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Sarah K. Hamburg

Sarah Karin Hamburg, sarah.hamburg@umontana.edu

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Linguistic Imperialism and Volunteer English Teaching: A Neo-colonial Practice?

Colonial era tactics of oppression may seem obsolete; however, the United States continues to exploit the same peripheral nations that it, and other world superpowers, have dominated for centuries. In Latin America, the influence of the American hegemony penetrates every aspect of life. Unable to escape the grip of the capitalist system, Latin America has become culturally subservient to the United States, whose supremacy has, over time, led to the extinction and endangerment of hundreds of indigenous languages and cultures. Through years of exposure to American mass culture (i.e. television, music, media, and consumer products), and an unyielding economically dependent relationship, Latin American cultures have become increasingly assimilated with that of their colonizers. This neo-colonial¹ practice is a commonly called “colonization of the mind” by indigenous rights organizers with whom I worked with in Guatemala and it is my assertion that volunteer English teaching is a major component of this psychological process. Latin Americans are motivated to learn the language in hopes of becoming part of the global economy, to fulfill dreams of migrating north to make a better life (as seen on TV), to find a job within their own countries, or to simply communicate with tourists that visit their communities.

¹ Term coined by Kwame Nkrumah, former president of Ghana (1960–66). It appeared in the 1963 preamble of the Organization of African Unity Charter, and was the title of his 1965 book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965).

My research culminated in an analysis of the role of English in Latin America and a critique on American volunteer English programs. Last summer, I filmed a documentary in Guatemala and Costa Rica interviewing students, teachers, and parents, both local and foreign, about their views on learning or teaching English and whether they believed it to be a form of linguistic imperialism² or a necessary part of an inevitable fate, i.e. globalization. Through personal testimonies and research, I have come closer to understanding this complex dichotomy that is deeply entrenched in American history and foreign policy. To understand the implications of Americans teaching English abroad we must take a historical approach.

Since the first encounter in 1492, indigenous people of Latin America have been oppressed by the violence of imperial rule. From the genocide of entire civilizations to the enslavement of thousands of native peoples, the Catholic Spanish monarchs justified by divine right to assert their power in the new world. Historian John Chasteen describes the crown's validation for expansion, claiming that, "The idea of spreading Christianity provided, above all, a compelling rationale for laying claim to huge chunks of the "undiscovered" world" (23). With the spread of Catholicism came the spread of the Spanish language, which resulted in the mass extinction of indigenous languages. As the Spanish imposed their culture by force and established their royal colonies, a new caste system arose subjugating the indigenous and mixed races from the land-owning creole elites. "For Latin America, conquest and colonialization by the Spanish and Portuguese created patterns of social domination that became eternal givens, like the deep and lasting makes of the Original Sin³" (Chasteen, 11).

² A term championed by research professor Robert Phillipson.

³ Adam and Eve committed the "Original Sin" in the Garden of Eden according to the Christian belief.

Now let us jump forward to Latin American independence from the colonizing peninsular powers. Not all Latin American countries gained independence at the same time or by the same means, however, they follow a similar pattern on the path to liberation from colonial rule. These post-colonial nations faced the challenge of breaking-free from economic dependency, establishing a new political structure, and the overwhelming task of catching up with the developed countries. According to Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist, revolutionary, and political analyst, when European nations and the United States achieved national unity, the middle class held the majority of the states' wealth. "Its coming to power enabled it to undertake certain very important speculations: industrialization, the development of communications, and soon the search for outlets overseas...there was no nation which by reason of the character of its development and evolution caused affront to the others" (Fanon, 96).

By contrast, the young underdeveloped Latin American nations had a disproportionate disbursement of wealth throughout the hierarchy of the caste system. The vision for the new republics entailed widespread transformation, however, presiding over countries wracked by war, they had neither the resources nor allies to realized it. The newly formed governments, starting from scratch, needed capital for restructuring. Thus, they turned to foreign investment from the United States and Europe for rebuilding the mining industry, industrialization, and transportation and communication infrastructure. They maintained the established import/export economy but their meager tariffs on exports were not sufficient to meet basic needs and often defaulted on their foreign loans. Following this liberal economic structure, the governments struggled to appease the populace and resulted in frequent political turnover. Thus, this "rapid fall of Latin America's first republican governments further undermined their legitimacy and set

a tragic precedent, as one constitutional president after another was overthrown militarily” (Chasteen, 122).

In 1898, the United States declared war on Spain to fight for control of the remaining Spanish colonies under the guise of liberating Cuba from the atrocities of Spanish rule. In fact, it was a strategic move to secure economic interests for the United States. This victory seized the islands of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines, and with the Platt Amendment of 1901, the United States solidified its military stronghold in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

That same year, on July 23, 1901, the U.S.S *Thomas* carried “a peaceful army of gentle pedagogues” from San Francisco to the Philippines. Aboard, teacher Adeline Knapp asserted:

“Our nation has found herself confronted with a great problem dealing with a people who neither know nor understand the underlining principles of our civilization, yet who, for our mutual happiness and liberty, must be brought into accord with us.”

For the United States, education became the ammunition to subdue its conquered populations. In *Innocence Abroad*, Professor of Education and History, and Peace Corps veteran, Jonathan Zimmerman, describes the legacy of American teachers abroad. He divides teachers into three categories; “colonials, volunteers and missionaries” (16). This first group, colonials, refers to those mentioned above. They taught in government schools in territories controlled by America’s empire, namely; Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam, America Samoa, the Virgin Islands and the Canal Zone and stayed out of annexed countries controlled by U.S. military occupation, such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. This set of teachers primarily went abroad in the first three decades of the twentieth century and faded out as the

Philippines won independence and the other islands shifted towards preferring locally born teachers.

The volunteer era of teaching began after World War II in association with U.S. agencies, especially the Peace Corps. At this same time, and as a result of international youth movements, other volunteer organizations were established as well (Zimmerman 16). I will discuss this breed of teacher more in depth later.

The third group, missionaries, spans both the colonial and volunteer eras of teaching abroad. Representing mainly Protestant or Catholic religious organizations, American missionaries are among the most criticized volunteers. In the 1960s, liberation theology⁴ in the Catholic church gained popularity and we see a large influx of young lay teachers as well as priest and nuns. Zimmerman notes that, “In 1967, a single lay group, Papal Volunteers for Latin America, boasted over 1,000 members” (17). American mission education is often criticized for its pursuit of widespread religious indoctrination where local beliefs and perspectives are already deeply rooted in the culture. Their undertaking is also often accompanied by a superior attitude. For example, with regard to English teaching, one missionary wrote in 1998, “The gift we offer by teaching English is thus in a very real sense a ministry of service that has powerful potential to help students in their communities meet their basic physical needs” (80).

To understand underdevelopment in Latin America it is important to acknowledge the inconvenient truths about the role of the United States in civil unrest. To understand the current economic situation, we must address the United States’ history of supporting Latin American

⁴ The term was coined in 1971 by the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, which proposed a new emphasis on social responsibility.

dictatorships which have undermined the power of the populace, murdered thousands, and sunk their countries into immense debt. El Salvador, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Panama, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia, Guatemala, The Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay are among the countries that have received U.S. financial and/or military aid to strike down the peoples' popular movements. CIA backed coups, rigged elections, and U.S. funded training of counter-insurgency, such as the Contras in Honduras and Nicaragua, are examples of the kind of intervention the U.S. has employed time and time again (Rosenfelder, 1996; Chomsky 35-50). Why has the United States done this? Former American diplomat, George Kennan, justifies these actions as "the protection of our raw materials" (Chomsky, 35). In a briefing for Latin American ambassadors in 1950, Kennan stated:

"The final answer might be an unpleasant one, but...we should not hesitate before police repression by the local government. This is not shameful since the Communists are essentially traitors... It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists" (Chomsky, 17).

Chomsky clarifies Kennan's definition of "Communist" as those who, "Are threatening to carry out independent social and economic and national development outside the framework of American Domination and control...what the term [communist] means in American political rhetoric is anyone who is concerned for the welfare of their own populations instead of our welfare" (37). Therefore, we see situations like the Carlos Castillo Armas dictatorship in Guatemala which was imposed in 1954 after the "Guatemalan Spring⁵." When the new reformist, Jacobo Árbenz assumed the presidency in 1951, his agrarian reforms included the expropriations

⁵ Also known as the Guatemalan revolution, it was the decade in between the popular uprising that overthrew dictator Jorge Ubico in 1944 and the United States-orchestrated coup d'état in 1954.

of large sums of land. These lands were primarily owned by the United Fruit Company for large banana plantations. As Árbenz continued to expropriate land and recourses to the Guatemalan government, accusations of communism spread through Washington. Due to the number of policy makers with interests in the United Fruit Company's banana empire, namely, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, CIA chief, Allen Dulles, intervention became a priority. And in 1959, the CIA covert Operation PBsucces effectively disposed Árbenz and installed the new military dictatorship (Chasteen 264-266). In the case of Cuba, Castro gained power, and gave it to the people, and the United States implemented its trade embargo essentially communicating, "Since you want independence, take it and starve" (Fanon, 97).

The Latin American armed forces were instrumental in the U.S. war on communism. American military aid and training programs, such as the School of the Americas⁶, helped form strong alliances that were solidified with President John F. Kennedy's call for the Alliance for Progress⁷ in 1961. That same year the Peace Corps was created and Zimmerman's second wave of teachers, volunteers, enter the scene. According to him, this new group would be the key to maintaining imperial rule. Zimmerman cites an observer in Puerto Rico, who wrote, "Effective colonization must come through the schools, even at great pecuniary cost. It is far cheaper than by means of military force" (187). During a protest at the agency's headquarters in 1970, a group of veteran Peace Corps volunteers remarked, "Once abroad, we discovered that we were part of the U.S. worldwide pacification program...to build an Empire for the U.S." (204). This sentiment is echoed throughout the decades as volunteers, English instructors in particular,

⁶ The school was founded in 1946 and from 1961 was assigned the specific goal of teaching "anti-communist counterinsurgency training," a role which it would maintain for the rest of the Cold War.

⁷ The Alliance for Progress was parallel to the policies presented by the Marshall Plan: "to reduce revolutionary pressures by stimulating economic development and political reform" (Chasteen, 287).

gradually became critically aware of their role abroad as neo-colonial tools of American Imperialism (205). Rudyard Kipling best summarizes this form of foreign policy in this excerpt from *Kitchener's School*:

“They terribly carpet the earth with dead, and before

their cannon cool

They walk unarmed by twos and threes to call the

Living to school” (Zimmerman, 181).

The 1980's in Latin America are referred to as the “Lost Decade” due to the immense foreign debts that had accrued drastically and suddenly as a result of the 1970's oil crisis in the Middle East. The crisis produced a worldwide recession due to high oil prices and many Latin American countries defaulted on their loans. The combined external debts of the region sky rocketed from \$105 billion (1976) to \$397 billion (1986) (Chasteen, 321). At this point the IMF⁸ stepped in and offered to “roll-over” the countries' debt if they accepted new neo-liberal⁹ policies that would require strict restructuring of loans and stipulations regarding the free-market. Trade agreements began to sprout up everywhere. In Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica there formed the Central American Common Market; in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, and Bolivia, The Andean Group; and in Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil began the Southern Cone Common Market otherwise known as MERCOSUR (Mar-Molinero, 200). However, probably the most infamous Latin American trade

⁸ International Monetary Fund

⁹ Neo-liberal economic policy “favors progress over tradition, reason over faith, universal over local values, and the free market over government control” (Chasteen, 6).

agreement is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Mexico, and Canada established in 1994. NAFTA was detrimental to the Mexican economy because among other things, it allowed the U.S. to outsource industry for cheap labor. Chomsky elaborates on this trade relationship stating;

“Ford sends something from Michigan to its northern Mexico assembly plants and then returns it to Michigan, because that way they make bigger profits. And they call that “export to Mexico” and “imports to the United States.” Well, this makes up close to half of our “trade.” So, when NAFTA was signed, more than half of U.S. “exports never entered the Mexican Market” (Chomsky, 90).

This trade deal has made Mexico subservient to the United States in not only economic terms but social as well. It has had an enormous effect on Mexican society and culture together with an increased need to learn English.

In my interviews with students in Guatemala, I ask what motivated them to learn English, and as if they were reading from a script, they reiterated the same five answers. The most common answer among students was that English is a requirement in schools, which local teachers and the Guatemalan Ministry of Education’s website confirmed. In fact, it is a requirement at all levels of education and is the official third language (L3) of Guatemala (MINEDUC, 2016).

Another common answer was related to migration. Many students said they either wanted to travel to, or live and work in the United States. For these children, this seemed like the answer

to their socio-economic problems, and with a better understanding of our shared history, it is no wonder why they believe in the Utopia that is the “American way of life.”

Another shared motivator was the pressure to learn English to accommodate for American tourists within their own country. They said that tourism is growing fast and to work in the service industry you must know English. The dollar goes a long way in Guatemala, meaning, we can travel at little cost and experience a new culture which seems like a great thing, right? I thought it was until I interviewed a mother in Santo Tomás Milpas Altas, who expressed her frustration with the constant presence of American. She said, “A lot of tourist come. Many foreigners that come from the United States and they want to ask someone something to know where some place is. But since I don’t understand English, I feel illiterate compared to them. Inferior¹⁰.” As Americans, we go down with our comparative advantage of wealth and we commodify a culture with our so-called appreciation for its music, its art, its landscape, its food and we turn our head at child in the street trying to sell us gum because, in reality, we don’t appreciate or understand the circumstances that brought about this encounter. We don’t acknowledge that that child begs, using the minimal English he knows, because of the economic situation in Guatemala has force a large portion of the population to work in the informal economy. And if you live within the informal sector of a tourist economy, learning English is a matter of survival.

Another driving factor in for students was their interest in American music, movie, and pop-culture. One girl told me she wanted to learn English to understand One Direction lyrics. Their culture is becoming increasingly homogenized with that of the U.S. and this is the case

¹⁰ Watch the full documentary American Linguistic Imperialism in Latin America at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqJfFx0non0&t=3s>>.

throughout Latin America. And so it is, that the Chilean or Mexican who cannot afford a car will still live immersed in, “Western consumer culture and, night after night, watch bright television commercials tailored to those able to emulate the life-style of the U.S. middle class. It is for this reason, and not just because of proximity and poverty, that so many Latin Americans come to the United States” (Chasteen 2).

Zimmerman’s book was accurately titled *Innocents Abroad* because many volunteers do not realize the implications of this American neo-imperialistic practice. As I spoke with English teaching volunteers to understand what motivated them to teach abroad, I realized they echoed Zimmerman’s subjects. None of them had formal educational training, nor did not want to presume teaching as a career, but rather, they thought it would be a good experience to travel and learn about a new culture. Teaching was more of an afterthought. A means to justify traveling abroad. One interviewee said that, “after seeing the plight of the people...I decided I wanted to dedicate my life to helping others.” This same man only taught for a week in the pueblo we were in. This altruistic rhetoric was present in all the volunteers’ testimonies; however, it fails to acknowledge the deeper issues within these Latin American nations. Zimmerman ascertains, citing William Appleman Williams, that this attitude implies, “that ‘other people cannot really solve their problems and improve their lives unless they go about it in the same way as the United States’” (6).

Now, before I finished out my final arguments in my critique of a common practice among American youth, I have a confession to make; I was a volunteer English teacher in Mexico in 2015. This project began abroad when a local friend of my criticized my work as being neo-imperialistic. I was surprised by this accusation and made it my goal to prove him wrong. However, as I started to dig, I realized I could not produce a convincing argument. To

continue this research, I traveled around Guatemala and Costa Rica, sometimes as a volunteer but mostly as an observer. Being in that position allowed me to form a relationship with the students and teachers before interviewing them and provoked a new sense of self-awareness. Through research I realized that this practice presents its volunteers as U.S. pseudo-ambassadors. We are, as the 1970's Peace Corps vets claimed, "part of the U.S. worldwide pacification program," which softens the blow of our economic and military domination, furthering the capitalist agenda. This promotes the acceptance of "America as Champion" by both sides of this "colonizer-colonized" dichotomy.

The volunteer attitude that I previously discussed was one of the harder personal truths I had to face and one that many volunteers are not admitting. I was already abroad when I started to teach, and like some that I interviewed, it was an afterthought. The truth is, I jumped at the opportunity when it was presented not because I really wanted to teacher or give back or "save the world one child at a time," but because I knew it would look good on my college resume and it would help me with my Spanish (it also helped that I love children). When we do this we are often not conscious of cultural sensitivity, effective teaching practices, or how our culture and world views can be transmitted through our language as they are embedded in it. It's even hard to recognize our very presence as having an impact on a community. Volunteer teachers are often young, white, privileged, middle-class people meaning we stick out with our name brands and we come here to work for free for weeks or months at a time, a luxury many Latin Americans could not afford meaning we must be financially successful, to teach the language that they have been told will better their lives. This tends to have negative effects on the students' view of their own language and culture, which I observed throughout my research. When asked about how they personally value English compared to Spanish all the students said

they were equal. When I asked how they value their indigenous languages they all said that it wasn't as important and some said they don't even like it. If this attitude persists, a future of flourishing indigenous languages seems unlikely.

Conclusion

To make an accurate critique on American linguistic imperialism we must first understand that the need to learn English is born out of socioeconomic circumstances which derive from American capitalism and foreign policy. As volunteers, we cannot be naïve in thinking that these issues are the fault of the Latin American people. It is important to be aware that the very problems we are seeking to mend are byproducts of our privilege and social status, which in turn allows us to be there. Going forward, we must be more aware of the implications of our practices abroad, but first and foremost, we must focus our attention on the issues in our own country that perpetuate these cycles of injustice.

Throughout my research, I have come closer to understanding the characteristics and effects of colonization on the mind and continue to contemplate whether awareness of this colonizer versus colonized dichotomy can help create a relationship that is complementary to the existing languages and cultures.

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