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Teaching language for possibility, not assimilation: Using bell hooks in the English as a second language classroom

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Teaching language for possibility, not assimilation: Using bell hooks in the English as a second language classroom

Inspired by hooks' (1994) seminal work, *Teaching to Transgress*, we examine one educator's (Laura E.) enactment of this liberatory practice in her role as the director of an English as a Second Language (ESOL) program. We deploy hooks' thoughts to rethink the ESOL classroom in terms of possibilities rather than the creation and control of assimilated gendered citizens.

Our case studies come from one ESOL program run by Catholic charities in Gaithersburg, Maryland. The program serves adult learners, most of whom are from Spanish-speaking countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. While learning English offers new possibilities for communication, we also recognize its use in the control of minoritized populations. Given the Catholic Church's religious coloniality and historic role as an agent of colonization, and how assimilation in the United States (U.S.) often looks like shedding cultural connections to one's home country to internalize American culture, the English language has been weaponized to oppress and become what hooks (1994) refers to as the "oppressor's language" (p. 170).

For students in Laura E.'s classroom, resistance to learning English as assimilation can constitute a meaningful refusal to abandon their language and culture for the sake of "becoming American." In this way, marginalized populations in the U.S. are able to "speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination" by ensuring that language is a tool to communicate rather than subjugate (hooks, 1994, p. 170).

As a Mexican immigrant who first encountered hooks' work during her master's program, Laura E. adapted hooks' approaches—such as multiculturalism and critiques of gender dynamics—in her ESOL classroom. The following case studies report in-situ results of her pedagogical work, and the transformative effects of hooks' theory in terms of rethinking the ESOL classroom.

Decolonizing the Calendar

Among the first lessons in the ESOL program is identifying dates to learn important calendar days and highlight that some offices are closed during specific federal holidays. Despite its practical applications, Laura E. realized that as currently structured, its learning objectives standardized a version of U.S. belonging that centralized a limited representation of citizenship. bell hooks' pedagogical theory provided a way forward, changing the lesson to: 1) encourage learners to bring their own national holidays into the lesson to use English to speak about their own cultures, and 2) begin questioning representation in current U.S. holidays.

Laura E. had learners share the important holidays in their home countries. Learners were eager to practice their English by sharing their own celebrations and traditions. For instance, her Venezuelan students discussed the November festival celebrating the Virgin of the Chiquinquirá, Catholic patron of Venezuela; her Nicaraguan students shared how Nicaraguan Independence

day in September all but shuts down the country in celebration; and her Ecuadorian students described the festivities of carnival a week before Easter. hooks (1994) encourages such democratic strategies when she writes, “making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy” (p. 39). Laura E.’s revision decoupled English from U.S. nationalist belonging by allowing students to present their homes intimately to each other through a shared language.

In her most recent iteration of this lesson, Laura E. used February 2nd (Groundhog Day) to open a conversation with students about representation while watching coverage of the Groundhog Day event together. She asked her students questions about what it meant to see only white men represented in the media surrounding the event and what messages it sent both about the history of this country and whose history is included. Encouraging such critical discussion ensured that: 1) learning English meant being able to offer a different voice and perspective to ongoing conversations and 2) students recognized that U.S. history isn’t just white and male, opening a way for her students to participate in its making. Critical discussion in ESOL classrooms regarding the purpose and use of English as well as ensuring that learning English isn’t a way to replace or primitivize students’ home language and cultures expands hooks theorizing and continues to answer her call to explore classrooms as places of possibility, resistance, and liberation, rather than control, domination, and restriction.

Emancipating Employment

Other lessons in the ESOL program cover jobs and employment vocabulary such as gardener, painter, housekeeper, secretary, etc. The current textbook makes an attempt to illustrate a diverse group of people participating in different types of jobs; yet the images largely continue to reinforce traditional gendered labor. As Laura E. reflected, “Because learners tend to gravitate towards employment opportunities where they see themselves represented, the lesson needed to be modified to include images that were more inclusive and challenged traditional gendered and racialized roles.”

hooks (1994) reflects that minoritized and “underclass” (p. 100) individuals are “bound” (p. 100) to a certain kind of labor such as housework, field labor, or low level positions due to transnational racist and patriarchal discourses that restrict that non-white, non-English speaking individuals to occupations “forced by economic circumstance” (p. 100). For hooks, the classroom offers an opportunity to break those binds by allowing students the space to explore possibilities. Through her experience, Laura E. found:

Most learners work in entry-level positions and don’t see the possibility to move beyond their current situation. They are mainly concerned with making money and surviving day by day. I began to incorporate the language of possibility in our discussion. When the class talked about specific days of the week and time, I ensured we talked about the possibility of them working in an office answering phones and making appointments for people who would call. I did not distinguish gender roles. Asking the learners about their current job allowed me to customize some lessons to push them to think for the future.

Many of the women in my classroom come from countries where gender roles are highly enforced and when they arrive in the U.S., they are very surprised. They bring this surprise to the classroom where we process together and expand their conceptions of possibilities for job opportunities. One Salvadorian student was surprised to see women as flaggers and operating heavy machinery on the roads during construction. She had never conceived that she could have that career path and was inspired to talk about her new opportunities.

Laura E.'s intentional and progressive introduction to career possibilities expands hooks to liberate us from transnational assumptions of traditional gender occupations.

Concluding Thoughts

Although hooks' theoretical interventions into pedagogy are not traditionally used in the context of ESOL courses, Laura E. extends hooks' call for transformative education into the ESOL classroom. Inspired by hooks' feminist pedagogy, Laura E.'s curriculum changes that decouple language from nationalism and gender confront assimilationist lessons that would create and control certain types of citizens. She transforms her classroom into a place of possibility that encourages experiential learning and values multiculturalism while also emphasizing language as a tool for connectivity. Following hooks, we encourage more ESOL instructors to adopt this transformative, engaged pedagogy.

References:

hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.