My Beliefs

Learners

The spirituality of teachers and learners is inevitably intertwined within the process of language learning. The way in which spirituality has affected language, learners, and my implementation of it as an educator is directly influenced by the way I perceive spirituality. The way I understand spirituality is articulated by Schneiders (2005) as “conscious life involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives,” which shows the integration of that which is outside of our tangible selves into our everyday existence or simply, our life. This correlates with Smith’s (2008) point that there is a difference between spirituality through direct means (Bible verses, prayer, etc.) and the idea of spirituality as incorporated and intermingled within everything one does (indirect means). Thus, that which appears mundane is actually a further expression of one’s spirituality. With this mentality, the words we speak out would be a form of prayer even if not intentionally meant as such. The power words have has been acknowledged (Robison, 2011), and serves as a reminder to use our words in a way that brings hope, encouragement, love, joy, and change. This is a power, the power of speech, that we are passing onto ESL students.

Taking a step back from the spirituality embedded within language itself, one must acknowledge the spirituality which exists within our students and within each teacher present. ESL students should be seen as holistic beings, for human beings are inherently multifaceted (Canagarjah, 2009) and complex. Students not only bring their intellectual intelligences with
them into a classroom, but also their emotional, social, and spiritual intelligences. On top of this they bring deeper questions: Why are we here? What is our purpose? What is truth? Acknowledging these underlying questions causes me to create content which appeals to the life purposes of my students (Edge, 1996). Understanding students as multifaceted, each equipped with a soul that is yearning for knowledge, purpose, and an answer to numerous challenging ethical questions, is essential to create a class that supplements the often superficial and stifled conversational prompts and responses found in many textbooks. Instead, I believe in creating space within the classroom to engage with the meaning of language, reflect on one’s own morality, and allow space for change and growth.

**Socio-political Aspect of Language Learning:**

Power is inextricably tied to English, and thus the learning and teaching of it. From the power a teacher holds in the authority of their position to the ties of English with imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999), hegemony (Edge, 2009), dwindling of indigenous languages (Makoni & Makoni, 2009), cultural superiority (Pennycook & Marin, 2003), global dominance (Canagarajah, 1999), and nationalism (Pennycook & Marin, 2003), English is embedded with power. It even goes back as far as colonialism (Pennycook, 1994). This means simply by vocational choice, English language teachers “involved in TESOL anywhere [are]…involved in the issues of liberation and domination everywhere” (Edge, 1996, p. 17). The power within English itself is that which cannot be ignored.

I believe teachers have the responsibility to be informed of the association between power and English, and seek to mitigate this. One thing an educator can do is learn a second language, as this can combat the hegemony of English by humbling the teacher, putting them in
the position of a learner, and promoting the message of multilingualism (Snow, 2009). Teachers must also be educated in how to teach English prior to teaching, as this will create effectiveness in the classroom and awareness of social issues (Wong, 2009). They must maintain a respect for other cultures and vernacular languages, as this will aid them to foster intercultural respect and communication (Makoni & Makoni, 2009). Lastly, an awareness of ‘hidden curriculum’ will make teachers aware of the messages of power or domination they are inadvertently sending (Canagarajah, 1999).

Overall, an awareness of the issues associated with language learning and power is crucial, for as teachers we need to “restrict the purpose of our teaching to facilitating the life purposes of our students” (Edge, 1996). In this, we are taking the power out of our hands and placing into theirs, which is the heart of what we aim to do – empower. I seek to empower students through intentional activities aiming towards autonomy, mindful and authentic encouragement, using assessment tools to gear content towards students’ goals and interests, and giving students the tools they need in which to succeed.

Teaching

Teaching is a relational and moral endeavor that aims to foster a change in individuals and society as a whole through the acquisition of knowledge. The only way I believe this acquisition can truly take place is through interacting with students as multifaceted beings (Canagarajah, 2009), thus incorporating the spiritual, moral, intellectual, physical, and emotional sides of students within the classroom. Students bring previous life experiences, struggles, and expectations with them into the classroom. Thus, it is up to the teacher to engage with the students in a way that reaches beyond the superficial, and instead values the individual. This can be done by incorporating content relevant to the life purposes of the students, setting up
individual meetings with the students to create a relational connection, fostering discussions that seek to know and value the opinions of all students, incorporating instruction that appeals to a variety of learning styles, and making myself available before and after class for students who do not feel comfortable asking questions in front of the entire class.

I believe English language teaching (ELT) is profoundly value-laden (Johnston, 2003) in nature, as it is “one of the central places where a society keeps its own self-image” (Edge, 1996, p. 16). The complexity of morality in education extends beyond the educators own moral conception or influence over the classroom, but is also seen in the institution itself (Johnston, 2003) as well as the variegated morality of the students within (Mason, 2000). I believe the fundamentally moral basis that language teaching has can be seen in its’ focus on relation, aim to change, and ambiguity in how a classroom is run (Johnston, 2003). The complexity with ELT is furthered by the fact that morality becomes a subjective concept in function, as seen through contextual examples of plagiarism (Pennycook, 1996) or failing a student (Johnston, 2003).

Given the context of moral subjectivity and taking into account the contextual differences of each class we teach, I believe teachers need to remain flexible and embrace their role as that of a caring facilitator. I see the greatest growth coming from students who feel motivated and known by their teachers, and it is in this relational endeavor I choose to focus my attention. It is through transformational pedagogy (Canagarjah, 2009) that I cannot neglect the importance of caring, individualized, and effective instruction as a teacher to solely remain relational, but I do believe that at the end of the day we are relational beings and we will be more inclined to succeed when our needs are met.

This educational philosophy centered in a transformational philosophy affects my development as a professional. The care and concern I have for the students in my classroom
drives me to be the most competent educator I can be. I want to give the students my best, especially if I am expecting their best from them. In order to pursue this goal of perpetual development, I will remain involved in TESOL/CATESOL conferences, participate in online discussion and sharing forums, stay up to date with current research trends, and attempt to enter the world of publishing.

Language and Culture

Language and culture are inextricably intertwined, and thus become an integral part of one’s identity. Language and culture exhibit this incredible duality, as language is used to teach culture, culture simultaneously conveys language. It is in this duality that one is able to see an inseparable link or correlation between the two concepts. Language can at times be thought of as that which we speak out, but if one takes a step back it is evident that language originates within our thoughts. Lightbown and Spada (2013) identify the sociocultural perspective which understands “speaking and thinking as tightly interwoven” (p. 118). I am in line with this concept, which is furthered through the Saphir-Whorf Hypothesis (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2002), which claims that one’s thoughts and perspectives on the world are determined by the language one speaks. Thus, as one acquires a second language, they are acquiring more than a new set of vocabulary and grammatical structures; they are acquiring a new way of seeing the world.

While the Saphir-Whorf Hypothesis promotes a definitive correlation between language and culture, there is also a belief that thought is only influenced by language, not determined by it. The sociocultural perspective understands, “speaking and thinking as tightly interwoven” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 118). I identify with the sociocultural perspective, and believe one way in which you can see the influence of culture on language is through social roles. For
example, there are students from cultures where power distance is deeply embedded in interactions between authority figures and this not only will this affect the interaction between the student and the teacher, but also the way in which that student perceives or thinks about the professor and the level of social distance between them (Scovel, 2001). I believe that teachers would do well to grasp how influential culture is on the thoughts and perspectives students hold so they can limit confusion and misunderstanding as much as possible, and instead respect and value each students’ perspective.

Language will also affect the way in which one is able to perceive various concepts; for certain languages have a variety of words to describe one concept while others may just have one (Crystal, 1987). This can be seen in the numerous words Inuits have for ‘snow’ versus other cultures that may have one or two. The way in which snow is viewed or perceived will be directly related to the language available to conceive the act or substance in and of itself. Having a plethora of ways to interact with one concept will allow for a more nuanced way in which individuals are able to understand it. Overall, language and culture cannot be separated for they are areas of our life that directly impact our make-up, our thoughts, and our perceptions.
References


