moment teachers agree to being eclipsed by their course book, TEFL starts to develop into an easy, albeit impossible, task. Why should we define it as easy? Simply, because teachers are able to spare themselves the time and the effort they should ideally be devoting to designing course plans that—as suggested by Social-constructivist pedagogy—are in accordance with their pupils’ knowledge and experiences, with their potential abilities and present interests. According to constructivism, an educator’s role involves parting from the knowledge each pupil brings to class and taking it a couple of steps further in the direction of the learning goals. But, in order to do this, students’ reality must be treated as the only starting point, so the interactional inertias that have shaped them and made them the way they are must be understood and respected. Only in this case will teachers be able to design new interactional patterns that allow their students to become aware, and hence transcend, their present condition, to get closer to the learning goals. From the opposite extreme of the pedagogical arch, book-focused didactics tend to take the course book as the point of arrival *and* of departure, since the students’ present is simply pushed against the future they must attain, as if this collision implied a pedagogic transition or mediation by itself. From the students’ side, this is normally experienced as sheer repetition and memorization. “Strict adherence to a teacher’s guide could lead to poor experiences for some students” (JOHNSON, 2004: 199). Once and again, they are forced to repeat the same exercises that will later on appear in the test. Teachers who, along with the behaviorist paradigm, take the knowledge that students bring from home and simply bang it, once and again, against the book’s content, and pretend that this shall result in actual learning—those teachers also incur in turning TEFL into an easy but impossible task, by making it incompatible with general pedagogic principles. In the long run, oblivion must be the only possible outcome.

Adapting TEFL to Social-constructivist principles

If TEFL teachers want to solve the linguistic obstacle, they should *not* forego the demands that pedagogy imposes on them, by adopting the easiest possible means of proceeding. Rather, the solution may lie in following somewhat more complex constructivist principles. The key idea to bear in mind is that, while the language variable is significant in language learning, it is not the only one involved in student-teacher interaction. Other factors are also important, so much so that the best way to compensate for the linguistic obstacle may be precisely to manage the rest of cognitive,

psychological and sociological variables, and orient them adequately so that they can contribute to the educational goal. I am referring to *autonomy*, *affect* and *identity* factors that are present in any educational enterprise (CUMMINS, 1994: 40-44, 54-55; CUMMINS, BROWN, & SAYERS, 2007: 9), but which tend to become atrophied whenever teachers place too much attention on the course book.

Luckily, EFL scholars and practitioners need not develop from scratch the theoretical and practical dimensions that pertain to these variables. ESL researchers have been doing so, at least, for a couple of decades: Jim Cummins' contribution to ESL education, like Pauline Gibbons', could in point of fact be defined as an attempt to analyze ESL education according to how these cognitive, psychological and sociological variables appear in the light of constructivism (BRANSFORD, BROWN & COCKING, 2000). This is exactly what I suggest that educators do, too, in the EFL context, a practice that research in the area is starting to bear out. To tell the truth, ESL suffered not long ago from the same kind of deficits that assail the field of TEFL today; the former also remained completely disconnected from any wider theoretical framework, excluding behaviorism. It also endured an internal fragmentation and external isolation, as EFL does today. Once, ESL also consisted —and still consists, to some extent— of a collection of distinct methods and approaches, each backed by its own specific research and case studies. And yet, “in contrast to research findings,” CUMMINS (1999) claims, “theories are almost by definition applicable across contexts” (327). Until some decades ago, ESL lacked its own theoretical underpinnings and, like any field which runs short of precise theoretical principles, it necessarily remained dominated by intuitive assumptions, based solely on superficial and disconnected experimental impressions. Such was the case of the *linguistic mismatch* and the *time-on-task* hypothesis, which Cummins has repeatedly showed not to apply in most cases in the ESL context. Misguided by these two hypotheses, and on the tracks of behaviorism, for a long time ELS minority language students were normally —and still are, in some cases— pushed into L1 mainstream classes, ones in which they experienced the same kind of direct confrontation and non-transitional didactics which inspire all sorts of EFL drilling, repetitive, and cognitively-low language practices. This led Ann E. BERTHOFF (1987) to speak once about second-language learning as the archetype of conventional educational practice, due to its abusive emphasis on repetition and a bare *know-how*, which did not lead to an exploration of deeper variables (xiv).

But this has changed. Today, the field of ESL has already built a set of coherent theoretical principles, thanks partially to *the threshold* and the *interdependence hypotheses* (CUMMINS, 2000: 173-200), and thus welcomes wider pedagogical variables into its analyses. Because of this, ESL practitioners and scholars meet the challenge of integrating the sociological, pedagogical, and psychological variables in their understanding. Cummins's 1988 simplified version of his pedagogical framework bears witness to this transformation:

- (1) *Minority students' language and culture are incorporated into the school programme;*
- (2) *Minority community participation is encouraged as an integral component of children's education;*
- (3) *The pedagogy promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of students to use language actively in order to generate their own knowledge; and*
- (4) *Professionals involved in assessment become advocates for minority students by focusing primarily on the ways in which students' academic difficulty is a function of interactions within the school context rather than legitimizing the location of the 'problem' within students (CUMMINS, 1988: 224).*

The best way to portray these variables is to imagine them as longitudinal axes along which the different aspects can be fulfilled to a higher or lower degree (+, -). The ideal ESL setting would be one in which all of them were fully satisfied, i.e. in which minority students' language and culture were *fully* incorporated in to the school programme, etc. This pedagogical framework has been amplified and enriched with time, especially in recent years, when Cummins and other ESL scholars have included the need for *critical literacy* in the ESL classroom (CUMMINS, 1992: 259-260), for a *cognitively challenging curriculum* (GIBBONS, 2009: 1-10), and for *technological resources* (CUMMINS, BROWN, & SAYERS, 2007: 90-111).

This is exactly what EFL should do to ameliorate the effects derived from the linguistic obstacle, so the remaining part of this paper attempt to describe, with the help of existing examples, how the pedagogical kernel of Social-constructivist ESL approaches may be transferred into the TEFL realm. In this transfer, some degree of mediation will be needed, of course. The fact that EFL students' exposure to the target language is restricted to 2 or 3 sessions per week, as dictated by the conditions charactering school subjects, (as opposed to ESL learners, who have a more abundant contact with the language) cancels the possibility of simply assimilating both English learning contexts. The chances are that something that works in TESL becomes ineffective in a TEFL situation unless adequate modifications are made to respond to the specific nature of the latter educational endeavor; hence the difficulty of treating TESOL as a single field of expertise. As a matter of fact, in English-speaking countries, ESL pupils tend to come from immigrant families and, while this sociological feature may be significant for pupils' general school progress (it usually correlates with other socio-economic facts), it does not affect EFL learning in any specialized way —not differently, in any case, from how it determines the student's progress in any other school subject.

A Social-constructivist rendition of English as an International Language

My proposal is the following: in order to turn TEFL into a difficult, albeit possible, pedagogical task, I suggest that it be taught as an International Language (EIL). Since this term already forms part of TESOL literature (it is gradually becoming

the subject matter of a growing amount of bibliography), I must specify its meaning somewhat more so that my thesis can be understood. The crux of the matter lies, of course, in the *international* quality which I have attributed to the English language, and especially in how the reader interprets it vis-à-vis the previous *foreignness* ascribed to it. So, what is gained by assuming that English is an international language in addition to a foreign one?

Firstly, the fact that both terms are kept means that each of them works at a different level; that, as in everyday usage, ‘foreign’ and ‘international’ retain their compatible meanings in this context. We could say that each of them focuses on the same reality from a different, albeit complementary, standpoint. While the distinction between TESL and TEFL revolves around quantitative and qualitative dimensions that relate to exposure to the target language, and while it is habitually linked to the level of exposure in the social and institutional context of the pupils, the foreign/international dichotomy refers only to the *way* English is taught. It is, therefore, a pedagogical distinction. As far as my own definition goes, highlighting the international quality of the English language is a way of singularizing, rendering more concrete or further defining its foreign aspect. From a pedagogical point of view, I advise that this be done by the teacher, raising awareness, in the educational context, of inertias that are similar to those identified previously by the Social-constructivist paradigm in the ESL framework. These inertias are sociological in kind, but we know that they have institutional and pedagogical implications.

The reader may conclude that my proposal of TEIL is a pedagogical variant within TEFL —a social constructivist rendition of TEFL, actually. This statement should already make it clear that it does not coincide with a prevalent stand on TEFL, which concentrates on the potentiality of the English language to function as a *lingua franca* (ELF) (see, for example, YANO, 2009; REPOVA, 2010). “The recent shift in the use of English, such that non-native speakers (NNSs) using English as for international communication now outnumber its native speakers” (JENKINS, 2002: 83), encourages these researchers to focus their interest on English being a tool that enables communication among many different people living around the world. While this is unmistakably true, my opinion is that this distinctive angle offers a somewhat simplified and abstract picture of communicative acts, the profound characteristics of which are not deeply explored. “English does not belong to any one group of people ... It is universal”, claim TALEBINEZHAD & ALIAKBARI (2001: 3). Statements such as these propagate uncritically the myth of globalization and of English as the global *lingua franca*, and, to the same extent, contemplate world capitalism in the abstract, without analyzing its conflictual component. In opposition to this neutral, pacifying or mollified picture that is frequently cherished by EFL and by EIL within it, my opinion is that English teaching should examine the internationality of its target language in the light of the sociological causes of which it is actually a consequence (HALL & EGGINGTON, 2000). These overlapping causes revolve around one main phenomenon: international capitalism, a variable that any social constructivist

orientation soon comes to disclose. As shown in KUMARAVADIVELU (2006), this critical perspective is starting to characterize recent approaches to TEFL. Pedagogically speaking, its salient feature is found in how it calls for a reflexive, critical didactics that enables sociological variables to be discussed openly in an educational context (the EFL lesson) which, despite being greatly determined by them, has traditionally remained secure from any social constructivist, critical —let alone transformative— scrutiny. “Despite the increasing recognition of the need for critical perspectives in teaching English to speakers of other languages,” says HUANG (2012), “critical literacy remains very much a marginalized practice”. And in the following paragraph, the same author neatly describes the complex outline that defines this TEIL approach:

As a result of the globalised world we live in today and the various changes it brings, it is pertinent for educators to take account of ‘the relationship between academic English(es) and the larger sociopolitical context’ (BENESCH, 2009: 82). Thus, a critical literacy pedagogy that seeks to cultivate sociopolitical awareness in students cannot ignore the implications of the globalizing world which we now inhabit, as the local and global inevitably impact upon each other. Consequently, teachers have the responsibility to extend the scope of students’ attention and interests beyond the bounds of their immediate lives and direct locales. This is particularly true in EFL classrooms where students not only learn writing but also the English language in the context of globalization in which English is the dominant undercurrent (285).

Huang’s article provides evidence of the success of this strategy, one through which students are allowed to “relate to the global not only ‘personally and culturally’ but also socially, economically, and politically” (296). All this is done in the context of language learning, which is thereby enriched. HUANG (2012) bears witness to the adequacy of relying on English as the ideal language for EFL learners to train themselves in writing reflectively on how international dynamics impinge on their local, Chinese contexts (286-290). The shameful persistence of child labor, the risks related to global warming, advertising as an element of identity formation, the growing pressure for same-sex marriage in China... these are some of the variety of topics that students researched (292-293). Through them, some of the inertias that account both for the international scope of capitalism and of the English language were brought to the foreground of the writing workshop, in order to underline the coherence lying between the topic chosen and the language used to develop it. Students became motivated as a result of this coherence, just as they normally do when teachers promote their acquaintance with the history and culture of English-speaking countries. Besides, while Huang’s strategy departs from the international arena, it soon provides students the opportunity to anchor their critical thinking processes back in their immediate frame of experience, where their own interests lie. The positive effects derived from this connection should not be underrated for EFL learning: as socio-constructivism makes clear, the fact that pupils consider classroom ideas and topics interesting, that they be able to relate to them from their own immediate realities, aids with a pedagogic principle that TEFL should aim to integrate if it wishes to become a feasible educational task. In the words of WIDDOWSON (2012), despite its foreign character,

English “has to relate to the context of the learners, to the *local* context of what they know of the language, but also to their attitudes, values, how they see the world—in short, their reality. [...] What becomes clear is the crucial importance of taking into account how this foreign, this other, language relates to the reality of learners” (p. 13). This is the one condition Jim Cummins tried to satisfy in the ESL context by devising a variety of ways (institutional as well as didactic) for integrating minority students’ language and culture in an otherwise fully Anglo-Saxon curriculum. In a similar fashion, LE HA (2009) suggests that,

Together with encouraging and valuing users’ appropriation of English, it is important to acknowledge and promote ways that individuals take ownership of English. [...] Users of EIL need to be seen as individuals in relation to who they are, who they want to be and who they could become and in multiple domains in which their identities are produced and reproduced (201).

Like HUANG (2012), Le Pa’s research bears witness to the convenience of allowing students to voice, reflect and negotiate collectively their own relationship with the target language. They may do so by expressing what the latter represents for them and then exploring the different variables that lie behind the language’s international character and—most possibly— behind the students’ decision to learn it, due to academic or professional requirements. But, as Cummins argues, “A framework for critical literacy in ESL must go beyond technical issues of how to transmit the language code effectively to broader issues of the social purposes for which language is used and the social relevance of the instructional content” (CUMMINS, 1994: 54). Integrating this sort of reflections in the EFL classroom, and using them to trigger language production in the target language, allows teachers to help their students gradually bridge the gap which separates the latter from the English language. Highlighting the international dimension of EFL may be adequate to make the foreign language more familiar.

Summary and conclusion

Throughout the paper I have argued that, if TEFL wishes to become a possible task, first it must compensate for a linguistic obstacle which tends to denaturalize its teacher-student communication in such a way that EFL learning may end up turning into a mirage of learning, and the alleged straightforwardness of its teaching task, into a concealment of its failure. I have also claimed, however, that the solution devised must not activate a different—albeit equally detrimental— kind of relational denaturalization between educators and students, the kind that occurs whenever the EFL course book becomes the axis around which the whole educational intervention gravitates. In order to avoid any of these failures, I suggested that TEFL should distance itself from whatever behavioral didactics remain in place in the field, and advance resolutely towards a true application of the set of general pedagogic principles already identified

by socio-constructivism. The latter are valid for any learning process, regardless of the subject matter involved. My proposal consisted of strengthening (through appropriate didactic strategies) those psychic and cognitive variables that have to do with students' interest in, and familiarity with, a subject matter. By proceeding thus, I maintained that the negative consequences of the so-called linguistic obstacle could be somewhat redressed.

The essay then proceeded to argue that the field of EFL should take ESL as an exemplary pedagogical model to orient and rebuild itself following the premises of socio-constructivism. In accordance with this suggestion, I made a proposal inspired by Jim Cummins' and Pauline Gibbons' contribution to TESL as much as by recent TEFL research. I presented an example of Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL) which, far from conceiving this target language as a lingua franca, interpreted this learning situation in the light of global socio-economic, interactive demands. This sociological dimension was introduced into the educational context with the purpose of identifying precise factors that could singularize the abstract *foreign* quality that is generally attributed to English as a subject matter. My proposal summarized the findings of recent TEIL research (HUANG, 2012; LE HA, 2009) which prove that, when EFL teachers include and frame the international dimension in this reflexive manner and, furthermore, inspect it through the lenses of Social-constructivist pedagogy, then their students appear in a very similar light to minority language ESL learners, that is, to non-native English speakers who instruct themselves in the educational system of an English-speaking society. My claim that ESL offered an adequate paradigm for EFL to reshape itself became retroactively justified in this way. The specific similarity between ESL and EFL learners is due to the fact that the capitalist fabric is gradually turning the globe into a single mode of production, spreading its crises, its inequalities, and its ideological effects worldwide. Whenever this global scenario is considered, EFL learners become the ESL students of a single, global society. For, like minority language pupils in English speaking countries, EFL learners also start from a position of inequality and disadvantage vis-à-vis a competitive international marketplace. Bearing this in mind, I concluded that an adequate way for EFL learners to become bilingual and, thus, reverse their own situation in their favor, was for teachers to allow them to analyze critically this disadvantage inside the classroom, to explore the reasons behind their own linguistic, cultural and economic inequality. If this was done, I suggested that EFL students might come to regard English education, not only as professionally important but also interesting, insofar as their own identities and realities became represented and integrated in the classroom context. At the same time, the English language would begin to be less foreign.

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