

## **Learning English Is No Neutral Choice: Contributions of Critical Perspectives to Classroom EFL in Mexico<sup>5</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The paper explores three naturalized discourses in EFL teaching in Mexico that many teachers and learners convey: 1) the undisputed truth value of the textbook; 2) the belief that students' individual efforts can lead them to become fluent speakers; and 3) the assumption that English language learning stems from a purely individual choice. From a critical perspective, the author explores Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia to make the point that textbooks should be more inclusive of more linguistic and cultural varieties, given the fact that English is now a global language. Bourdieu's notion of legitimate speaker and symbolic capital are also discussed, now that English language learning occupies such an important role in Mexican discourses of education and that learners, convinced that EFL will provide many opportunities, are often left with less than what they invested in.

### **Introduction**

Every semester at a public university in northwestern Mexico, hundreds of people line up outside of the gates of the school waiting for their "ficha" to enroll in a semester-long English course. Some show up with a rolled-up blanket under their arm and dark circles under their eyes. "Aquí estoy desde anoche para agarrar una ficha," say the students to each other. Those who arrive late run the risk of not being able to enroll and have to wait another semester. Teachers and office staff walk by, freshly showered with a coffee in their hands, to help with the enrollment process which will last all day and the rest of the week. It's just another semester with the ever growing amount of people waiting to enroll in English courses.

The semester starts and beginning level classes typically have over forty students enrolled. Students from all over the city enroll: men, women, high school students, college students, housewives, retirees, business men, university professors. Each of these individuals comes with their own expectations of what English will do for them. Yet as a novice teacher I hardly questioned this scene; it was good because it meant I would be assigned classes, and I would have

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<sup>5</sup> This is a refereed article.

more money in my paycheck. The Russian teacher, on the other hand, taught one class with a handful of students. What made me, an English teacher, different from the Russian teacher? What did English mean to so many of these students who were willing to invest time, effort, money and sleeplessness?

This paper will unravel some of the discourses that explain English language learning and teaching in Mexico, contending that it is no neutral matter -- not for the teacher and not for the student, despite the fact that as practitioners in the field we rarely question our roles as conveyors of the English language. In Mexico, learning English as a foreign language has become so entrenched in our everyday lives that part of the national discourses on education include the learning of English and computer skills. It has not been unheard of for presidential candidates to propose English as the vanguard of education for all Mexican children. Learning English has been placed up there on the political agenda along with fighting poverty and corruption. It has acquired such a neutrality that we go along with our everyday lives teaching and learning English as a foreign language, but rarely reflecting on the ideologies that have made our profession what it is today -- a booming field that carries promises that at times are complied with and at times broken.

With a critical perspective, the following paper will explore three naturalized discourses we language teachers may internalize when teaching English in Mexico, but which can certainly be extended to many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts around the world: 1) the unquestionable truth-value of the EFL textbook, 2) the belief that students' individual efforts can lead them to become fluent speakers; and 3) the assumption that English language learning stems from a purely individual choice.

## **The Critical in Language**

Traditionally, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been dominated by psycholinguistic approaches which claim that it is the individual differences between learners that ultimately predict the learner's success. Cognitive factors such as "intelligence" and "language aptitude" and affective factors such as "attitude," "motivation" and "anxiety" (Gardner & McIntyre, 1993) have been considered sufficient to explain the learners' differences in learning outcomes. As canons of SLA, these theories have rarely been questioned by many, except for a handful of authors who agree with Rampton (1995a, p.294) that SLA "could probably benefit from an enhanced sense of the empirical world's complex socio-cultural diversity."

And so, it is for this need to open up new perspectives in SLA that a "progressive" group of authors such as Ben Rampton, Bonny Norton, Aneta Pavlenko, Suresh Canagarajah, Claire Kramsch, James Lantolf, and Alistair

Pennycook<sup>6</sup> have noted the importance of turning to theories that view the field not as the development of accountable quantitative models based on empirical studies but rather models that account for the language learner as a member of complex social networks encompassing multiple identities. Such theorists have looked to a poststructuralist framework as a means of explaining the social dynamics of language learning and teaching experiences. While poststructuralism is a broad term and overlaps with a variety of theoretical positions, I use Weedon's (1987) conception of poststructuralism, defined as a range of theoretical positions which address the questions of how social power is exercised and how social relations of gender, class and race might be transformed. Poststructuralism indicates the types of discourse from which particular questions come and locates them both socially and institutionally. Language is considered intrinsic because it is the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness. It is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested, yet it is also the place where the sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed in socially specific ways.

### **If only Bakhtin saw these EFL textbooks**

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the greatest scholars of language of the twentieth century, offers an engaging perspective which contributes to a critical perspective of EFL, both in terms of the types of language considered as "teachable" and in the conception of the language learning and teaching endeavor as ideological. Because of the role of English in today's world, and because of the elements of symbolic power in EFL, I will allude to examples within EFL that relate to Bakhtin's philosophy. He helps us to go beyond the traditional view in SLA that the language to be taught is what is in the textbook, without considering the multiple varieties and usages within a single language. Bakhtin also helps counter the current prevailing view that learning English as a foreign language is "unquestionably the best choice" over the learning, and in many cases, maintenance of any other language.

One of Bakhtin's most important contributions to the theory of language is the conception of verbal discourse as a social phenomenon -- "social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of its abstract meaning." (1981: 259). According to Bakhtin's view of discourse, each social language, each "concrete sociolinguistic belief system," is a form of conceptualizing its surroundings in

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<sup>6</sup> It is not my intention to categorize all these authors as working within the same theoretical frameworks. I include them because they work within a critical tradition, with wide range approaches such as socio-cultural frameworks, critical language awareness, poststructuralist and postcolonial theories.

words and is "characterized by its own objects, meanings and values." This means that such language is value laden and reflexive of its historical time and context; it is "a particular point of view on the world and on oneself, the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality" (Bakhtin, 1984, as cited in Evans 1998: 404). Each of these social languages -- and its discourses -- stand in dialogic tension with the other languages in the community, from varieties of a language (standard American English vs. other world varieties) to competing ideological discourses (English as a means to integrate into American communities vs. English as a means to communicate with the rest of the world). As teachers in the Mexican EFL classroom, we are in constant tension between our positions as nonnative speakers who are trying to teach prescribed ways of talk presented in the textbooks. Are those accents we hear familiar to us? Can we reproduce them and follow the pronunciation exercises in the book? Have we stopped to think what variety we are teaching our students? Why the American Midwestern standard variety if many of our students may interact primarily with non-native English speakers?

Because of this particular language dynamic, Bakhtin (1981) considers that every utterance is an example of "dialogized heteroglossia," defined as a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor (p.358).

The recognition that language and its discourses are conformed by a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of links and interrelationships counters the traditional idea of a simple relationship between a speaker and his "own" unitary and singular language, "the monologic utterance of the individual" (ibid, p.269), as contemporary social psychologists and psycholinguistics in SLA claim. In arguing for the "heteroglossic" nature, which is the multiplicity of social voices in discourse, Bakhtin sees as essential the location of these social voices in a context and historical time, recognizing, in turn, that languages and their speakers change over the course of time. Such an idea counters static forms of language and cultural representation in textbooks that are usually taught regardless of their actual usage in the actual linguistic communities.<sup>7</sup>

The question is: Through what venues are these students introduced to the traditional static images of the "English speaking world" represented in texts?

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<sup>7</sup> There are countless examples, but perhaps one that is the most common is the teaching of formulaic conversations, which learners memorize and conceive of as unbreakable. Many learners later come back to complain that in engaging in a conversation with a native speaker, he/she answered something different than what the learner saw in every single textbook, such as "Hey" instead of "Hello," thus causing surprise and even bewilderment about the language they were hearing.

Without a doubt, the EFL classroom provides the students with perceptions of this world, and the textbook is crucial in offering depictions of "this world" through portrayals of language and culture, more so when its content may be unfamiliar even to the teacher. For the foreign language teacher, in a country such as Mexico, the textbook not only guides the course activities, but also guides the language and cultural content which the teacher may be unfamiliar with, not having been immersed in an English speaking context portrayed in the textbook. On the other hand, if the textbook does not offer any English-speaking contexts which the teacher and students may be familiar with, their experiences and their imagined portrayals may be discredited.

The power of the textbook is that it is a tool which is often viewed as authoritative, factual, truth-based, and obligatory. Van Dijk (2004) views textbooks, along with other public discourses, as more relevant than other texts in processes of social reproduction because of their impact on people's beliefs. Due to their "obligatory" status, textbooks have an effect on societal reproduction: "Besides their overt contents aiming at the acquisition of standard knowledge in society and culture, textbooks and their hidden curricula also play an important role in the reproduction of dominant ideologies, such as those of race, gender and class. It is therefore important to examine in some detail how textbooks do this." (Van Dijk, 2004, p.2)

Inclusion or omission of information in the text leads to a validation or invalidation of the students' own experiences. McKay and Wong (1996) refer to the power of discourse, enacted for example in foreign language textbooks, as historically grounded statements that set forth presuppositions, thematic choices, values, and boundaries as to what can be said about something, by whom, how, where, and when, and that beneath it all lies some form of institutional authority. Hence, a thorough analysis of the textbook is necessary in order to determine how the textbook is portraying the "English speaking world" and if these particular students are a part of it. Such an analysis is particularly important because for many of the students the textbook is a "legitimate" text which provides them with linguistic and cultural information related to the target language. It also has the power of strengthening or weakening the students' investments in the target language.

In a study on the politics of the ESL classroom, Auerbach (1995) questions the authoritative role of the textbook in the classroom by setting forth important aspects such as whose voice is represented in the text and how is the text's content related to the students' own lives. She notes that traditional language exercises in typical textbooks are based on functional approaches that focus on rehearsing correct forms rather than creating and exchanging ideas. She finds how such practices preclude Bakhtin's notion of the "appropriation" of the language in that the language can truly become one's own when the speaker "populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his semantic and expressive intention" (Bakhtin, 1981, as

cited by Auerbach, 1995, p.22). Textbook practices rarely give the user an opportunity to 'expropriate' the language because of the prescriptive nature that it adjudicates to the presented language. Students are assumed to need and want what is presented in the text, when oftentimes that may overtly reject its content. Canagarajah's (1991) study found instances when Sri Lankan high school EFL students scratched out the written dialogs or modified the textbook illustrations to replace them with dialogs and illustrations that were more relevant to their political and social climate.

Norton and Toohey (2002) suggests that because of the complex nature of identity, specifically that of the learners and of the portrayed speakers of the "target language," there is a need for texts that describe this very complexity of learners in the textbook, as opposed to static products that are traditionally portrayed as cultural icons of the "target language." In this sense, textbooks must portray the complexities of their linguistic and cultural content as well as the complexities of their users. And so, in a setting of foreign language learning, language and culture is not only what the learner has been exposed to, but also what possibilities the language learner will have to use the language, outside of the formal learning environment.

### **Bourdieu's reminds us that there is nothing apolitical about EFL**

Bourdieu, one of the icons of critical language theory, complements the study of SLA by revealing that language is a social-historical phenomenon. He offers an alternative to the pervading idea in linguistics (carried over to SLA) of *competence* and *performance* developed by Chomsky and defined as "...the ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-communication" (Chomsky, 1965, as cited by Angelil-Carter, 1997, p.263).

In this definition, Chomsky separates 'competence,' an idealized capacity, from 'performance', the production of actual utterances. Competence, being an ideal, is located as a psychological or mental property or function (Lyons, 1996). This is in contrast to performance, which refers to an actual event. In this sense, language can be "objectively" studied because it is seen as a neutral language phenomenon where everyone knows the speech community's language perfectly. Such is the pervading idea in traditional teaching methods, especially for non-native settings.

Within Bourdieu's framework, the ideas of a homogeneous speech community, ideal speaker, or a single language do not exist. As users of the English language in Mexico, we are quite aware of the different contexts where English is used. Is it possible to speak of one single community now that we are immersed in a global context? While Chomsky's contribution to language superficially takes into account the social conditions of use in the belief that performance is what is socially significant, Bourdieu adds that actual speakers have a capacity to produce expressions which are appropriate for particular

situations, that is, a capacity to produce expressions *á propos*. Bourdieu also reminds us that in SLA there is nothing neutral about particular languages, even though linguists tend to ignore that through a complex historical practice certain languages emerged as dominant languages, often through colonialist or imperialist strategies. Thus, the idealized speech community is nothing more than "an object which has been pre-constructed by a set of social-historical conditions endowing it with the status of the sole legitimate of 'official' language of a particular community" (1994, p.5).

Bourdieu views language as a complex set of social, historical and political conditions of formation, where "ideal" conditions do not necessarily exist for the speaker because of their social place on the linguistic "market". Bourdieu (1994) emphasizes once and again "...the economic and social conditions of the acquisition of the legitimate competence and of the constitution of the market in which this definition of the legitimate and the illegitimate is established and imposed" (p.44). In this context, Bourdieu's following notions prove helpful for a rethinking of English as a foreign language: the concept of legitimate language and with that its legitimate users; and the concept of the linguistic market and the material and symbolic profits which may (or may not) emanate.

### **Legitimate language**

Angelil-Carter (1997) summarizes Bourdieu's notion of legitimate language in his contention that a communicative event takes place when the speaker is recognized as a legitimate speaker. This recognition is granted under the following conditions that define legitimate usage:

1. An utterance must be spoken by the person legitimately authorized to do so.
2. It must be spoken in a legitimate situation.
3. It must be spoken to legitimate receivers.
4. It must be spoken according to legitimate syntactic and phonetic forms.

Traditional teaching practices generally focus on the last condition, especially when emphasizing that students must acquire the grammatically correct forms, and especially in conditions where the learner may not be exposed to opportunities to actually use the language outside the classroom. Bourdieu, however, reminds us of the importance of the other three conditions, as communication and legitimacy cannot be separated. Pierce, as cited by Angelil-Carter (1997), adds that claiming the right to speak should be an essential component of a revised notion of communicative competence. She therefore puts forward the notion of legitimate speaker in SLA, referring to immigrant

women who may have learned the classroom version of the language but who have not had the opportunity to practice it. Our learners are not far from this situation for a variety of reasons. The primary reason is that they still may not have access to an actual English speaking community. (Internet communication, however, may provide new communities the opportunity to use the language, with the advantage that learners do not necessarily have to expose who they are racially or ethnically; but that is a further research topic.) Another of the multiple reasons is that if the U.S. is the learners' cultural reference for the use of English, harsh realities such as the color of their skin, the Hispanic surnames, the non-native American accent, and the current anti-Mexican immigrant climate in the U.S. may never provide our student with a "legitimate status."

The learners' goal may be the acquisition not only of a language, but also a wider range of material and symbolic resources, which will in turn increase their value of cultural capital, that is, *if* they have the access to resources which will legitimate them as a speaker. Bourdieu sheds light on the idea that the choice to learn a second language is not a completely voluntarily one; second language learners rarely decide on learning a language because it was an individual choice, but do so because their context somehow views the learning of that particular language as the practical thing to do, thus "le sens pratique." Bourdieu's notion of habitus can be summarized as a set of dispositions that predispose individuals to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously governed by any 'rule.' Dispositions can be gradually inculcated and structured according to the social conditions within which they were acquired. Thus, the habitus 'orients' actions and inclinations rather than imposes them. The actions, then, acquire "le sens pratique."

When individuals act, they do so in specific social contexts or settings referred to, by Bourdieu, as 'market' and 'game'. The market can be seen as a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelationships are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or 'capital.' Bourdieu alludes to *economic capital*; *cultural capital* (the knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications); and *symbolic capital* (the accumulated prestige or honor cristalized in diplomas, certificates and awards). These forms of capital can be converted into one another, such as transforming the knowledge of English as *cultural capital* into *economic capital* when finding a job that pays more because of that particular knowledge.

According to Stroud, as cited by Bourdieu (1994), "the sense of value of one's own linguistic products is a fundamental dimension of the sense of knowing the place which one occupies in the social space," and this is one of the processes which helps "to constitute that sense of one's own social worth which governs the practical relation to different markets (shyness, confidence, etc.) and more generally, one's whole physical posture in the social world" (p.198). In other words, members of a community have a practical sense of their

positions in social space; thus, it is no accident that many learners decide to be silent and not impose their presence in the language community in which they may aspire to be members. Even foreign language learners who may never even think of becoming a member of the "target community" assume that the language they do know is for very specific uses and rarely do they go beyond that practical sense. "Language ideologies provide the systematic associations of behavioral aesthetic and moral values, or bodily emotions, such as shame with specific varieties of language" (ibid, p.199); this, according to Bourdieu, is one of the most powerful mechanisms of the maintenance of the symbolic order.

This symbolic order is seen by Bourdieu as a form of complicity which is neither passive nor active. The recognition that a language has more 'value' than another in the linguistic market is inscribed in inculcated dispositions that permit that particular language to have more material and symbolic profit than others. While Bourdieu uses standard language varieties as an example of this phenomenon, I would argue that the learning of a so-called powerful language such as English is very often a product of calculation by the individual, oriented by discourses of English equating success. It is only through the acquisition of this linguistic product that the individual will acquire more symbolic, cultural and economic capital. An everyday example of this are the countless commercials on television channels offering English learning methods which will grant the learner "the key to future success" even though there happens to be a disclaimer in tiny letters that learning English is no guarantee of employment.

Bourdieu's theory comes full circle in its premise that legitimate language is only possible through the speaker's appropriate positioning on the linguistic market -- that is, the speaker must now possess the capital necessary to be recognized as legitimate:

*Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are de facto excluded from social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence.... What is rare then ... is [not linguistic competence] ... but the competence necessary to speak the legitimate language, which depending on social inheritance, re-translates social distinctions into the specifically symbolic logic of differential deviations, or in short, distinction (1994, p.56).*

In transferring Bourdieu's system of linguistic and social difference to EFL it is quite evident that the linguistic market has heavily endowed the English language with a high value. The competence of the agents in this market is to know English and to be able to produce it, without ignoring the fact that first they need to be legitimated as speakers. The distribution of this linguistic capital is related in specific ways to the distribution of other sources of capital, such as *economic capital* in order to be able to access language education and *cultural capital* in order to have the background academic skills needed to study a language. Bourdieu contends that the more linguistic capital that the speakers

possess, the more they can exploit the system of differences to their advantage and therefore secure a profit of distinction.

Being that the access to English and the legitimacy of its speakers is so unequally distributed, there is a sense that there is a greater value and, with that, a greater profit for the foreign language learner who fully acquires the language, under the condition that (s)he has been legitimated as such. Bourdieu rightly reminds the SLA field that language learning is a product of a complex historical process, at times with extensive conflict, subtle policies, or non-written requirements, and that the learner is in a constant struggle to keep up with the requirements of the linguistic market.

## **Conclusion**

This essay exposed how prevailing discourses in English language learning and teaching in Mexico can be unraveled by exploring some of the most important contributions of critical thinkers of language. We go about our everyday lives rarely thinking about the texts we use, which typically guide much of our teaching activities. After all, we may think that they provide us with what students need to know. We also teach with the hope that our students will become English speakers who will be served by all the efforts they have made. We assume that they will be prepared to enter English speaking communities because we were able to convey all the knowledge about English they need to know. Yet somewhere down the line, very few of our students reach these milestones, and oftentimes, as teachers we are not completely convinced that correct usage of language is all students need to know in order to seize the English language.

When exploring Bakhtin's contribution to a rethinking of language -- that is, how language is social throughout and context and history are essential for its understanding -- we come to realize that language is forever changing. We cannot afford to view language and the culture it represents as static images, with little space for change over time. As language teachers, we convey these images, yet it is also in our power to present alternative images of the "English speaking world," highlighting the multiple varieties and multicultural contexts where English is used. Viewing English through a global perspective, rather than as the language of two powerful countries, can provide a necessary contextualization for a new approach to EFL teaching. Further research could contribute towards new pedagogical frameworks for teaching English as a global language, recognizing its transformative nature.

Bourdieu's contributions to language, viewing it as a commodity that has values on a linguistic marketplace, help reframe the conception of English as a neutral means of communication to a medium of power through which our learners pursue their own interests. Within this conception, issues of race, ethnicity, gender, social class and economic power play an important role in

legitimizing who will become a speaker, who will be heard, and who will be silenced. In recognizing such a scenario, we teachers also have the power to transform such futures. Hopefully, by not ignoring how the linguistic marketplace deviously works, we may be able to construct alternatives for our students.

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