

COMMENT

A case for decolonizing English language instruction

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English is an international language and has considerable power in many socio-political and socio-economic spheres. Some argue that the spread of English is a natural phenomenon and a unifying factor in a globalized economy (Crystal 2003). English use has also spread into the digital, online world as the preferred medium to facilitate intercultural communication and professional success.

With this global advance in influence and cultural capital, the English language has replaced the voices and identities belonging to speakers from varying cultures and traditions. These multifaceted voices in our classrooms belong to heritage language speakers who speak, in addition to English, an ancestral language with emotive and cultural significance (Meighan 2019).

The concern is that English has appropriated indigenous and other heritage languages into an anthropocentric (human-centred) Eurocentric system of knowledge (e.g. García and Otheguy 2019; Macedo 2019). In addition, the view of English as the passport to professional success has had a corresponding negative influence on heritage language use and multicultural learner identities (Tse 1998). Our learners actively desire to assimilate into the dominant culture and language in order to ‘succeed’ and this sentiment is compounded by colonial English classroom settings with ‘English Only’ policies and product-based, standardized testing (Garcia 2009).

Not surprisingly, as heritage language speakers age and progress through monolingual English schools, heritage language use decreases (Cho, Shin and Krashen 2004). Cummins (2005) remarks that heritage language

use is 'viewed as either irrelevant or as an impediment to the learning of English and overall academic achievement. Many students continue to be actively discouraged from using or maintaining their home languages' (p. 585). In a nutshell, heritage languages are conceived and assumed to be a 'deficit' (Little 2017: 4) and our learner identities as plurilingual and pluricultural individuals are disenfranchised and minoritized in the colonial English classroom.

This comment proposes that it is time to decolonize English language instruction, implement pedagogical change and inspire a radical paradigm shift to fully embrace and validate alternative worldviews and ways of knowing and being. For example, indigenous worldviews are rooted in ecocentric principles of reciprocity and relationships between communities and the local environment (Blaser, Feit and McRae 2004).

An ecological view of language (i.e. how we experience, relate to, and treat the environment) needs to be implemented in the English classroom in order to counteract the anthropocentric worldview that currently dominates the English language. For example, the grammatical system in English categorizes water as an uncountable noun, an 'infinite' source, or product, which can be ultimately exploited. Moreover, the current negative, uninviting (colonial) definition of water as 'tasteless' or 'odourless' is the polar opposite of relational, experiential worldview encapsulated in many heritage/indigenous languages (e.g. the view of water as a living-giving and -sustaining spirit).

This paradigm shift need not be difficult. It would be a start to give our English language learners the opportunity to reflect upon their worldview, their experience, and how they originally relate to their surroundings (e.g. people, the environment, and objects) in their heritage language. This experience can be explained, drawn, written, or shown as part of their English language learning journey while they work on course material and reflect on differences/similarities between dominant vs. nondominant worldviews/languages (Meighan 2019). As Cummins (2005) remarks, monolingual teaching methods that restrict the use of the heritage language should be questioned in order to implement 'bilingual instructional strategies that acknowledge the reality of cross-language transfer and strongly encourage students to engage in it' (p. 588). Providing our learners with a safe space to express their thoughts and their experience of the world in their heritage language could also avoid 'ethnic ambivalence' or 'ethnic evasion' where 'the desire to integrate into the target culture is so strong that there is apathy toward or even rejection of the heritage culture and language' (Tse 1998: 25).

Ultimately, embracing an ecological worldview in language instruction (e.g. relating to water as a spirit, life-sustaining, thirst-quenching as opposed to tasteless) will be of great importance to wider society. If our learners have greater opportunities to relate to their heritage languages and traditions, there will be greater transfer of worldviews and local knowledge that could lead to more sustainable solutions in combatting the climate crisis within the walls of the classroom. At an institutional and global level, there will also be a genuine opportunity for English speakers and instructors who have been raised in the anthropocentric worldview

to learn from the heritage experience. We can question the status quo and decolonize the English language from grounding instruction in an ecocentric and relational worldview rooted in relationships and experiences with people and the environment.

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