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Creating Authentic Contexts for Transnational Language Learning and Teaching in TESOL Teacher Education: Online ELT for Kenyan Youth

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Sarina Chugani Molina, University of San Diego, 5998 Alcala Park, San Diego, CA 92110, (619) 260-4685, sarina@sandiego.edu

Bio: Sarina Chugani Molina serves as an Associate Professor and Director of the MEd in TESOL, Literacy, & Culture program at the University of San Diego. She has taught English to students both locally and internationally for over 20 years and trains teacher candidates and teachers both within the United States and abroad. Her research interests include teaching English as an international and transnational language, supporting the needs of marginalized students in academic communities, and TESOL teacher development, particularly as it relates to developing mindful, reflective practitioners and researchers from a constructive developmental perspective.

Abstract

Creating authentic contexts for our teacher candidates to learn about ELT in transnational contexts has become increasingly important for the depth of learning it affords as boundaries begin to blur in this transnational world. In this chapter, I present our work in developing and teaching an online Business English program for Kenyan youth, who were part of a non-profit organization with a mission to help homeless youth escape poverty through the provision of professional development opportunities. Through the process of engaging in this transnational context, our teacher candidates became more cognizant of the conceptual understanding of the historical, political, economic and social influences impacting the process of language teaching and learning within this context. Preparing English teachers to teach in this transnational context allowed for critical conversations around power, language hierarchies, ownership of English, and post-methods and post-structural perspectives on language teaching. It also provided a space for our teacher candidates to continually examine and negotiate their positionality as English teachers within this transnational context.

Introduction

As a teacher educator, I have long been interested in looking for ways in which to provide educational opportunities for students, particularly for those who are unable to receive education due to a variety of political, economic, social and contextual factors. As a faculty member of a University dedicated to the values of equity and social justice, I looked for ways in which to embed these important principles into our TESOL teacher education program. It also became important for us to create authentic contexts for our teacher-candidates to prepare them for the kind of work they will be doing in this transnational world. Our cohorts generally comprise of domestic and international students working in diverse contexts within the San Diego area serving international, migrant, refugee, and immigrant student populations. Though we have instituted partnerships with institutions that provide opportunities for them to engage in fieldwork experiences with mentor teachers both locally and internationally during their program of study, I wanted to create an opportunity for our teacher candidates to engage in transnational language teaching with deliberate supports in place to theorize about transnationalism and translingual practice in this post-method, post-structural era, and understand ways in which English language teaching is situated within an ecological context comprising of complex historical, political, economic, institutional, and social influences that impact language teaching and learning practices (Molina, 2017).

In this chapter, I share our work with Kito International, a non-profit organization in Nairobi, Kenya. This project was a two-year initiative with the intention of training the staff members, working with them on training their youth, and then handing over the curriculum for use with subsequent cohorts as a way in which to empower the local trainers to then take on the leadership around this work. Through this project, our teaching team attempted to take into careful consideration the importance of viewing English language teaching and learning from local, global,

and transnational perspectives, which is an epistemic shift from the traditional national and colonial approaches (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). As such the following inquiry guided this study.

Guiding Question

What are some lessons learned for TESOL teacher candidates from engaging in English language teaching with Kenyan youth within this transnational context?

Transnational Context

This study took place in a collaborative partnership between teacher candidates in a TESOL program, the researcher who is also a faculty member within the TESOL program, and Kito International, a non-profit organization in Nairobi, Kenya. The mission of this organization is to provide professional development opportunities and skills for homeless youth to successfully transition into society as a means out of poverty. This organization responds to the needs of the urban youth in Nairobi, Kenya where many are considered "at risk" according to *The Strategy Paper on Urban Youth in Africa* developed in collaboration with UN-Habitat's Safer Cities Program and Partnership for Africa's Development.

In collaboration with the founder, his staff at Kito International, and our teacher candiates, we developed an online business English program to support their entrepreneurial goals. We first piloted this project with four of Kito's staff members before I paired the Kito staff members with our TESOL graduate students into collaborative teaching teams for deploying this online program for their youth.

Because we were developing the program as we were simultaneously trying to understand the needs of the learners enrolled in the program, I instituted Dialogical Learning Spaces (Molina, 2015), which were weekly teaching-team meetings where I could mediate teacher-candidate learning (Johnson & Golombek, 2016) as we studied the history and contemporary use of the English language in Kenya, brainstormed lesson plan ideas, pre-screened and uploaded lessons, reviewed

student submissions, provided feedback, while having conversations around our positionality and assumptions about language learning and teaching, particularly within this transnational context.

Teaching Team

It is important here to provide my positionality within this context. I am an Indian national, born and raised in Japan. I attended an American International School, where I was exposed to multiple varieties of English spoken by our teachers and peers. At home, my parents spoke our native tongue, Sindhi (a region in what is now Pakistan), Hindi, and Indian English learned when they relocated to mainland India after the war. India was under the colonial rule of Britain from 1858 to 1947. In Japan, my father learned Japanese to engage in business transactions and my mother learned Japanese for day-to-day communication. As third culture children, we quickly learned to engage in what Canagarajah (2013) terms "translingual practice" within our own speech communities. I have now been in the United States for close to 25 years and find that I am continuing to de-construct, construct and negotiate my identity and liminal cultural and linguistic space as an English teacher and teacher educator.

The teaching team consisted of six, female American English speaking teacher candidates, between the ages of 24 and 32. These teaching team meetings also served as Dialogical Learning Spaces, which provided a space to mediate teacher learning by working through questions, concerns, issues, and challenges surrounding pedagogical practice within this context (See Molina, 2015). There were eight weekly lessons in total delivered over a 14 to 16-week period. I served as a consultant to this project and supported their learning process through weekly meetings that served as a space for us to engage in dialogizing about teaching practice within this particular transnational teaching context.

In light of the literature, we focused our conversations around teaching practice in this context and developing a deep understanding of the needs and goals of our Kenyan students, as well as the

historical, political, and socio-cultural dimensions that have influenced the status of English in Kenya. A total of 21 Kenyan students (ten males and 12 females) participated in this study. The Kenyan youth ranged in age from 18 to 25 years of age.

Opportunities for Teacher Learning within this Transnational Context

We met weekly as a teaching team from one to three hours to work on the technical aspects of teaching such as lesson development, online lesson delivery, and assessment, but also the challenges we encountered while engaged in the process of teaching and learning with our Kenyan students. In designing these Dialogical Learning Spaces (DLS), I sought to understand how to craft critical discourse within these spaces where we could engage in a multidirectional negotiation process of reflection and inquiry in order to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges, concepts, or ideas under exploration (Molina, 2015). This opportunity and dialogical learning allowed our teachers to become central to the meaning-making process as they refined and reshaped their own theories in practice. Crookes (2013) defines critical language teaching as one that "does not take for granted the status quo, but subjects it to critique, creates alternative forms of practice, and does so on the basis of radical theories of language, the individual, and society that take seriously our hopes in the direction of liberty, equality, and justice for all" (p. 1). In this way, we explored principles of criticality in language teaching where we reflected on our positionality within this setting as English teachers, and analyzed the power and hierarchies inherent within varieties of English. We also sought to understand the conditions of the youth within this organization and how we can empower them through use of language to support them in meeting their entrepreneurial goals with an end-goal of social transformation. These discussions allowed us to probe further and negotiate meaning, which served as a form of mediation where the graduate students serving as teachers, had an opportunity to ask for example, a question related to whether or not a particular form of feedback was appropriate in this transnational context. We relied heavily on

our Kenyan students and research articles as our primary experts in scaffolding our learning process in this unique transnational context. As we deployed the business English program through extensive research on best practices for teaching online and through assessing and addressing the needs of the students enrolled in the program, it became clear that we were met with some challenges and utilized the DLS as a space to understand these challenges.

In the following section, I present some of these learning opportunities we encountered, our learning from each other, our students, and further research that could shed light on the complexities of teaching within this context.

Developing Curriculum to Address Student Needs

One of the learning experiences for our graduate students was the development of a curriculum based on institutional and student needs and goals. Many of the students were planning to pursue entrepreneurial goals within Kenya. Their goals ranged from improving English language skills to pursue higher education, enhance their business skills ("market Eco Safi products to increase sales"), start their own businesses ("start a choreography school focused on acrobatics, dancing, and youth"), and empower members of their communities ("I want to empower at least 100 youth in 2 years."). Additionally, some of them wished to work for multinational corporations and organizations such as the United Nations, World Vision, USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development), and Amref Health Africa (International African health organization headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya). We developed synchronous and asynchronous curriculum around writing professional emails, responding to job postings, working on interviewing skills, and making a sales pitch while integrating the four language skills areas that we identified in the initial written and spoken needs assessments conducted.

Though the Business English curriculum might resemble similar curriculum taught in any country on the topic of "Business English," we found that there were many questions about the

particularities of the linguistic and cultural nuances that were important to consider in light of the student goals. For instance, if our students wanted to work for a local company in Kenya, we found that it would be important for our student to be able to communicate and write in a way that was appropriate within that context without imposing American English stylist elements we might use in the U.S. context.

Likewise, we felt as though we erred in providing them a sales pitch video by Steve Jobs pitching the iPhone. This is because the language Steve Jobs used appeared to work within a particular context, which may not have been the style of pitching a product within local companies. We believe it would be important to find mentor videos and mentor texts that most resemble the expectations of such interactions within their context or the context in which they wish to engage in business exchanges. Alternatively, introducing them to a variety of norms for business practices in global contexts we found might help them to better navigate business opportunities both locally and globally. In other words, we believed that the exposure to a variety of ways in which business is conducted in transnational contexts could empowered our students to select those that best helps them to share their voices in their particular local context or future global context. This essentially shifts the focus of English language teaching from approximating a native English speaker model to one that empowers the English speaker in these diverse, international contexts. Ideally, being able to simultaneously engage in the teaching and learning on both levels, what Canagarajah (2006) terms "multidialectal competence" I found became increasingly important within this context.

Another complexity that our teachers struggled with was the diversity of student proficiency levels. In this particular context, the diversity of proficiency levels was further complicated because our students had varying levels of proficiency in their own native tongue, the Kenyan English variety and British English. This often made our teachers wonder during our teaching team meetings if the features they identified were the norms for the Kenyan variety they spoke, or a result of their native

language or their individual developing English language system. During the course of this study, there was a constant interplay between the teachers' understanding of American English and their inquiry about British English and Kenyan English usage and norms.

In addition, our students had variation in strength, where most were stronger in writing than speaking. In our research, we found that in Kenya "…an examination-oriented educational system leads to instructional pressure and literacy focused learning of English leaving little space for creative and innovative communicative language learning opportunities" (Dhillon & Wanjiru, 2013, p. 22). Within these circumstances, our teachers needed to negotiate how they could meet both the larger institutional, economic, political goals as well as support the students' individual goals. Kumaravadivelu's (2008) affirms this that when working within transnational context, we need to be:

> sensitive to the societal, political, economic, and educational environment in which L2 education takes place…L2 education is not a discrete activity; it is deeply embedded in the larger social context that has a profound effect on it. The social context shapes various learning and teaching issues such as (a) the motivation for L2 learning, (b) the goal of L2 learning, (c) the functions L2 is expected to perform at home and in the community, (d) the availability of input to the learner, (e) the variation in the input, (f) and the norms of proficiency acceptable to that particular speech community (p. 207).

These notions framed how we approached our work from the research literature we referenced and the identification of needs and goals of our Kenyan students, which informed our curriculum.

Negotiating Understanding through Translingual Practice

As we were teaching within this context, we were concerned about of the possibility of having the dominant ideologies re-socialize us into "monolingual practices and colonizing relationships" (Canagarajah, 2013). As such, we found it important to use our students as cultural and linguistic informants as we approached the inherent tension that characterized our work. Motha (2014) recognizes that

> The teaching of English is frequently represented as a neutral enterprise or even a benevolent one, one that promotes equity and access, arming learning with skills that allow them to escape poverty, to deploy identities of privilege and power, to move ahead socially. These representations bear truth, and the proliferation of English does indeed open doors

> and further futures. It is undeniable that around the world, English and opportunity walk hand in hand. However, I have begun to see that as English is spread, it carries other effects. It reinforces colonial divisions of power and racial inequalities. As English is increasingly commodified, racialized, and globalized, it is implicated in the persistence of racial inequalities, in cultural and economic domination, in heritage loss, in the extinction of less-commonly–spoken-languages and their inherent epistemologies, and in inequitable distribution of global wealth and resources (p. xxi).

This critical lens guided our approach though we are unsure that we were able to circumvent these larger concerns.

All of the Kenyan students in this study reported that they were bilingual in Kiswahili and the local Kenyan English variety. According to Muriungi (2013), English and Kiswahili are the two official languages spoken in Kenya. English serves sociolinguistic functions such as instrumental (e.g. national exam), interpersonal (e.g. common language of communication), regulative (e.g. law) and creative functions (e.g. literature) (Michieka, 2005, pp. 180-183). It is also associated with high status jobs, the government, "significant factor in academic achievement" and "social mobility" (Dhillon and Wanjiru, 2013, p. 14). Kiswahili is used for social interactions within towns, trade between towns and some local jobs. Their native languages differed and included the following languages: Kecrew, Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Dholuo and Nubian. Budohoska (2011) asserts that these languages link them to their family values, ethnic identities, and their rural homeland. As such, we attempted to approach teaching in this transnational context by adjusting our methods of teaching English to be in line with the changing patterns of English use within the local context (Jenkins, 2000).

Challenges of Assessment in Transnational Contexts

Document analysis (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to analyze teacher feedback on student written assignments and synchronous and asynchronous video data documenting teacher feedback to students on spoken assignments. The written feedback data provided by the teachers on the students' assignments were available through the Edmodo platform.

Spoken assignments were recorded on YouTube and Skype recording software and were transcribed and housed on Google Drive. A total of 63 written assignments and 28 spoken assignments with feedback were collected for analysis. There were 31 instances of feedback data analyzed from the asynchronous (rehearsed) and synchronous (unrehearsed) spoken assignments. These data sets with the feedback and the context in which this feedback occurred were extrapolated for analysis and the following themes were generated (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Labuschange, 2003). Feedback data fell into five categories: 1) comments on quality of work (e.g. "Good job!"), 2) request for clarification/extension of ideas, 3) comments on grammatical features (e.g. subject and article omission, pronoun usage, verb tense), 4) comments on mechanical features (e.g. punctuation, capitalization, spelling), and 5) comments on pragmatic or stylistic features (e.g. format, phrasing). In addition to the categories described above, the spoken data also included feedback on the phonological features of student oral language. Jenkins (2000) states, "There is really no justification for doggedly persisting in referring to an item as 'an error' if the vast majority of the world's L2 English speakers produce and understand it" (p.160). These "errors" often fall under the grammatical and mechanical categories such as dropping the third person plural "s" or omitting articles (See Molina, 2015a; 2016).

As we began to assess and address the needs of the students enrolled in the program, it became clear that the graduate students who served as teachers were met with some level of cognitive dissonance as they began to confront the notion of providing feedback or what they considered to be "errors" within this transnational context. For example, in writing the business letter, the Kenyan students dated their letters following the British English format where the date precedes the month, which is then followed by the year. One of the graduate student teachers provided feedback where she stated that they should reverse the date notation to month followed by the date and then the year to which the Kenyan student responded through the chat box in

Edmodo, "This is how we write dates in Kenya." In another example, most of the graduate students indicated that their students misspelled the word "learned," which they spelled with a "t" as in "learnt." These examples were highlighted during the teaching team meetings to illustrate the paradigm shift within the transnational framework. There were several features that the teacher addressed in this passage including capitalization, subject omission, sentence boundaries, spelling, and the stylistic elements of writing. In the teaching team meetings, we learned that these features have been addressed in the literature as features that characterize English in Lingua Franca communications. These "errors" were reviewed during the weekly teaching team meetings, where the graduate student teachers began to think more deeply about their students' linguistic backgrounds and goals, while reflecting on their own English frame of reference. Hee-Seung & Dykema (2017) make an important observation on the limitation of previous studies on feedback practice which they believe lack a deeper understanding of how power and identity are negotiated through the process of feedback. Through these interactions with our Kenyan students, it became important for our teachers to know how this approach frames our students not as passive recipients of the feedback, but as active agents in the negotiation process of power and identity.

After our teaching team meeting where we discussed the history of English in Kenya, my graduate students began to question their previous assumptions surrounding feedback and became more aware of their feedback. Davies, Hamp-Lyons, & Kemp (2003) believe that assessment should be based on the Standard English variety, whereas proponents of World Englishes (Lowenberg, 2012) believe that the diversification of English can no longer be ignored in attempting to assess English language proficiency. Hu (2012) also criticizes traditional forms of assessment that do not consider the changing uses of English in transnational contexts. We understood these challenges to assessment practices and philosophically aligned with Canagarajah's (2006) vision for assessment whereby, he states that students should not be assessed from any particular variety of English, but

instead that assessment should focus on "strategies of negotiation, situated performance, communicative repertoire, and language awareness" (p. 230); however, it became challenging to consider these facets of assessments as these ideas did not appear to have been filtered into assessment practices in the field as yet. The teachers began to question themselves in what they indicated as errors until they checked in with the group. For example, one graduate student said, "I don't know anymore. I'm not sure if what I see as an error is really an error." We learned that the assessment of productive skills (oral and written) is challenging when considered from the perspective of World Englishes in post-colonial countries in particular (e.g. syntactic simplification of West African English; pragmatics; spelling – colours, learnt, tyre*).

We then surveyed the literature on Kenyan English and learned that given the diverse linguistic context in Kenya, it is likely that the English variety may have developed some characteristic features of its own (Budohoska, 2012, p. 46). In other words, the English variety spoken in Kenya has renationalized (Sharifian & Jamarani, 2013) and evolved through the interactions within this multilingual community. For example, Mwayngi (2004) compared the use of prepositions comparing prepositional usage in British English and Kenyan English through the International Corpus of English (ICE) and concludes that Kenyan English has gone through a form of syntactic simplification where closely related prepositions are "ironed out" and those with more general meanings are more commonly used, with less synonymous prepositions. This nativized English spoken in Kenya may include some language mixing, code switching and use of emerging vernaculars, which adds to the diversity of Kenyan English, but could also add to the complexity of teaching English to Kenyans. Some of the features identified as errors in the teacher feedback to their Kenyan students such as the omission of articles and prepositions and misuse of prepositions, appears to be the acceptable in the nativized variety of Kenyan English.

In addition to features unique to the nativized Kenyan English variety, there are also

pragmatic (Firth, 1996; Meierkord, 2000), grammatical (Seidlhofer, 2004), and phonological features (Jenkins, 2000) that are unique to Lingual Franca communications. Jenkins (2000) redefines the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) in EIL contexts with "greater individual freedom…by providing speakers with the scope both to express their own identities and to accommodate to their receivers (p. 158). She lists areas in Lingua Franca contexts that can be considered errors such as consonants, phonetic requirements such as aspirations, consonant clusters, vowel sounds, and nuclear stress. She does discuss some provisions such as the use of /θ/ and /ð/ as permissible. Given that these are considered the norms in Lingua Franca Contexts and were often considered errors in this transnational context of English language teaching, it brings to the forefront again the question of "Which English or Englishes?" should be the framework for teaching and assessment.

The teachers, themselves, had a diversity of linguistic exposure to different English varieties, and depending on their experience, their feedback was influenced or nuanced in approach. In our teaching team meetings, we employed multiple lenses in our attempts to provide feedback to our Kenyan students, but our lack of knowledge of Kenyan English, their local languages, and the British variety often made the teachers revert back to what they know and their own variety of English, though tremendous efforts were made in our attempts to exhibit caution in our feedback by considering these complex layers embedded within this language teaching and learning context.

Discussion & Conclusion

Our ELT experience with Kenyan youth opened up our conceptual understanding of what it means to teach within transnational contexts. We began to question the limitations of considering our work as international, rather we recognized that within national political, economic and social histories, we can no longer see our work as between nations, but beyond nations and boundaries – that our work is in essence, *transnational* (Canagarajah, 2018, p. 42). Even in this postcolonial era, where we consider English as an international language, we were cognizant of the complex political

history of the English language which includes ideological questions around the role of linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999) and linguicide (Hassanpour, 2000; Van Dijk, 2000) and racialized practices that undergird the hierarchical power (native/non-native; standard/non-standard). The imposition of the Western education system on the culture and heritage of its people (Canagarajah, 2003; Crookes, 2007) around the world has alerted us to how history can shape individuals' attitudes toward learning the English language. We had to also shift away from our traditional methods of teaching and learning, and construct our practices within our transnational context where my teacher candidates felt empowered to theorize about teaching practice through understanding the needs of our Kenyan students that continually manifested within this unique online ELT teaching context. We honored their unique translingual practice, where we recognized that historically as their languages came in contact with others, they created their own variety of language that were "appropriated by [them] and used beyond their separate labels as suits their purposes" (p. 42-43). Through our DLS, we confronted these challenges, which were often uncomfortable because it demanded a sense of honesty, integrity, and authenticity in our experiences as we recognized those of our students. We attempted to learn as we engaged within this complex transnational context by continually reflecting on our positionality, construction of self and identity as language teachers and our pedagogical practice (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). It became clear that this positioning of teaching of English within this transnational context entailed a certain demand for our teachers to have a sense of critical consciousness informed by "socio-culturally sensitive pedagogical practice" (Alsagoff, McKay, Hu & Renandya, 2012).

English language teaching in transnational contexts may be an important consideration for teacher education in TESOL. As English language teaching is continuing to transcend boundaries of English varieties, it opens up many opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in deep learning about the role of English and reflection on their own evolving identities as English teachers.

Kilickaya (2009) suggests that if the goal is to promote intercultural communication, the focus should be on developing awareness of the many varieties of English and the various communication strategies that can be used to enhance intelligibility. Ideally, being able to simultaneously engage in the teaching and learning process on both levels may be an important goal. However, in terms of pedagogical practice, the questions about which English to use, what materials and methods to use for instruction and what assessment measures to utilize continue to be important areas to examine in such contexts.

While engaging in this project my graduate students felt that this experience was meaningful in that it provided them an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills to support and reach out to students in need in another country made possible through the use of mobile technology. However, this study brought to light the various challenges that are inherent in teaching in transnational contexts. Though the graduate students serving as teachers in this study became more cognizant of the conceptual understandings of teaching in this transnational context, the questions around permissibility and intelligibility remained to be a challenge. Canagarajah's (2007) statement about the redefinition of language acquisition appears to apply to this teaching context where "previously dominant constructs such as form, cognition, and the individual are not ignored; they get redefined as hybrid, fluid, and situated in a more socially embedded, ecologically sensitive, and interactionally open model" (p. 923).

As a teacher educator hoping to provide optimal learning experiences for my graduate students through participating in this project, it became clear that navigating their learning was indeed a complex and challenging task as I, myself, was learning alongside them. My graduate students and I began to truly value the teaching team meetings and learned the importance of creating learning communities centered on improving instructional practice to best meet the needs of our students while at the same time designing an online teaching learning and teaching platform

that best approximates face-to-face interaction.

For teachers teaching within these transnational contexts, it might be important for them to develop the kind of "multidialectal competence" (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 233) or "meta-cultural competence" (Sharifian, 2009), which are essentially strategies used by English speakers in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts to negotiate meaning (Sharifian & Jamarani, 2013). Sharifian (2009) believes that it is important for English learners to develop "meta-cultural competence," that is "a competence that enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate their cultural conceptualizations during the process of intercultural communication" (p. 9). Not only do we find that these competencies are important for our students, but these may be necessary dispositional skills to nurture within teacher education programs for our teacher candidates who are intending to work in transnational contexts. This transnational language teaching experience afforded us the opportunity to take one step towards understanding what it might look like for our teachers to possess "meta-dialectal," "meta-cultural" and "translingual" competencies from a critical framework, however, future studies that address ways in which teacher educators can nurture and develop these competencies in our teacher candidates may help to shed further light on this important area for teacher development, particularly within transnational contexts.

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