

An Investigation into a Culturally Sensitive Manner of
Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

How to teach English globally has continued to be a relevant topic of discussion in the field of TESL, especially how to teach in a manner that is sensitive to the various sociocultural and historical factors surrounding the English language, as well as other languages and cultures. Through an examination of the current global status of English, its historical significance, the dilemmas attached to its' worldwide spread and dominance, and an examination of culture in language teaching, an attempt is made to codify some basic principles of culture-sensitive English teaching, as well as address the Christian position on this matter, considering biblical truth.

An Investigation into a Culturally Sensitive Manner of
Teaching English as a Foreign Language

How to teach English in a manner that is sensitive to the various sociocultural and historical factors surrounding the English language, as well as other languages and cultures, has continued to be a relevant topic of discussion in the field of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). English has risen to the position of a global lingua franca (a trade language) and its influence has continued to spread across the world. Many people worldwide have used it as a bridge language for communication or as a path to a better education and future. However, the English language also has a long history of cultural imperialism and linguistic hegemony worldwide. This has led some to argue that teaching English in countries where English is not the native language has been another Western attempt to be culturally dominant, at the expense of other languages and cultures. Yet, whether it was asked for, wanted, or intended, English has risen to its current status and is spoken by hundreds of millions of non-native speakers (Crystal, 2003). Since there has been and currently remains a global demand for English to be taught, the question now becomes how English can be taught in a manner that allows for effective communication and language learning, but also accounts for the various cultures, customs, and environments worldwide.

One singular curriculum or method will not be successful for all learners of English worldwide, and all humans are biased to some degree. Language teaching also never occurs in a vacuum. Many have argued that language and culture are inseparable, and that one cannot be taught without involving the other. While it is often necessary to teach and explain various Western cultural practices that have influenced the English

language, this does not mean that English language learners should be made to unquestioningly accept these cultural practices, think that these practices are superior, or be made to feel that their own culture is somehow less important or lacking. How exactly this should be accomplished is currently a major area of discussion. While it is doubtful that this question could be fully answered within the scope of a single thesis, the hope is that through an examination of the current status of English, its historical significance, the dilemmas attached to its worldwide spread and dominance, and a discussion of the role of culture in language teaching, a more tangible pedagogy for how to accomplish teaching English with as little cultural bias as possible can emerge. It is also important to examine how Christian English teachers can approach the matters of English teaching and cultural imperialism in ways that honor God and celebrate other cultures as examples of His great creativity and diversity.

What is a “Global Language”?

To understand the current global situation of the English language, one must first understand what is meant by the terms “global language,” “international language,” and “world language.” These terms have all been used in recent decades to describe the massive dispersion and use of English worldwide, and all essentially mean the same thing. While English does not possess the largest number of native speakers, nor even the greatest number of second-language speakers (Graddol, 2017), it is a language that wields immense power on the world stage. According to David Crystal (2003), a world authority on the English language, “A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (p. 3). Such a language must be used within countries that have few native speakers of the language, and

therefore little reason to give it any special role or attention. This can be done either by elevating the language to the status of an “official,” or “secondary” language, such as in countries like India or Nigeria, or by making the language a priority in the country’s foreign-language teaching, such as in Germany or China (Crystal, 2003). This is what is meant by describing English as a global language, that even in countries where the people have no, or little, historical or cultural reason to use the language, it is given special consideration, is used widely in some capacity, and is taught in schools to those who may never travel to an English-speaking country. This extent to which English has spread globally in these terms is staggering. Alastair Pennycook (2017) quotes from the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*:

English is used in an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents. It is the main language of book, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international businesses and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competition, pop music, and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world’s scientists write in English. Three quarters of the world’s mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world’s electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. (p. 8)

These figures represent only a tiny fraction of the immense power that English wields worldwide. Another example of this power regards the publication of scholarly work. If an expert in a field wants to publish research, no matter what his or her first language, they will publish it in English, in order that it will have the greatest chance of being read (Pennycook, 2017). In findings from 2008, it was stated that around 44% of

printed and electronic information in the world is in English, and English is the overwhelming leader in production of print, electronic, and media information (Lobachev, 2008). English is the language of all air-traffic controllers, and overwhelmingly dominates the Internet, business, and media (Pennycook, 2017). This does not mean that other languages are not used in some of these areas, but English is overwhelmingly the dominant language used. The total number of English speakers worldwide numbers, according to estimates at the beginning of the 21st century, was at around 1.5 billion globally (Crystal, 2003). This is divided between native speakers at around 400 million, speakers of English as a second language at around another 400 million, and speakers of English as foreign (or international) language making up the rest (Crystal, 2003). It is the last category that is the hardest to estimate but has also been the fastest growing within the last decades. All these statistics and facts speak of a language whose power extends to every corner of the globe. Even if it is not spoken in a country as a first or second language, its relevance is understood.

The Expansion and Cultural Power of English

English has not achieved global status because of any innate superiority as a language, nor even because of vast numbers of native speakers, but because it has historically been the language of nations that achieved great economic, cultural, and technological power (Crystal, 2003). English reached the position of global dominance as a language due to geographical-historical factors as well as socio-cultural factors. Geographically and historically, English owes much of its global spread to the imperialistic and exploratory bent of Great Britain. This began with the voyages to the Americas in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and continued with expansion into the

Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa all throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (Crystal, 2003). This extreme British expansion to nearly all continents means that English left a linguistic presence which is still felt to this day. Besides the imperialistic influence of England, another major factor in the global spread of English that arose in the 20th century was the emergence of the United States as a leading economic and cultural power (Crystal, 2003). It is this factor, far more so than the effects of the former British Empire, which continues to explain the expanding position of English to this day. Currently, the United States boasts seventy percent of the world's mother-tongue English speakers, excluding Creole varieties (Crystal, 2003). But beyond the influence of these two nations, English has risen to the position it is in because modern society has come to use, and depend on, English in many diverse areas. In the 19th and first half of the 20th century, due largely to factors such as the Industrial Revolution (which began in England and eventually spread across the ocean to America), English experienced a period of rapid expansion and diversification. Innovative technology was being developed, which meant not only an expansion to the lexicon of English, but that those who wished to learn about these technologies needed to learn English. This era also saw developments to the way knowledge was disseminated. For example, steam technology revolutionized printing, which led to a massive number of English written works being produced. This access to new knowledge was also helped by advances in transportation and communication systems (Crystal, 2003).

This period also saw the growth of the international banking system in the United States and Great Britain, with New York and London becoming the two main investment

capitals of the world. So many developments were occurring during this time, that it is impossible to pinpoint any one cause and effect for the expansion of English. However, by the end of the 19th century, and certainly the beginning of the 20th, the unspoken world opinion was that English was the language of progress, dominant in global economy and politics. In the second half of the 20th century, English cemented its position by entrenching itself in specific areas that affected domestic and professional life. International relations, media, international travel, international safety, education, and communications are all areas dominated by English. The media and the Internet are both areas where English has especially been an influence on the world. Movies, music, radio, television, journal articles, advertising, and websites all provide a steady deluge of English-language material. A final interesting area of English influence has arisen with the independence of many former colonies in Asia and Africa, in which English emerged as a language of special status. For example, in India, English is used as an ‘associate’ official language, as a way of mediating between the many languages spoken throughout the country. Especially in the South, it is widely used as a lingua franca. Many countries in Africa, such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Uganda have English as their official language, since there are, again, many other languages spoken throughout these countries. Here, English shows itself as a language that can unite a country, or even the entire world—though some might argue at the cost of linguistic diversity and identity (Crystal, 2003).

Linguistic Imperialism Examined

While the spread of English across the globe might be considered blessing in terms of providing a global language for widespread use, this spread is not without

problematic consequences and results. British imperialism and American cultural exports, as well as military and economic dominance, have spread English to every continent, many times at the expense of other local languages. Especially during the British colonial period, in many places in Africa and Asia, English was the language of the conquerors, and it became the dominant language of commerce, law, trade, and social advancement. It became a part of society (so much so that many post-colonial nations have kept it as a lingua franca), but it displaced other languages and had social implications. This aspect of the history of English and English teaching is one that must be carefully examined by any who would enter the field, especially Christians, who ought to have a far more vested interest in preserving linguistic and cultural diversity, since these areas showcase the glory and diversity of the Creator.

The theme of linguistic imperialism in Africa was written about extensively by Phillipson, who was one of the first authors to really examine the topic, in his groundbreaking 1992 book *Linguistic Imperialism*, in his 1996 article *Linguistic Imperialism: African Perspectives*, and again in his 2010 book *Linguistic Imperialism Continued*. In the third chapter of *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson (2010) gives a definition for what exactly linguistic imperialism is, since the word “imperialism” can be ambiguous in its meaning, depending on context. This “working definition” stated that, “the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (p. 47).

The book itself analyzes three aspects of English: the historical spread of the language, the role English plays in Third World countries, and how English language

teaching can contribute to the dominance of English worldwide (Phillipson, 1992). This discussion of the use of English as a means of conquering is not meant to vilify individual English teachers. Phillipson's goal is to collectively hold the field of TESL responsible for not examining the historical biases surrounding English teaching, as well as ask for a re-examination of English language dominance in the world (Phillipson, 1992). In this book, Phillipson examines the situation in British colonial and post-colonial Africa. He describes how English was consistently given a place of prestige, and local languages were ignored or demeaned. Even when there was schooling in the local language, it usually only occurred during elementary school, and a transition to English learning in higher education was viewed as inevitable (Phillipson, 1992). In the 1996 article, he specifically discussed the then-current language landscape of Africa, and how many indigenous languages of former British colonies were still often viewed as "inferior" compared to English, despite colonial rule having been ended for at least two decades. Phillipson's point was that if the use of other indigenous languages in schooling is not intentional in formerly colonized countries, then English-language education will continue to dominate the educational systems in African countries, creating an elite group that is more alienated from their own culture (Phillipson, 1996). In his sequel to *Linguistic Imperialism*, titled *Linguistic Imperialism Continued*, Phillipson (2010) moves the conversation of linguistic imperialism into the 21st century, with a collection of "an encyclopedia entry on linguistic imperialism, seven articles that [he had] written since the appearance of...Linguistic Imperialism in 1992, and six book reviews on closely related subjects" (p. 8). He argues that the discussion of linguistic imperialism is still relevant in this time, since the use of English continues to expand. Especially, he mentions the issue

of consistently using native English speakers (usually American or British) as a yardstick for language proficiency. Phillipson's work raises sobering and important points that any TESL teacher, especially one who plans to go overseas, must take into consideration.

Global Reactions to the Spread of English and English Teaching

The widespread, global reaction to English language teaching in areas where English is not spoken as a mother tongue has varied. Especially in those areas where English was inevitably tied to the conquering might of the British Empire, but even in other areas where the influence was less political in nature, English has still left an imprint and reputation in some manner. In the examination of how to teach English globally in a manner that accounts for and incorporates local culture, these reactions and opinions are especially important to consider. One cannot consider how to move forward without an accurate picture of the current attitudes and thoughts in regions where English has been and will continue to be taught. The examination of this topic will now be done with respect to the regions of East Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America.

In South Asia, East Asia, and Africa the history of colonialism often irrevocably taints English (Phillipson, 1992; Crystal, 2003), though the language is often not viewed wholly negatively, especially given the current near-necessity of knowing English as a means of advancement and opportunity. The Middle East is a bit of a different case, because while the British did colonize some areas of the region, it was not quite to the extent of other regions, leaving many countries to view the language in a different light. More emphasis in modern times is placed on its connection to the United States and the Western world in general, with the conflict being one of ideology (Javdani, 2012).

Meanwhile, South America is not much haunted by specifically British colonialism, although there was certainly attempted dominance from the United States, meaning that English is viewed less as an area of culture that has been either forced on or appropriated, and more as an outside, even neutral language (Porto, 2014).

In Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, English teaching and English medium schools (where the language of instruction is in English) have formed a large part of many children's schooling, often leading to a cultural disconnect when Western cultural values and practices are emphasized heavily in such teaching. For example, in a study conducted on Bangladeshi students in English medium schools, the main concern of the author is that these schools, while fostering a greater knowledge of English, may also be undermining Bangladeshi culture and values (Akter, 2012). The school curriculum used is primarily British, and students learn about Western traditions, geography, politics, government, etc., at the expense of learning about their own culture. The study showed that many students and teachers in these institutions are far more geared toward a knowledge of anything Western, over a knowledge of their own cultural values and heritage (Akter, 2012). To counter this reality, the author suggests a few ways that teachers in these school environments could expose students to, and celebrate, their culture, traditions, and values, such as giving Eids—Muslim holidays—the same amount of emphasis as Christmas or relating a Western book to the Bangladeshi context. Conversely, in nearby Pakistan, a research study on how ESL learning affected Pakistani university students' identity, showed that English language learning did indeed affect student perceptions of identity, but in a mainly positive way (Anbreen, 2015). The study found that learning English greatly affected students' identities, often increasing their

self-confidence, and the perspectives they had on the world. They did not feel overly distant from their families (who often speak no English at home) but found their responses to other students had changed (Anbreen, 2015).

In Africa, as discussed in Phillipson's works (1992/1996), the reaction to English teaching has varied depending upon whether various nations were a part of the British Empire. In countries such as Kenya, one writer chronicled in Crystal (2003) describes how in his school days, English "became more than just a language, it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference. Thus, one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu [the local language] in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on the bare buttocks—or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID, or I AM A DONKEY" (Crystal, 2003, p. 125). As Crystal points out, with memories such as these, it is little wonder that English teaching in Africa has left such a sour mark. Overall, many former British colonies in Africa have retained English as an official language, along with other notable languages, though there are some exceptions. Tanzania, for example, has now made Swahili its official language (Crystal, 2003). Former French colonies, such as Algeria, have a different view of English due to its not being a language of colonialism, and in 1996, English, not French, was made the chief foreign language in schools (Crystal, 2003). In South Africa, English was indeed the language of British colonizers, especially to the Dutch Afrikaners. However, since most whites in the country used primarily Afrikaans, Afrikaans came to be perceived by the black majority as the language of authority and repression. Conversely, many South African blacks saw English as a way of achieving an

international voice, and as a means of uniting themselves with other black communities. Thus, English gained a reputation during the Apartheid era as a language of protest and self-determination. In a country with an incredible amount of linguistic and cultural diversity, English often serves as a connecting language between various ethnic groups and languages, much the same as in other African countries (Crystal, 2003).

In East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and China, there is a great desire to learn English, but there can exist issues of clashing ideologies as well as with the materials provided to learners. McKay (2014) cites an incident in her article, where Korean English students, “were asked to look at photographs of various American scenes depicting different periods of history and decide in which decade the picture was taken” (p. 10). Obviously, the Korean students found this exercise extremely difficult. The attitude towards English teaching in China is one that is of particular interest, given the growing power of the nation over the past several decades. Britain (along with several other countries) partially colonized China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, after forcing the country to open to the wider world after two devastating defeats in the Opium Wars. After these defeats, reformers saw the need for China to learn from the Western world, which included language. In 1862, the first Chinese-run English language school was opened in Beijing, and in 1903, English became a required secondary school subject, which it has remained ever since (Yang, 2000). This marks the beginning of a trend of Chinese people pragmatically using English as a means of national advancement, which continues to this day. Thus, the language is seen as a tool for national and global progress, but Western culture is not necessarily viewed as something to be emulated or seen as “better” than Chinese culture, since the nation has such a rich heritage of its own.

In in areas of the Middle East, such as Iran and Turkey, the main complaints seem to lie with either the stranglehold of their own culture on English teaching or else the overreliance on native speaking English teachers or a British or American curriculum. In Iran, a study was conducted which attempted to discover the attitudes of Iranian high school and college students towards the way culture was addressed in their EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. Overall, the study found that students generally had a negative attitude towards the way culture was portrayed, stating that English classes were either used as a way of furthering their own cultural ideology (which is very conservatively Muslim), or else contained little to do with culture, leaving texts staid and dry (Javdani, 2012). This situation is almost a reverse case of linguistic imperialism, where instead of the outsider culture connected with English vying for dominance over the local culture, English is left robbed of any outside context altogether. This is a revealing opinion, which suggests that the answer to culturally sensitive language teaching is not simply teaching English with no outside cultural connection. In Turkey, which was also never directly colonized but was and has been greatly influenced by the West, the imperialism is not so much of language but of native speakers. Isik (2008) gives an overview of the current ES/FL (English as a Second/Foreign Language) learning situation in Turkey. The author spends the first half of the article critiquing the current linguistic and native speaker imperialism present in Turkey by giving specific examples, such as all textbooks being foreign-written (with little knowledge or regard for the local culture) as well as competent Turkish teachers still feeling inadequacy compared to native English-speaking teachers (Isik, 2008).

English has an interesting position in Latin America and is not viewed in the quite same manner as in the other regions mentioned, due to the main colonizing influence in the region being Spain, not Britain. Although the United States has often cast a quasi-imperial eye on this area of the world, this did not translate into English becoming ubiquitous in the region. Porto (2014) discusses the position and view of English in Argentina, writing that English is often held in high regard, despite being the language of the United States, whom the country has a complicated relationship with, due to politics, and the United Kingdom, that fought a war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. After achieving independence from Spain, and due to immigrants from so many other countries settling in the region, the Argentine government felt the need to create a unified Argentinian identity, which was cultivated by using Spanish exclusively in the education system, often at the expense of other indigenous groups and languages. Because of this policy, many smaller, disenfranchised groups, particularly indigenous peoples, viewed English as a means of expressing themselves and making their voices heard (Porto, 2014). Instead of being tied to a colonialist history or a society divided by class, English is viewed as a far more neutral language than Spanish.

Taking these facts and examples into consideration, it is clear that English teaching cannot be done in a way that leaves no effect on the learners and the cultures from which they come. The question now becomes how much of teaching language is also teaching culture, and, if so, how necessary is a knowledge of Western culture for a global student of English?

Is Teaching Language Teaching Culture?

Dwight Atkinson (1999), an ESL teacher and applied linguist, writes that, “Except for language, learning, and teaching, there is perhaps no more important concept in the field of TESOL than culture. Implicitly or explicitly, ESL teachers face it in everything they do” (p. 1). Lessard-Clouston (1997), a Professor of English at Kwansai Gakuin University in Japan echoes a similar sentiment:

Although some L2/FL teachers seem to think that the presence of culture in current writings is relatively recent, a review of the L2/FL literature shows that this is clearly not the case. The early pattern is evident: people learned a second or foreign language in order to read and study its literature...prior to the 1960s, the lines between language and culture were carefully drawn. The primary reason for second language study in the earlier part of this century was access to the great literary masterpieces of civilization. (p. 1)

Although Lessard-Clouston speaks of past reasons for learning a second (L2) or foreign (FL) language, which may not be reasons many learn a second or foreign language today, this does demonstrate a key point: language and culture are invariably intertwined. Teachers of a language cannot help but teach the culture connected with that language, even if they are not explicitly trying to do so. In the normal utterances of any language, there are implicit value judgements, beliefs, and worldviews that are expressed, and since teachers of a language are concerned with teaching those very utterances, culture will always be taught along with language. With English on the rise as a supposedly “global” language, it begs the question of just what culture should be taught along with the language, and to what degree. To better understand this dilemma, it is

important to have a working definition of culture. Choudhury (2014), defines culture as, “characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts” (p. 2). Culture also involves, as stated previously, the unconscious worldviews and value judgements that all societies and peoples possess. It is a dynamic thing that never remains static (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). According to Lessard-Clouston, “In L2 and FL teaching and learning, the issue of defining culture is best viewed as a continuum. This provides the ability to stress various dimensions of culture at different points and allows for major differences between L2 and FL contexts. For L2 or FL teachers and learners in varied contexts, various aspects of culture may well be important at various levels of language proficiency (Lessard-Clouston 1997). With this definition, we see that culture and language are not easily parted, since language is a part of how a culture is expressed. Choudhury (2014) explains this by giving multiple ways that culture influences vocabulary: listening, reading, speaking, and translating. For instance, in vocabulary, he explains the cultural connotations surrounding the colors white (meaning sickness, death, and weakness) and red (luck) in China, and states that, “Learning vocabulary, while paying attention to cultural factors, is vital and crucial” (p. 5). McKay (2004) also examines this idea by discussing various areas where language teaching relates to culture, such as semantics, pragmatics, rhetoric, the development of teaching materials, and teaching methodology. With semantics and pragmatics, the link between culture and language can be seen most clearly. Certain phrases or ways of expressing oneself are rooted in a certain cultural context. Phrases such as “Big Stick Diplomacy” or “Pandora’s Box” require a knowledge of certain facets of Western culture. Regarding pragmatics, in many Western

cultures, it is typical to accept compliments by saying, “thank you,” and this is a part of learning to communicate in English. In many Asian cultures, however, compliments are often deflected if given. These are important socio-pragmatic facts that can affect a student’s language capacity. If the goal of an English teacher is to prepare students to use English competently, especially in an overseas context, then students must learn something of the culture that is woven into English, in order to not only communicate with native English speakers, but to better understand something of their own culture as well. Pragmatics is an especially important aspect of language teaching and learning, since it prepares students to not just view the language as a robotic tool, but as a means of affecting people around them. Choudhury (2014) gives an example of a young translator who was given the job of accompanying a foreign guest:

He tried to be attentive as possible by saying “You come this way.” “You sit here.” “Don’t go too fast.” “Follow me.” “Don’t be late.” But the next day, he was shocked to know that the foreigner didn’t want to go with him, because the foreigner thought that the young interpreter was not polite. In the foreigner’s eyes, the interpreter is not helping him, but scolding him as scolding a child. There is no problem in the interpreter’s English, but the lack of the cultural background knowledge makes him incompetent for this job. (p. 6)

This story illustrates the intersection of language pragmatics and culture and shows the clear importance of preparing English language learners to communicate not only with correct grammar, but with an eye to the cultural norms of the wider world. With rhetoric, certain cultures may emphasize different styles of learning, which is then exemplified in the writing styles of a language. For example, in many Asian countries,

learning requires much more memorization and imitation, meaning that the preservation of earlier knowledge is viewed as most important. In the West, however, since there is often more of a critical and expansive nature to learning, where people are encouraged to present their own opinions on topics (McKay, 2004). With methodology and teaching materials, it is important to consider the implicit culture transfer and biases present in curriculum and teaching methods, such as an inclusion of culturally-bound terms or common cultural ideas that may not apply to or transfer well into the local context. An example of this might be, as McKay describes, a textbook that includes explicit references to American (or British) culture, or a teacher that spends more time describing his or her own culture than giving students the vocabulary to describe theirs. McKay's point is that if English is to be an international language, then teachers need to carefully evaluate what aspects of Western culture need to be communicated in English teaching, based on the ultimate needs of the students (McKay, 2004).

Choudhury (2014) makes a similar point, as he discusses various areas of language learning that culture affects, such as writing, reading, vocabulary, listening, and even translating. He argues that one cannot divorce language teaching from culture teaching, but that, "Making students aware of the important traits in the target culture help them realize that there are no such things as superior and inferior and there are differences among people of distinctive cultures, as well" (Choudhury, 2014, p. 8). When educators are teaching culture, they should always seek to draw students back to their own cultures and let them come to their own observations about what is similar and what is different between their home culture and the target language culture. Because of how culture affects all these areas of language, Choudhury (2014) reasons that students in

ES/FL classes ought to have some knowledge of Western culture. The point is not that students be forced to adopt Western ideologies or thought patterns, but rather that they learn to recognize them. In this way, they can become more aware of these areas in their own culture and be able to express them in English (Choudhury, 2014). Atkinson (1999) outlines six basic principles about culture that can inform and guide English teachers: all humans are individuals, individuality is also cultural, social group membership and identity are multiple, contradictory, and dynamic, social group membership is consequential, methods of studying cultural knowledge and behavior are unlikely to fit a positivist paradigm, and language (learning and teaching) and culture are mutually implicated, but culture is multiple and complex (Atkinson, 1999). With these six points, it becomes clear that the relationship between culture and language is one that goes hand in hand and cannot really be severed. On the other hand, it is important to remember that culture is not monolithic, and that different members of a culture may belong to diverse groups socially, economically, age-wise, etc. Atkinson (1999) states that, “if we can develop a notion of culture in TESOL that considers the cultural in the individual, and the individual in the cultural, then we will have a conceptualization that will stand us in good stead in the 21st century” (pp. 25-26).

With this examination of the relationship between language and culture, one sees that it is impossible to really teach language without also teaching culture. However, with a language such as English that has a history of colonization, power, and dominance attached to it, this can be complicated. Blindly including too much of Western culture in English language teaching becomes imperialistic and dogmatic and is not even necessary in many cases. At the same time, culture and language cannot really be separated, and it

follows that in many cases, the historical culture attached to the English language is Western, often American or British. Therefore, having taken these factors into consideration, the question to be addressed is how one can teach English in a way that is culturally rooted where necessary, but also sensitive to the culture of the learner.

Practices for Effective, Culturally Sensitive English Teaching

Undertaking the task of teaching English in a manner both effective and culturally sensitive is not an easy task, and as in most things dealing with people, there can be no strict outline guaranteed to work perfectly every time. However, given the amount of research and perspectives on the topic, it is possible to create a set of principles and guidelines to assist TESL teachers in this area. In Graddol's (2017) book, which discusses current global language trends and the spread of English as a global language, he spends the last part of his work highlighting some of the ways that English has "made the transition from foreign language to basic skill" (p. 116) and how English teaching needs and realities have changed. One area he touches on is the fact that native speakers are becoming less of a "gold standard" for English language use. He writes:

One of the more anachronistic ideas about the teaching of English is that learner should adopt a native speaker accent. But as English becomes more widely used as a global language, it will become expected that speakers will signal their nationality, and other aspects of their identity, through English. Lack of a native-speaker accent will not be seen, therefore, as a sign of poor competence. (p. 117)

This, then, is one of the first principles of culturally sensitive English teaching, especially for teachers who are native English speakers: not to expect second or foreign language English learners to adopt an American, or British, or Canadian, etc. accent, or to

attain a “native speaker” style of English. Not only has it been proven nearly impossible for second or foreign language speakers to ever completely acquire native-like language skills, as Van Patten (2016) discusses and gives evidence for, but it is a rather imperialistic thing to say (or imply) that English is only “correct” when spoken like an American or British person. Considering that both British and American varieties of English consist of a myriad of regional dialects and slang, it is almost hypocritical to suggest that non-native speakers adopt an “American” or “British” accent, as if such a standard accent truly existed. If English is on its way to truly becoming a global language, then it follows that the global community will leave its mark upon the language. The challenge then comes in filtering out the most necessary aspects of English for communication across different environments and stressing those things in the classroom. Things like vocabulary, sentence structure, pragmatics, verb conjugation, and correct use of tense are important and part of communicating effectively in English. Knowledge of obscure American slang or speaking English the way a BBC announcer does is not.

The second principle of English teaching is understanding and teaching according to the needs of one’s students. The knowledge of obscure slang, cultural practices, and common cultural knowledge is probably unimportant to a student in rural India, who plans to stay in his or her region and is merely learning English as a way into a better job and life. However, for a Chinese student who plans to attend university in America, that knowledge, while still not essential, suddenly becomes far more relevant to his or her life, and consequently to his or her English language learning. As an ES/FL teacher, it is one’s job to make sure that students are being taught things that are beneficial and

necessary for the path of life they choose. Part of doing this means including in a curriculum features that will translate well to local culture or are neutral enough to translate to most. Alptekin (1993) discusses the importance of using translatable cultural items when designing English language learning curriculum:

Familiarity with both content and formal schemas enables the learners to place more emphasis on systemic data, as their cognitive processing is not so much taken by the alien features of the target language background. Moreover, familiar schematic knowledge allows the learners to make efficient use of their top-down processing in helping their bottom-up processing in the handling of various language tasks. Needless to say, familiarity in this context refers to schemas based chiefly on the learner's own culture. (p. 7)

Whether it is having students write about a local festival, explain a certain area of their own culture, or discuss things that they wish to do or change in their home country, these activities allow students to learn English without feeling that they must adopt a new, alien identity. As Alptekin (1993) puts it, “English already represents many cultures and it can be used by anyone as a means to express any cultural heritage and any value system” (p. 7). If students begin to see English as a means of communicating their own culture, heritage, and worldview to the global community, instead of an unwelcome interloper that chops away at these things, then their interest in learning it will hopefully be kindled. Incorporating local culture into the classroom is an effective way to show students that their own culture is valuable and important, as well as allowing them to focus more on language learning, without having to learn alien cultural markers. A final principle is maintaining a healthy balance between presentations of Western culture and

local culture. As stated by Choudhury (2014), there are some aspects of English, particularly idioms, proverbs, and ways of thinking, that are simply too moored in Western culture to be taught without context, especially regarding material that students might read or listen to. Choudhury gives the example of a quote from Churchill that was loaded with Biblical allusions, including one that many Westerners would not understand. While it may be a bit of a stretch to assume English language learners would be reading or listening to anything from Churchill, especially those at the beginning level, the point still stands that some concepts students will encounter require extra explanation. The goal, then, is to explain elements like these in such a way that students are not only exposed to another culture's history or worldview but are able to look at their own culture and examine it more critically.

Part of learning another language can also mean learning that other people think and view the world in a different manner from oneself, which leads to students having a more robust view of the world around them. These four principles only scratch the surface of what makes an English teacher or curriculum successful and culturally sensitive, but they provide starting guidelines for those who wish to work in the profession of TESL. By taking these four principles into account, TESL educators can go a long way towards creating a classroom and curriculum that not only facilitates language learning but prepares students to participate in the global community.

The Christian Response to Global English Teaching

All these principles are helpful to TESOL teachers regardless of their faith, or lack thereof. But for Christian English teachers, specifically those who feel called into missions, the question takes a slightly different turn. Besides wondering how to navigate

the issue of linguistic imperialism, Christian English teachers also must examine how to best live out their dual callings of faithful teacher and witness of the Gospel. This can be hard to determine, since it is not always plain how to connect Christian faith with English teaching. As Smith and Carvil (2000) write, many of the “heroes of the faith” Christians are called on to emulate are pastors, evangelists, or relief workers. Therefore, Christian English teachers might feel, as Smith and Carvil write, that: “to really serve the Lord, meant following one of these vocations. I had been given little reason to suspect that anyone in the past had shared my peculiar calling, or that it might have any significance in God’s plans. (Smith and Carvil, 2000, p. 19). Snow (2001) addresses this dilemma as well, stating that Christian English Teachers (CETs) face scrutiny from both inside the church and outside of it. Inside the church, from the more conservative side, missions is often viewed firmly within the paradigm of evangelism and church planting. While these two things are certainly important, and English teachers ought to seek out chances to share the gospel with students, the nature of their work does not consistently present chances to do so. This may tempt CETs to justify their work by exaggerating the amount of explicit Christian influence they have, or the amount of interest in Christianity generated. The second dilemma occurs from the more liberal side of the church, who often focus on missions from a social justice angle of giving aid to the neediest in society. Many CETs do not work with this segment of the population—indeed they often work with some of the most elite in society—leading some CETs to again feel the need to justify their ministry (Snow, 2001). Outside the church, as Smith and Carvil (2000) point out, “the idea of approaching foreign language teaching in a Christian manner seems odd, idiosyncratic, perhaps even illegitimate” (p. 20). However, both Smith and Carvil, along

with Snow, show that not only is language teaching present within the history of Christianity, but also that CETs have a unique position in missions as both ambassadors of their own culture, and ambassadors of Christ. Smith and Carvil (2000) detail the foundation for language teaching not only in Christian history, but also in Scripture itself. Starting with the account of Creation, they argue that the divine mandate to be fruitful, multiply, and rule over the earth extended to the realm of language, as demonstrated by Adam's naming of the animals. This linguistic diversity, like everything else, was damaged with the fall, but it is present in the original order of creation. In the account of the Tower of Babel, which many have viewed as God using linguistic diversity as a curse, they suggest that "oppressive uniformity rather than diversity...seems to be associated with sin" (p. 8). They also discuss Israel's dual mandate to be a hearing people and to welcome the stranger (Smith & Carvil, 2000), which bears some resemblance to the idea that foreign language teaching should provide the ability to discuss one's own culture while at the same time gaining a broader perspective of other cultures.

Within Christian history, there was, and still is, a great emphasis placed on translating the Bible into different languages, which began even as far back as the early church (Smith & Carvill, 2000). Men such as Raymond Lull, who campaigned for language colleges in the Middle Ages so that people could be equipped to preach the gospel to all nations; Robert Bacon, who wrote a treatise on the usefulness of language learning; Martin Luther, who called for a reform in language teaching; and Comenius, who offered new paradigms on how to teach foreign languages, all prove that language diversity and teaching is not at all divorced from the theology or history of Christianity

(Smith & Carvill, 2000). They write that considering a Christian perspective on cultural diversity, foreign language teaching, including English teaching, is called to play a special role in the cosmic story of redemption:

It [foreign language teaching] must be shaped by respect for the other as an image bearer of God; it must be eager to hear out the other; and it must be driven by love for God and one's neighbor. In light of these biblical themes, we propose that foreign language education prepares students for two related callings: to be a blessing as strangers in a foreign land, and to be hospitable to strangers in their own homeland. (pp. 57-58)

Far from being bearers of an imperialistic standard, CETs are called to bless their students through English teaching, and in turn enable their students to bless them with knowledge of their home culture and language. CETs should aim to create students who are, "kind, educated, and informed persons with a sense of cultural identity" (p. 74), as well as present them with the traditions often associated with the English language, many times the traditions of the teachers themselves, in a way that causes them to reflect on their own cultural practices, and even change the way they view culture. Smith and Carvill (2000) also examine how the ideas present in a Christian worldview can be used in a classroom, not as a source of outright proselytizing, but as a way of championing, however quietly, the image of God in others. This allows students to examine deeper issues beyond how to ask, "where is the bathroom?" In some contexts, this might look like teaching the vocabulary for religious holidays and customs common in English-speaking countries and encouraging student dialogue about their own religious practices. In other cases, it might be asking students questions like "who is your hero and why,"

“what do you think is wrong in your society,” or “who in your country do you think has done something worthwhile” (Smith & Carvill, 2000, p. 145). Obviously, questions like these would be best in more advanced English classes, but even simpler questions like “what do you want to do when you are older, and why?” or “what would you do with a large amount of money?” allow students to learn to think about deeper questions in English. This not only helps students become better language users, but also encourages them to think in a way that can open doors to conversations outside of class about morality, faith, and values. Snow (2001) covers comparable topics, with more advice specifically for English teachers overseas. He discusses four main ways that CETs can be not only good teachers, but good witnesses as well: by learning the local language, by teaching to the best of one’s ability and doing quality work, by serving those who have a genuine desire and need to learn English, and by acting as a bridge between not only Western culture and other cultures, but also between Christians and those of other faiths, and even Western Christians and Majority World Christians.

English teaching is not designed to supersede traditional church-planting and evangelizing missions, but it is a unique aspect of ministry with its own pitfalls, challenges, and joys. Therefore, for Christians seeking to be English teachers, it is important for them to remember not only the four areas that make up culturally-sensitive English teaching discussed earlier, but to approach their job in the same manner they are called to approach everything else: considering the truths of scripture. The basics of human history can be summarized in four broad stages. First, God created everything, and it was very good. This includes language diversity. But humanity fell, and into that diversity was sown suspicion, mistrust, evil, and a desire to control and dominate.

However, Christ came to earth to restore humanity's relationship to God and to each other, including in the realm of how they relate to different languages and cultures. Finally, one day in heaven, there will be every tribe, tongue, and language represented around the throne of God. These four foundational areas of Christianity undergird everything a CET does in life, especially their teaching. From scripture, we know that our students' diverse backgrounds and native languages are not hurdles or barriers, but unique ways of showing God's glory—as is English and Western culture. Therefore, we can feel a freedom to share what is ours and bless our students with this knowledge. By our teaching, we give them the gift of communicating their hopes, thoughts, dreams, and visions to the wider world. However, scripture also reminds us that not all our students' cultural mores and traditions align with scripture—nor do ours. Our students, lovely and friendly as they may be, are sinners desperately in need of salvation through faith in Christ. Our desire to see them succeed at speaking English is vital, but we should never lose the desire to see them come to know Christ as well. There are many ways of demonstrating the love of God and the truth of the Gospel, and it may look different depending on one's ministry location, but it is a non-negotiable calling that supersedes even our calling as teachers. From the knowledge that Christ came to redeem everything, including language diversity, we feel the freedom to not only teach our language but to learn the language of our students. We are citizens of heaven, and the languages of our Father's world should not intimidate us. Lastly, we take comfort in the knowledge that heaven will be a multi-lingual, multi-cultural event, where the glory and creativity of God is on display in the praises of His people. A key principle for every CET is to approach his or her vocation from a position of humility. We are part of the grander story of God

and we come as neither conquerors nor saviors. As stated earlier, English has not risen to its current global state by any internal superiority. As teachers of a language, CETs bear the responsibility of producing students who can communicate in English about simple matters, as well as important ones. CETs are to bless and give, and to be blessed in return, understanding always that there is more at stake than just students learning a language—they are learning something of God through the ones who teach them.

Conclusion

The goal of conducting this research has been so that CETs will have guidelines and basic principles for language teaching, as well as a biblical perspective on the topic. The hope is that they would teach English neither from a position of bias, nor without the historical implications of English teaching considered, but in a manner that expresses honor, respect, and care for the diverse nature of the world. From examining the current state of English and its global spread, we see that English has not reached its current state through any intrinsic superiority, but through the position of nations it has been spoken in. From looking at the idea of linguistic imperialism, we understand the importance of approaching the position of English teacher from a posture of humility, not of control and power. From studying the impressions and opinions of areas where English has been taught as a second or foreign language, it becomes clear that language teaching always leaves an impact, whether helpful or harmful. Through examining the role that culture plays in language teaching, we see that culture and language are not easily, or practically, separated, and that the goal of the English teacher should not be to make the language “neutral,” but to understand student need; help students to be able to describe their own culture, values, and worldview; and incorporate areas of Western culture into the lesson

where necessary or where there is genuine interest. From there, we form four guidelines of culturally sensitive English teaching: not attempting to push a certain accent or way of speaking onto students, seeking to fulfil the language needs of students, incorporating local culture into the classroom, and maintaining a balance between presenting Western culture and local culture. Finally, through looking at the historical and biblical basis for language learning and teaching, we conclude by realizing that English teachers have an opportunity to impact their students with the language they teach, and be impacted in return, not in an imperialistic way, but in a way full of humility, honor, and joy.

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