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Reinforcement or Resistance? Perspectives on Teaching and Learning English

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REINFORCEMENT OR RESISTANCE?
PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH

by

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B.A. Union University, 2011

A Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree

Department of Speech Communication
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Though I took my first “real” job as an English language teacher just two years ago, I recently realized that I have been “teaching” English for much of my life. My first classes were held when I was in first or second grade, with my friends in Uzbekistan, squatting at the end of a driveway with sticks and drawing English letters in the street dust. Our friends asked for these English lessons often, “lessons” which often turned into help with English homework. As we grew up, my sisters and I learned that we had something others considered special—all our friends’ moms wanted us to “speak English” with their kids, and often parents would offer to pay us to “teach” our language. Our parents taught us to respectfully decline, but we also learned an important lesson: though people were surprised and happy when we spoke their language, they were desperate to speak ours. Long before moving to America, I knew that English is considered to be a highly valuable language. I easily took tutoring positions and eventually a full time job teaching English, but naively expected to be able to maintain a critical approach to English language teaching (ELT) in my program. I soon learned that neither the administration nor the students wanted that. Studying in a critical department for my masters, I constantly struggle with the fact that my studies didn’t often account for the things my students were saying every day. I also knew that my students would likely reject most of the things my classmates and I discussed in my own classes. I learned to my dismay that critical pedagogy and ELT don’t play together in the real world, and I wanted to know why. Hoping for better understanding of my students and some kind of ethical compromise with my job, I decided to interview a small group of friends who are high-level English language learners and non-native speakers in the U.S.

First turning to a sampling of the research literature, however, I saw repeated themes of English as a dominating, hegemonic language. Critical research regarding English language teaching and English language learning around the world has presented English as a tool of

hegemony and domination (Pennycook, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999; Choi, 2003; Matsuda, 2003; Kachru, 2006; Phillipson, 2007; Ha, 2008). One of the first to make the overt claim that English language is not value or moral or power neutral, Phillipson (1992) works to implicate the responsible parties in English hegemony by exposing phrases as “language spread” (it doesn’t spread by itself) or “linguistic hegemony” (*who* has the power to make one language more important than another?). He argues that the spread of English is in fact harmful to other languages, and carries with it deep political implications. Canagarajah (1999) agrees, stating that “the dominance of English is therefore not only a *result* of politico-economic inequalities between the Centre and Periphery, it is also a *cause* of these inequalities” (p. 41).

Yet, paradoxically, some of these same scholars also discuss the ways that English hegemony is resisted in small, daily ways by English language learners (ELL). Along with scholarship about the power and oppression of English around the world, there has emerged research accounting for ways that non-native English speakers and groups resist the hegemony (Canagarajah, 1999; Choi, 2003; Phillipson, 2007; Ha, 2008;) and still others have presented ways of resisting and counter-acting the hegemonic effects of English (Miike, 2008; Thurlow, 2010; Tsuda, 2010). There seems to be a theme of reasonable resistance—in other words, ELLs have strong reasons for learning English that rationalize their decisions, reasons that make English simply a tool to be used for their own personal or cultural gain. This is a form of resistance because the learners are choosing to learn English, they say, and they are choosing to do so for their own purposes.

This paradox I found in the literature, the tension between participation and resistance, was just the beginning of a study in apparent paradoxes—tensions between participants’ ideas and the literature, and tensions within participants’ own narratives. It became clear throughout

the study that English language learning and teaching is an area in which many people feel, live, and express tensions between theory and practice, and experience and ideology.

So, if critical scholars perceive the English language to be dominating other languages, and students are intermittently resisting the language hegemony, what do ELLs perceive the nature and status of English to be, currently? And, is there a place for ELT to simultaneously teach English and participate in resistance efforts? I turn to my participants to begin addressing these questions, because I believe it is necessary to center the voices of non-native-English learners in this discussion, a field often dominated by the native English voices and Western scholarship. These research questions and this approach make my project inherently critical. In the next section, I present a brief ontological framework for the literature and data analysis to follow.

ONTOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A critical approach has been defined by scholars in multiple ways, but for the purpose of this study I situate the work as critical because I focus on the need to address linguistic hegemony through critical pedagogical practices and because I seek to learn the participants' ideas and opinions about improving resistance methods. As a critical scholar, then, I work from the views that power is systemic (Collier, 2002; Halualani & Nakayama, 2010), and that societal and economic hierarchies are rampant and not accidental (Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009). I also assume that a linguistic hegemony implicates an oppressive group of people (Thurlow, 2010; Tsuda, 2010), and that the topic of a language spread cannot be considered in isolation from the people who use and spread it. This is because no part of language is ideologically neutral; power structures affect everything from grammar and phonetics to the language's use and spread (Canagarajah, 1999). Thus, my first research question is, "what do

ELLs perceive the nature and status of English to be, currently?" I also assume that a study of a situation is not enough; the role of both scholarship and pedagogy should be to expose, interrogate, and work toward remediating social inequities (Kincheloe, 2008; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008; Halualani & Nakayama, 2010), and that is why I have included a second research question that is focused on discovering an appropriate mode of action: "is there a place for ELT to simultaneously teach English and participate in resistance efforts?" With these views in mind, I use a combination of different kinds of literature and theory in this study, including both researchers who self-identify as critical, and others who do not.

Positionality

This study is also critical at a personal level, meaning that I am implicated in the topic and in the study. As a White, U.S.-American born woman who was raised and educated in Central Asia and the Middle East, teaching English has always been a difficult space in which I feel ethical tensions. I know that I am privileged in my profession as a White teacher with a native U.S. American accent, and that even if I contest daily the current position of English in the world, many of my students will still see me as a participant in the hegemonic system. I am often dismayed that, even though I have studied five other languages, English is the one that gets me education and my jobs. And while I understand that my students want to learn English, I feel uncomfortable participating in the spread of a language whose impact I have little respect for.

This study is also personal because I collected the data from conversations with close friends. It is difficult to frame friends' experiences in the academically-mandated research structures, asking for permission to record our conversations, working through the tension of friends acting interviewer/interviewee, and not knowing how to frame friends' sentiments as "contributions" in juxtaposition with scholarly literature. I decided to frame the participants'

narratives first in the analysis, then to follow their themes with theoretical work that both resonates and diverges from their ideas. This approach helped me attempt a connection between the two themes I found creating tension in the critical ELL literature, that 1) English is hegemonic, and 2) students have ways of reasonable resistance to that hegemony. I start by trying to outlining the literature surrounding these two themes before I discuss my methods used to collect data. I will then discuss key themes that emerged from my participants' interviews, and conclude with suggestions for students, teachers, and future research. Before I can begin exploring these themes and conclusions, however, I must first study the literature framing the area into which I wish to enter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before beginning to analyze the information my interviews have provided, I turn to an overview of literature that surrounds my topic. To narrow the vast amount of research done in this area, I focus specifically literature by researchers whose work occupies the intersections of English language power study and English language teaching methods. First, I explore the ways they have discussed the English language as a tool of domination, then I focus on the ways that teaching English plays into that system of domination. There are, however, significant tensions in this discussion—regardless of how severely English language hegemony is painted, many people around the world still say they want or need to learn English. So, I explore how the literature discusses students' reasons for wanting or needing English language skills. Finally, I examine the way literature discusses forms of resistance to English language domination and how learners attempt to exercise their agency while operating within the hegemonic system.

Overview of English Language Domination

Many critical communication and linguistic scholars theorize the harm and oppression caused by English language teaching (ELT) (Phillipson, 2007; Tsuda, 2008; Thurlow, 2010). Because there is a small but strong system in place that controls communication today, English occupies a privileged position in global society. Regardless of their achievements in their own languages, students and professionals around the world study English as a second or even fifth language in order to legitimize their scholarship, open opportunities to publish, or simply be able to attend training sessions. Phillipson (2007) conducted an analysis of power structures and the patterns by which English has spread, concluding that the spread of English language is imperialistic and dominating, affecting much more than just the alphabets and words used by people around the world. In other words, though English is taught as a language, it tends to affect the holistic person, doing much more than increasing their phonetic knowledge or vocabulary. This English language imperialism is different than other historical forms of imperialism that were based on military force, but according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994), the most lasting, effective, and harmful forms of colonization and domination are mental and ideological. Language is pivotal to this domination of the mind, because it affects peoples' perceptions, ideas, and, eventually, permeates their culture. And English has proven to be an unusual linguistic case. The ways that English has been spread, and the ways that it has thoroughly taken root in societies and cultures around the world, demonstrate that it is substantially different than other widely-spoken languages in the world today (Kachru, 2006).

English language teaching, then, is seriously implicated in this system of domination. It is a very political project with global and local ramifications (Canagarajah, 2003). There is copious propaganda surrounding English language learning (ELL), ideologies that lead students and professionals to believe that their only way to success, recognition, legitimate accreditation, or a

decent pay check is through English. Regardless of their intentions, the teachers, textbooks, and programs often promote the increasing spread of English over other languages. Similarly, English often represents increased economic opportunities and access to improved social standing for ELLs, and this contributes to the power of the language itself around the world. This means that though there is no physical or military coercion from the West for non-native speakers to learn English, the prospects within learning English are presented as so attractive that English is perceived as a need (Canagarajah, 2003). This phenomenon of English as a perceived need is a strong force behind English language spread around the world, and though it could be termed as a choice for learners, the literature shows that there are heavy political, economic, and social pressures around that choice.

Because of the power hierarchy English has created and maintained over most of the developing countries of the world, English language skills seem to have significant political and economic weight. ELLs perceive lack of English language skills to be a symbol of their social inferiority. Even after acquiring years' worth of English study, many non-native speakers still find themselves at a disadvantage in public discourse, feeling that they still can't measure up to standard English because of an accent, intonation, or vocabulary gap. Simpson (2009) explains that, even with English language skills, many non-native speakers experience marginalization. Similarly, their stories and personhood can be relatively inaudible in English, compared to native speakers' voices and stories. Tsuda (2008) states, "those who cannot speak English fluently are labeled incompetent and thus insulted and perceived to be inferior" (p. 169). ELLs often perceive English skills as a way to have voice in the world, but the reality after years of study can be severely disappointing. Though English seems to promise greater chances at an equal opportunity in the world, the fact is that English has been spread by Western native English

speakers, and thus is positioned to protect the native speakers' best interests (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2001; Matsuda, 2003).

The Role of ELT in English Language Domination

Whether or not English language actually fulfills the promises it appears to make to non-native learners, many non-native speaking countries have effectively reinforced English hegemony in their state-sponsored ELT projects (Choi, 2003; Ha, 2008; Lee, 2008). Firstly, only students with sufficient social capital have the access and opportunity to study English from a young age. In this way, English as a language has been used to reinforce structural and cultural inequalities between people. Often, only people with certain social and economic capital have access to learning English, and then once they learn English, their status and access is enhanced by their new skills. For many, English skills open up new social and economic levels to learners. So, regardless of whether or not those students receive the results they assume English promises, the fact that they started off studying English as higher-class citizens reinforces the apparent hierarchy to other citizens. Secondly, state ELT projects often advertise themselves to society as offering greater opportunities and helping the country to become a better global player in the political or tourism realms. This affects ELL's thinking, leading them to learn English because, for example, there is a "need for the local Chinese employee or salesperson to cater to English-speaking entrepreneurs or clients" (Choi, 2003, p. 676). In this rhetoric, English is presented as a neutral, global language that ELLs can acquire to improve their lives and jobs the way they might acquire a new piece of technology for the same purposes. But language "represents a way of thinking, a mental structure. Learning a language is not simply a tool, it affects people's emotions," and the state ELT projects' rhetoric disguises the political impacts and the power inequalities that come along with catering to English's demands (Tsuda, 2008, p. 256).

Because language is a key part of social and cultural practices that never operate in isolation (Ha, 2008), ELT is implicated in marginalization of other languages around the world. ELT has proved harmful as a form of language hegemony by participating in what Phillipson (1992) terms *linguicism*, which is the process of marginalizing and sometimes eliminating cultural and linguistic forms regarded as inferior to English. Though the West doesn't necessarily label other languages as inferior, the process of constantly portraying English as superior has negative effects on other languages. In many non-native speaking countries, the propaganda of English and Western superiority has been deeply entrenched in society, and though ELL may in fact afford a higher economic standard of living or a wider access to global job positions, it may simultaneously strip learners of roots, identities, cultures, and values (Matsuda, 2003; Asante, 2008; Miike, 2008; Tsuda, 2008).

However, it is important to distinguish between a language itself and the way that its speakers use it. To focus on the language itself as the perpetrator is to shift the blame from the people in power who are causing that language spread. In other words, Western scholars have discussed English language spread as though it spreads by itself, on its own. This removes the people in power from agency, and makes the whole process seem more benign. When scholars discuss "English language spread" there is no subject named, so it is less likely that people ask who or what causes the spread to happen. It just seems natural, because the phrasing seems benign. But the people behind English spread are a group of people in power who are oppressive on multiple fronts in the world. English language dominance is just one of the manifestations of their control. Though, as Canagarajah (1999) points out, language "is just an arbitrary construct," it has been "exploited by politico-economic structure to carry out their own agenda of dominance" (p. 41).

Tsuda (2008) worries that most people in the world, particularly in academia, unquestioningly accept the international use of English as the standard mode of communication. That is why I want to interrogate the English language's social status and to discuss counterstrategies and resistance methods, especially in the scholarly areas of cultural and global discussion. But as Tsuda remarks, "strangely enough, international and intercultural communication studies are quite indifferent to the dominance of English, while sociolinguistics centers around the objective description of the spread of English and thus legitimates the function of English as an international language" (p. 168). The problem is not simply, as Phillipson (1992) suggests, that English is a global, common language that has been chosen for the world by a small group in power. It is that this language does not only function as an international trade language; it has infiltrated even remote cities' social hierarchies. The result is that non-English-speaking people are inevitably disadvantaged in terms of jobs, education, and finances. The hierarchies go even deeper, however. The reality is that, as English has become more widespread, there have also developed hierarchies of accent and pronunciation that prevent the language from actually putting all English speakers on the same playing field (Tsuda, 2008; Ha, 2008; Lee, 2008).

Reasons English Language Learners Want English

Why do we spend all of this time and energy teaching/learning English, then? Phillipson (1992) categorizes English and ELT promotion into three types of approaches: English as having unique capacity, English as having usability, and English as functioning to open opportunities. ELLs often choose to learn English because they know it is the most widely spoken language that will allow them to have a voice in global areas (Ha, 2008). As far as usability, almost all my students in the last three years have rationalized that learning English is better than learning

another language because it is the language of technology and academia. They can use English to improve their careers as well as their general knowledge and technical skills. The idea of open opportunities is one of the strongest motivations behind English learning, and scholars agree: the fact is that improved English skills have been proven to open up economic and academic opportunities for non-native speakers (Canagarajah, 2003; Ha, 2008; Choi, 2003).

While non-native speakers may realize they are buying into a domination scheme, they also know the undeniable benefits that they will likely gain with their English language skills (Ha, 2008). Learners often have to make sacrifices that involve marginalizing family, culture, or other languages in order to study English, but choose to do so anyway. English spread may have dangerous implications for the learners, but that spread is still perceived to be important and necessary. English skills offer increased power and status for many non-native speakers, and this in itself is often motivator enough to overlook potential disadvantages. Especially in countries that are former colonies, English plays a major role in determining social standing and respect (Pennycook, 1994). In many countries, even low-income, low-access members of a culture consider it natural for English to act as a hierarchy-enforcer among their upper classes (Choi, 2003).

Besides the economic and political gains guaranteed by English, there are promises of greater equality and access to voice through English. Ha (2008) explains, “through English, the world cannot only hear voices of the powerless, appreciate values owned by different peoples regardless of what language they speak, what race they belong to, but also see and protest against global exploitations and inequality” (p. 72). Coming from a non-native English speaker, this ideology is a strong promotion of Western democratic values associated with the language. English in this context is presented as a benefit, a great gift that the native-English speaking

countries extend to those ELLs who will work hard enough to earn it. The assumption is that learning English could be a solution to global inequalities (Canagarajah, 2003). Theoretically, if everyone learns English, everyone could share the access and opportunities that are currently monopolized by English speakers, primarily native English speakers. This only seems logical to some learners, Ha (2008) and Canagarajah (2003) explain, because they buy into the idea that they should have to work very hard to achieve access to their goals—access that native speakers are essentially born with.

Tension and Resistance in English Language Teaching

Not all learners believe that English is a superior and equalizing language (Canagarajah, 2003). However, Ha (2008) believes that learners often unconsciously support and reinforce dominant ideologies about English. Some learners may try various small forms of resistance, but often struggle to maintain a mindset that resists English hegemony. As an Australian-trained Vietnamese scholar who works as an English Teacher in Vietnam, Ha explains how her

purpose is to contest the stereotypes constructed by the West about the East, [but] in doing so I happen to reinforce such stereotypes . . . While we are trying to disrupt preconceptions to make the West appreciate our cultures, we subconsciously admit that we are inferior . . . Because many of our fellows have been made to believe that the West is better, so their voices actually reassert such perceptions. (p. 21)

According to Pennycook (1994), Choi (2003), and Canagarajah (1999), there are important ways that English is responded to and resisted by non-native speakers around the world. There is a power/resistance tension between the native-speaking and non-native speaking countries that complicates English hegemony. This resistance is key. Because of the long, strong

history of colonialism, economic power, and all-around domination, non-native speaking countries cannot expect to achieve equality through Western culture, theories, assumptions, or ways (Asante, 2008; Miike, 2008). So, it is important to study the ways that ELLs are not simply passive, accepting receivers of English language and mindset; rather there are varied ways that pushback happens (Phillipson, 2007). These ways are sometimes overt, sometimes more subtle; sometimes critically planned and sometimes subconscious. Non-native speakers' resistance strategies do not necessarily follow Western ideas of "right" ways to resist hegemony, as in Western-fashioned dialogic classroom approaches, or a leveling of student/teacher power distance. Though sometimes weak and almost invisible, resistance efforts are present in ELL schools, as Choi's research demonstrates that, fortunately, domination is "never complete" (p. 677). It is never complete, she says, because learners often find small, mundane ways to make the language or skills personal and relevant.

Literature shows that many ELLs decide to treat English language and culture as a product, an accessory that can be adorned or discarded at will (Canagarajah, 1993; Matsuda, 2003). This in itself is a form of resistance to English hegemony, a resistance of fully integrating Englishness into one's life and identity, and a using of the skills to ones' own advantage. When the learners voice their ability to choose how and when to learn English, they assert their agency. In this case, ELLs treat English as "something to be learnt for its informational value and stored in memory" (Canagarajah, 1993, p. 619). In these situations, ELLs are riding the tension between trying to maintain cultural integrity while simultaneously achieving greater socioeconomic mobility through English. Some students may participate in hegemonic practices as they manage this tension (Canagarajah, 1993). But it's also possible that they participate entirely unwittingly, because the whole ELL process is cloaked so heavily in rhetoric of neutrality, internationalism,

and opportunity. Other literature demonstrates a more insurgent attitude, as in Ha's (2008) call for ELLs to take ownership of English, so that they can become agents with voice in the ways English is discussed, taught, and used. Pennycook (1994) argues that perhaps worldwide English learning can be an impetus for insurgent and alternative knowledges and cultures to emerge. He posits that "if insurgent knowledges can emerge through English, they may have an effect far broader than if they had been voiced in other languages" (p. 325).

English Language Teaching Pedagogy

The apparent challenge, then, is for ELT programs and practitioners to learn to support resistance and insurgent knowledges in their classes, among their students. First, however, that requires that practitioners be aware of both English's hegemony and the need to cultivate healthy resistance. As mentioned earlier, however, scholars doubt that this kind of critical understanding has taken root in ELT communities (Tsuda, 2008). Before strategies can be developed to promote resistance through ELT pedagogy, observations need to be made about the current mentality and approach of ELT.

Through a series of case studies, Thurlow (2010) calls critical interculturalists to reckon with their responsibilities, "recognize that your own acts of cultural identity, like all collective affiliations and actions, are inherently contrastive, hierarchical and exploitative in the sense that they are (and have been) achieved at the expense of others" (p. 16). Commitment to critical intercultural work involves a commitment to redistribution of privileged resources, he argues, both material and symbolic. Particularly, attention needs to be paid to how ELT educators might be participating in and perpetuating English hegemony in harmful ways around the world (Pennycook, 1994; Norton, 1997). Norton (1997) in particular worries that non-native TESOL

educators are integrated into programs in the U.S. that teach them to unquestioningly accept and pass on English language hegemony when they return to their countries around the world.

Almost 15 years ago, Canagarajah (1999) discussed the ways that forms of critical pedagogy were gaining acceptance in many different areas of teaching and education, but generally seemed to be ignored in ELT and language-teaching circles where it “generally has evoked much hostility” (p. 20). In this context, critical pedagogy refers to pedagogical methods that developed out of Paulo Freire’s (1970) literacy work in peasant and marginalized communities in Brazil. Since the original publishing of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critical pedagogy has grown, changed, found applications, taken on different names, and adapted in so many ways that any definition seems simplified and distorted. Critical pedagogy can be referred to for the purposes of this study as a radically anti-traditional mode of education that centers around dialogue and problem posing, or interrogation of the world that surrounds a learner (Freire, 1970, 1998; Wink, 2004; Giroux, 2007; Kincheloe, 2007; Macedo, 2013). This orientation resonates with scholarship on English hegemony and its resistance, because both assume the political and ideologically-imbued nature of language learning, both work to allow for agency in the learners, and both situate learning within the larger systemic structure.

Some studies, such as Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini (2005) and Kincheloe & Stienburg (2008), examine ways that a critical pedagogical approach could help ELT to integrate and center indigenous knowledges as a way to combine forces in resisting hegemony and oppression. Though native speaking countries tend to overlook non-native speakers’ knowledge backgrounds, a critical pedagogical approach would practice recognizing the innate and unique potential of non-native speakers’ offerings. It would develop a nuanced and engaged perspective on the system of English as well as the necessary skills of English. In line with English

hegemony scholars as we saw earlier, critical pedagogy also offers a method for systemic critique and resistance models (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).

It would be problematic, however, to assume that this kind of critical pedagogical approach automatically fits the needs of ELLs around the world today. Canagarajah (1999) deconstructs the Western idea that “process-oriented, student-centered, task-based pedagogies [are] the most efficient means of language acquisition” (p. 106). We cannot completely discount product-oriented pedagogies, even though they are at root dissonant with critical pedagogy as defined here, because there are in fact functions for more linear forms of language acquisition. Matsuda (2003) points out that in traditional banking-model classrooms, students are more able to disassociate culturally and emotionally from the language they are learning. Similarly, Canagarajah (1993) discusses how students that feel removed from the subject material in the classroom are more likely to maintain personal distance from the language and use it just as a stepping stone for a certain job or social status. One function might be the emotional and spiritual disassociation of students from a language that they need to learn to achieve a certain job or social status (Canagarajah, 1993, 1999; Matsuda, 2003). So, a more critical pedagogical approach to teaching English cannot be assumed to counter the language’s dominating hegemonic power. Canagarajah (1999) warns against a “false optimism through classroom empowerment that does not help them interrogate oppressive tendencies outside” (p. 107). There are definite limitations to critical pedagogical approaches in more Eastern cultures, like the process-oriented or dialogue-based classroom, which is foreign to many ELLs’ cultures (Pennycook, 1994, Delpit, 1995).

Despite these tensions, a critical pedagogical approach does have significant resources that ELT could benefit from, such as a commitment to constant questioning and improving as

well as consistently situating the learning in a global, systemic context (Pennycook, 2001). This kind of pedagogical practice could connect learners' contexts and cultural backgrounds to systemic issues and ideologies (Simpson, 2009). Since ELT and ELL have been shown to be saturated in ideology and values, however, my analysis turns to five key informants for insight about the ways that English is being learned, taught, and possibly resisted in their ELT experiences. The following methodology introduces those informants.

METHODOLOGY

Site/Scene

This research is based within the context of graduate students' experiences at a mid-sized state university in the rural Midwest. The university hosts many international students at the graduate and PhD level, and is home to a large intensive English program for non-native students wishing to improve their academic English skills. All the participants and I are connected to and met at the university, though not all the participants were in session at the university during the time this research was conducted.

Participants

When I began this project, I already knew the participants I wanted to research. I wanted to focus on conversations that a group of friends and I had started about this topic, about a year ago, and develop those conversations into interviews and analysis for a formal project. These friends are all non-native English speakers, international students who are completing their graduate degrees in the U.S. All of them are also planning on eventually returning to teach in their home countries. There are five participants total: two men and three women, all of whom have been living or studying in the U.S. between two and six years. Of the five, three are

masters' level students and two are PhD level. Stephy, one of the PhD students, self-identified as a critical scholar and a student of pedagogy; she was the only participant to do so. All of the participants expressed willingness to be identified by their first names for the purposes of the project, but I decided to choose pseudonyms for the final product to provide more precaution in case they change their minds about the exposure later on.

I met Salima soon after arriving in Carbondale, about two and a half years before starting this project. She is from Uzbekistan, the country where I spent twelve years of my childhood, so we instantly became very close friends. She is currently a Masters' student in Linguistics and TESOL, and had expressed interested in writing something together about this topic early on in our friendship. When I first approached her about interviewing for this project, we had three informal conversations about it before conducting the actual interview, and have conversed throughout my writing process over the phone and through email. Salima taught in her country for two years before coming to the U.S. and has taught in both public school and private tutoring settings. Besides English, she speaks Tajik, Russian, Uzbek, Japanese, and Farsi. She began learning English in grade school. Salima is currently in her mid-twenties and she plans to return to Uzbekistan to teach English after she finishes her current program.

Stephy and I became friends in a critical pedagogy class during my graduate program. From the beginning of our friendship, we have been talking about critical pedagogy in Asian cultures and the impact of English on non-native speakers around the world. Though this project came at a very busy time for her, I invited her to participate in an interview because she has been involved in shaping my thinking about this topic throughout my time in graduate school. Besides the interview, she has greatly influenced this project with her reading suggestions and occasional conversations over lunch. Stephy is completing a PhD in Global Studies in Education, and has

taught in her home country, China, in both university and public school settings. She began learning English in middle school, and feels that she is still improving her language skills, in her late twenties. Stephy plans to return to China to teach eventually after completing her program.

Wadha, the third female participant, is from Saudi Arabia and is studying English with the hopes of entering a U.S. PhD program in social work next year. We met a year and a half ago, in an English writing class I taught, and developed a friendship before the class finished. She taught for four years in her country before coming to the U.S., and approached me early on in our class with questions about my teaching style and our class content. I began to confide in her about my struggles teaching English in my program, and we began discussing issues around this topic far before my research started. We switched student-teacher roles around six months ago, when I began studying Arabic with her, and she requested to be interviewed for this project when I first began it. She speaks Arabic as well as English, and began learning English later than the other participants, after her Masters' degree, when she was 38 years old. Now in her early forties, Wadha plans to return to her country and resume her position as a university professor after completing her PhD program.

I interviewed Obb because he and his partner are close friends with whom I have had conversations about English learning and teaching before, and I knew he would be open to share his views and experience without hesitation. I met him one year ago, through his partner who was my coworker. Obb is from Thailand, and speaks Thai and English. He did not teach in Thailand before coming to complete his Masters' in the U.S., but his partner did, for three years. Obb has completed his degree and recently began teaching at an American institution, where he plans to work for a few years before returning to Thailand to teach. He began learning English in grade school, but didn't become serious about the language until after completing his

undergraduate degree in Thailand. He is now in his late thirties, and feels that he has finally begun to speak English more fluently in the last year.

I met Jacques through Salima, who were classmates in the same program. The three of us spent several months together as friends before Salima left town for her Masters' program. Jacques is from Congo, and taught in his country in both public school and private tutoring before coming to the U.S. He is completing his Masters' in Linguistics and TEOSL, and plans to return to Congo after graduation. Because I did my undergraduate degree in Linguistics, the three of us often discussed English and language issues together informally, and I asked him to interview because I expected that he would be excited to participate in the project. Jacques speaks French, Spanish, Bembe, and two national Bantu languages as well as English. He began studying English in 9th grade, and is now in his early twenties. After finishing his study in the U.S., Jacques plans to return to teach English in his city's university.

Interviews

After deciding on my topic and participants, I contacted Salima and Wadha to talk through how I might best approach the project. From these conversations, I developed a general set of interview topics and questions. I began our interviews by referring to the topics or a question, but worked to keep an open mind about the direction and themes discussed. I attempted to follow Lindlof & Taylor's (2011) advice that "sometimes, it requires one to step back (or aside)—to dwell on a topic, to explore the ramifications of a remark, to mentally revise the ideas guiding the interview—before taking the next step forward" (p. 172). I found that the interviews followed a loose formal structure, with frequent detours into narratives, accounts, and explanations. In retrospect, I identified that parts of our conversations could be categorized as what Lindlof and Taylor (2011) call narrative interviews. Our interviews came out of previously

developed friendships, and the participants had full disclosure and participation in shaping the topic of the interviews. Further, they had stories, experiences, and personal investment in the topic that informed and guided our discussions. In many ways, we had “conversations with a purpose” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 163); I worked to elicit the participants’ thoughts, ideas, and stories about the topic and sought to let that information guide the direction of the discussion.

When I contacted each of the participants to ask for and schedule interviews, I explained my topic and goals for the interview ahead of time, letting them know that they didn't have to prepare anything for the interview, but that they were welcome to let me know what parts of the topic and goals they felt most comfortable and willing to discuss. In total, I completed eight interviews: five in person, and three over Skype. Though I didn't know what direction the research would take, I started by following Charmaz' grounded model, progressively creating abstract categories from the data, and found as I went that the data began to synthesize in the categories as I “interpret[ed] them and identifie[d] patterned relationships within them” (2007, p. 83). I knew that I wanted to focus on my participants' ideas and insight about English language learning (ELL) and teaching (ELT), and see where that information would take us. I began the interviews by stating exactly that, giving two or three sample questions I had in mind, and asking if they wanted decide the next direction and steps or questions. Because of the existing relationships and previous conversations with all the participants, this method seemed to work well. The recorded conversations varied greatly in length, from 20 minutes to around 90 minutes. After interviewing, I transcribed the conversations immediately, word for word, and only included my comments and questions when needed to make sense of the participants' answers. In

order to create emotional distance from the interviews, I let them sit for at least 24 hours before reading over them and beginning to look for themes.

Method of Analysis

In analyzing the interview transcripts, I began what Lindlof & Taylor term the “conceptual development” of the analysis (2011, p. 211). I read several times through the participants’ ideas, then began to make categories to better understand and see what they agreed about and had in common. I used paper copies of the transcript, highlighting repeated ideas, terms, and kinds of examples, in a process of open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). After compiling these different parts in different documents, I read through them and began to see several themes emerge. I began to write my ideas out about the themes I saw, and was surprised by some of the themes that seemed to emerge, so I then proceeded to do member checking based on what I was finding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I called Stephy to talk through the patterns, and also asked Obb some questions about the terms and ideas I saw repeated. Through those conversations, I developed six themes, some with two or three sub-parts. Though these themes initially seemed rather separate, the more I read, thought, and wrote, the more connections and overlaps I saw in the data. This interconnectedness is reflected in the analysis that follows this section, and in the final code: access to power.

These themes were the result of a grounded theory process in which I grouped repeated terms and ideas in the participants’ narratives (Charmaz, 2007). This open coding process resulted in several labeled categories, some of which were later collapsed or canceled out, and were compiled into a codebook. Due to the open-ended nature of my research questions, the whole process was an abductive one, gathering ideas and themes from the data itself rather than coming in with a hypothesis to test. Though I did theoretical research prior to the interviews, I

used that literature as a backdrop and context to the participants' data rather than as a way to interpret it.

It is important to note that while these friends have their U.S. and English-learning experiences in common, they have vastly different home cultures and experiences relative to English and their U.S. studies. These differences, however, testify to the strength of the common themes running throughout their thoughts in their interviews. So while the analysis later on provides a concise set of themes and literature correlations drawn collectively from the material, each participant's interview in itself could be alternatively treated as a complete narrative. So, I have tried to maintain the participants' thoughts coherently. I also work to emphasize ways in which their conversations might best dialogue with the literature, and focus on the conclusions and implications that emerge from that dialogue.

Beginning to write and think through the themes that our interviews presented, I foreground the narratives of the participants, using their direct words as often as possible, and sometimes position their ideas and stories in relationship to each other in effort to reconstruct the kind of conversational style in which the interviews and discussions were held. In relating the participants' thoughts to theoretical interpretations, I attempt to connect their grounded experiences with the academic ways that their experiences are discussed by U.S. Americans. I hope that these connections will demonstrate the kinds of tensions experienced by emergent international scholars of higher education in the U.S. The participants all studied U.S. American English, and unless they mention otherwise, mean U.S. American English when they describe the language.

After writing through each main theme with the participants' response data, I stopped and began writing through each main theme again, this time connecting literature and theory to the

themes. The following analysis moves first through each theme based on the participants' information, then works to connect their responses to the literature.

ANALYSIS

From the participants' responses and ideas, six main themes emerged about English language learning (ELL) and teaching (ELT). I determined from our conversations that the participants viewed 1) *English as a necessity* for their lives and many others' lives as well. Though sometimes that necessity was imposed and sometimes personally chosen, the participants also conveyed that they used 2) *English as a tool* to achieve their personal goals. Here, they articulate their agency in learning English on their own terms and for their own purposes. The participants also discussed forms of language 3) *exceptionalism*; the participants tended to treat English as a unique language with unusual standing and capabilities. Some of unusual characteristics developed into important perceived 4) *U.S. American English values*. Another one of the unusual characteristics of English was that the participants largely perceived 5) *English's global impact to be benign*, though a couple did name a handful of potential negative effects of the language. Lastly, there was a general 6) *theme of power* running throughout the narratives.

After analyzing and demonstrating the six themes through the participants' accounts, I turned to the literature to look for connections. After finding the areas of connection, similarity, and discrepancy, I added these theoretical analyses to the end of each thematic section, to mark the ways in which the participants' experiences did and did not match up with academic theory.

English as a Necessity

First, it became clear that the participants viewed English language learning as necessary. The discussion of English language skills as necessary seemed to fall into two main categories,

where the necessity was seen as imposed by a larger structure, and where the necessity seemed to be personally determined. The participants often made generalizations that everyone needs English—for jobs, education, and standard of living. Though they had each made choices to learn English, they articulated that those choices were based on needs. When participants explained their need for English based on societal, global, or structural conditions, they seemed to be controlled by outside forces to need English. I called this the “imposed need,” reflecting the lesser agency participants expressed about this kind of need. However, in the second category of needing English, the participants seemed to have more agency—this is the personal need for English. They had made choices, all as the first in their families, to pursue English skills in order to achieve personal goals or dreams.

I began by asking my participants to talk about their decisions to study English and pursue a U.S. American education. Several explained that it was hardly a choice. They talked about needing English—not just personally, but on a national level. Studying English, Wadha explained, “is really necessary,” and not because her boss or job directly required it but because she perceived it to be the open-minded, progressive route. Also, Obb pointed out, English is the language of access to people, places, even mundane things like movies. Salima agreed, saying that without English, she assumed her country would “be far from the world. I mean, most of the spheres of industry, agriculture, tourism, and engineering are developing internationally because of knowing English.”

English as an imposed necessity.

All the participants agreed that English is a key skill in the global sphere as well as in their personal job and education choices. Their perspectives on the dominance of English in society hinted at a fatalistic understanding. As Obb said, “We can’t change the situation that

people need English, now. We use it for everything.” All of them also indicated, without any apparent value or emotional judgment, that their career paths required them to learn English, a reality which they had both expected and prepared for over the course of their educations at home. They repeatedly indicated that people choose opportunities, and that English comes part and parcel with that choice. It’s not that everyone chooses to study English, it’s that English is the path to certain goals; the native English speakers in power use the language for gatekeeping. Similarly, all the participants associated English with development, something they want for themselves and their countries. Salima pointed out that “English is spoken in most developed countries; as a result it makes English more powerful language to rule the world.” Though only Stephy discussed where/who that gatekeeping might come from (Western systems of domination) or why English might rule the world, all of the participants discussed needing English not because of personal choices, but because of educational or social requirements. Sometimes their need for English seemed to come simply from the fact that the language has power, the kind of power needed to achieve their goals. The participants also did not seem too concerned with why English has that power; they had already accepted it, and had moved on long ago. Jacques narrates about a friend, “She was not like upset about this, saying, Why do they ask me to speak English?!’ No, it’s like, I have found a job, I have to speak English. Because I have to keep my job.” As this example shows, several of the participants related that English is necessary to keep their jobs or achieve academic goals.

English as a personally determined necessity.

The participants were more focused on the choices they personally had made to study English than on the systemic situation of English. The discussion of necessity in ELL uncovered a paradox—the participants felt a certain agency in deciding to learn and study English, yet also

made clear that certain forces had influenced those decisions. The nature of those forces remained somewhat ambiguous, even when I pressed about them. Except for Wadha, all articulated that they had had some basic English classes in elementary school, and that they had had to make conscious choices to pursue English learning seriously both at home and in America, to be able to achieve their educational and job goals.

When asked about their choices to study English, all the participants said their choices were personal; none described force or coercion used on them to learn the language. Rather, they used a rhetoric of decision and choice. Except Wadha, all had early general exposure to English in school but had to intentionally choose to pursue learning the language more fully. When I asked participants about the idea of English being imperialistic, they felt this was an unfair representation, because, as Wadha explained in an informal conversation, no one commands or points a gun at me to learn English. Wadha and Jacques both reacted strongly when I used terms like “forced.” They felt that they had personally chosen, decided, and struggled to learn English. Interestingly, all the participants’ choices to learn English were also individually personal; in all the participants’ extended families, they were the only ones who had English skills beyond basic phrases.

Theoretical connections.

This theme of needing English connected easily to the literature. Phillipson’s (1992) categorization of ELT promotion discussed many of the needs my participants named: English opens opportunities, is widely used, and has a unique position in the world. Similarly, scholars agree with the participants that English does often earn learners higher pay checks, promotions, and scholarships. Tsuda (2008) says that many people around the world have accepted English as the standard for communication. The participants echoed this idea, saying that they need English

to connect with the developing world, to get or keep their jobs, to study at the graduate level. And, except for Stephy, the participants had both accepted and embraced English in this role. As Obb said, they knew that nothing could change the situation at this point the language's establishment and spread. As Ha (2008) and Lee (2008) point out, however, ELLs and their teachers often overlook the fact that English skills are not in fact necessary or even possible for a large majority of the world. Many of the participants discussed how they had accepted and moved on from the idea of English being necessary for their life goals. Theorists such as Asante (2008), Miike (2008), and Tsuda (2008) all discuss how non-native speaking countries and people can work to re-center their own languages and cultures. Their kinds of approaches could help de-center the ideas of learners who have accepted English's status as normal.

English as a Tool

When asked why English is necessary, all the participants pointed to their educational and career goals. They wanted English as a tool to help them achieve their dreams and goals. This theme differed from the theme of *English as necessary* because, in it, participants demonstrated more agency—they wanted to use the language for themselves. They also discussed how English skills can earn them respect and credibility in their jobs and societies. Though the ideas of advancement and respect were occasionally connected by participants, I look at the two themes separately to reflect the different dimensions of the participants' narratives.

English earns educational and career advancement.

Jacques was very candid about why he chose English, explaining that for him, it was directly linked to moving out of the poverty he was born into. He explains how by his junior high years, he “understood that, the more you study, the more opportunities you will have. So it's like,

if you don't study hard, then I will die poor just like all the people in my family . . . if I study hard, I can change my life." English itself did not change his life, but English was the avenue to academic advancement, which he knew could change his family's economic trajectory. For Wadha, English was the only way she knew to get the PhD degree she'd always wanted—since her “university closed the program for the PhD . . . if you want to study, [they] don't offer this, you should go outside. So everyone doesn't want to stay in their level, they want to progress their education, so they decide to go [to an English-speaking country].” Salima and Obb similarly explained that the U.S. simply had the best programs they could access in the graduate fields they wanted.

There were some nuances in the ways the participants discussed this aspect of English learning as well. Obb, Stephy, and Jacques all pointed out that not all people need English, only those who have certain career and educational goals and dreams. This was an area of some dissonance in the interviews—though all the participants repeatedly explained that “everyone needs English,” throughout their narratives it was clear that “everyone” included people like them—able-bodied, educated, financially supported or financially capable students and professionals wanting to pursue higher level jobs and positions.

English earns respect and credibility.

The participants also demonstrated that their English skills associate them with respect and credibility in their home communities. Stephy, Jacques, and Wadha explicitly discussed how English skills are used as a measure of many international students and professionals' value, and narrated how their home societies regard English skills as a mark of credibility. “They encourage people to study in the U.S. because they think it's a really strong education,” Wadha said, and Stephy remarked that “English has taken over as the language that shows your ability.”

Jacques supported the idea of English skills marking personal skill and ability. He argued that the world needs a consistent Standard English—not just so that people can better understand each other, but so that people can demonstrate their proficiency compared to the standard.

Theoretical connections.

Pennycook (1994) talks about English marking a person's deserved standing and respect in the non-native speaking society, and this idea lines up directly with the ways that the participants said their English skills earn them respect and credibility. This is true both in the U.S. where they are studying and in their home countries. Choi (2003) and Ha (2008) agree that many programs and governments in non-native speaking countries actively propagate these ideas that English will improve learners' and businesses' reputations. The difficulty is that many scholars would agree that the respect and credibility may be real in the ELLs home countries, but can be little more than a façade in native-speaking countries where the ELLs are studying or working. Pennycook (2001) and Matsuda (2003) would argue that, in the end, English is really only set up to benefit the dominant group.

Choi (2003) and Phillipson (2007) write about the ways that ELLs resist English, and the participants connect to their theories by demonstrating a utilitarian mindset towards English. In other words, when ELLs decide to treat English simply as a means to an end, they may avoid immersion in the language's values, mindset, and ideology. Scholars describe ways in which ELLs resist in this utilitarian way, and interestingly the participants used very similar terms when describing why they need and how they use English (Canagarajah, 1993). As Canagarajah (1993) describes about his study, my participants often discussed English as necessary for its information and benefits. The difficulty is that, for this kind of approach to be categorized as resistance according to the literature, the participants should be treating English only as a tool to

be used, without any ideological or value influence. However, other parts of the interviews and conversations demonstrate that the participants do, in fact, see English as more than just an arbitrary accessory.

English as Exceptional

In the comparisons of languages and discussions of English hierarchies, I began to see a more latent theme emerge: the participants treated English with a degree of exceptionalism. Reflective of the political term *American exceptionalism* (Said, 1993) this English language exceptionalism includes ideas that the language is unusual or extraordinary, that it doesn't fit or follow the general norms, or that it deserves benefits or treatment beyond the ordinary. For example, there were ideas that it is *the* international language, and it can open minds and opportunities that nothing else can (Wadha, Jacques, Obb). There was also an idea that English can be used simply as a language tool (Salima, Wadha). When the participants treated English this way in their narratives, they described an agency, an ability to use English without consequences or values attached. Though they mentioned ways that other languages had invaded their countries and caused change in value and culture, they seemed to think that using English would not have a similar effect because of English's unique nature.

English as a simple language tool.

Most of the participants conveyed opinions that they can use English without English using or affecting them. Salima explained in detail how Russian becoming her country's second language has affected all areas of society, worrying that "children forget their traditions, they are becoming Russianized." However, when I asked her about any connection or similarities between English and Russian, she explained that people don't view English the same way—it "is a foreign language." Obb, also, wanted "to say that my English, it's not really affect my Thai or

my culture. I mean, it's true, sometimes I feel like I am a different person because of using English, speaking English, and start to think like in English. But it's not make me want to forget Thai, or ignore my culture.” While several of the participants mentioned languages of groups that had formerly colonized their areas, they did not consider English to be colonizing or detrimental to their societies in any ways worth mentioning in our interviews. They associated colonization with force and violence, rather than with opened opportunities and economic enrichment, which is what they perceive English to be offering.

Similarly, when asked, all the participants said they considered English just another language—not superior to other languages in any way. This was an interesting contrast with the consistent rhetoric of English as necessary. Wadha said she felt that, even if families raised their children to speak English, people will always keep their own languages as well. She explained that her mother language allows her to express herself in a way English doesn't, and “I will talk in Arabic. I like my language, and other people feel this way. But we just have also another language.” Jacques agreed, explaining that he can speak four national and tribal languages fluently, as well as French and English, and didn't feel that any of his other languages were threatened by English. Paradoxically, he later pointed out in the interview that English was more useful than one of his tribal languages, his mother's language, because he can speak other common languages with relatives who speak that language, and because the language offered him nothing for his future. However, English was not what had made the other language obsolete; so English was not implicated. English is just another language Jacques can use when needed.

English as Honest and Credible

The participants also repeatedly discussed another element of exceptionalism about English, that English can open peoples' minds and ideas as well as their opportunities. In this theme, English is unusual in the way that values are automatically attached to it—that it's credible, or progressive, or creative. Sometimes, the values are associated with the country or culture as well as the language. Jacques explained part of why his studies in the U.S. would change his life back home, because "America to us . . . it represents honesty. We know America is honest." Because of this reputation of credibility, Wadha explained that academics in her country consider an American degree to be the most respected, the best option for PhD students studying abroad. She didn't explain why this was the case, but she didn't consider even a British education to be comparable. "If you just want to go out for a while, and make your salary go up, okay, go to the U.K. But the U.S. is always better." Later on in our conversation, Wadha talked about wanting her students to learn and use English because "they can be thinking more creatively and critically if we can use English." Here again, she considers English, especially learned in America, as a way to become more open-minded and creative. Salima used the same two words to describe her professors in her American graduate program—she considers them unique because they "encourage to think creatively and critically."

Jacques made a similar point, explaining the difference in prestige between fluency in French and fluency in English for Congolese people.

If there is someone working at the French embassy, for example, we look at his job, it's an okay job. It's not great . . . I mean, I don't know, they colonized us, but we have a hard time to connect with them, and so it's not as valued. On the other hand, if there is someone working at the American embassy, even if he is a person cleaning the floor, he is more highly valued. Because that is America.

Jacques mentioned French and their colonization of the Congo a few times throughout the interview, but did not make a direct connection between history with France and the reduced prestige associated with France. Rather, he emphasized instead the qualities and opportunities that he saw as making U.S. America and American English more respected.

Both Obb and Wadha talked about English making people more “open-minded,” a term they used repeatedly to describe acceptance of new ideas, access to new worldviews, and liberal tendencies. They cited this open-mindedness as an important reason to learn English, one of the reasons that they needed the language. Part of Wadha’s motivations also centered around having more control over her materials as a teacher. She explained that the curriculum for her classes in the past had always been selected, reviewed, and sometimes censored by members of university administration who knew English. She felt that the books she had access to in her university, even in English, wouldn’t help her open herself to new ideas. Studying in English in the U.S., however, “it opens your mind to the new ideas, something you never know or thought of it before.” Salima also commented that her country’s “educational system doesn’t encourage students to think out of the book [outside the box].” After studying in America, she feels that her mindset has changed and she wants to teach her future students to think more critically when she returns home. Obb, also, said that an important part of learning English is that it “opens your mind. It gives like some new ideas and worldviews, you know, and that’s so good, to open your mind to bigger.” He went on to say that many people don’t have the opportunity to expand their mindsets and ideas, because they just know one language. Wadha, Obb, and the other participants discussed several other languages each in our conversations; however, English was the only language to which they attached definitely value labels. English was attached to values of newness, open-mindedness, creativity, modernity, and critical thinking.

Theoretical connections.

The idea of English promoting or allowing open-mindedness seemed unusual to me, but Ha (2008) demonstrates that this mentality is relatively common among ELLs. She comments that English is often positioned as offering equality, an understanding of global situations, and appreciation of a multiplicity of values and viewpoints. Wadha's and Obb's narratives both resonate with Ha's depiction. Jacques' s discussion of American English representing fairness also exemplified the kind of rhetoric Canagarajah (2003) names, where English is a force against inequality. Though some of the literature connects with the ways the participants discussed this theme, Asante (2008) and other critical language scholars would argue that the system of power around and behind English is too strong for non-native speakers to think they can truly infiltrate it. Miike (2008) argues that, rather than buy into the freedom rhetoric English parades, non-native speakers should learn to value, study, publish in, and promote their own cultural heritages and languages. This approach is the only way to truly resist the hegemony, as Miike (2008) and Tsuda (2008) agree.

English as Relatively Benign

Looking at the list of values above, I noticed that all of them are portrayed as positive attributes. Throughout our conversations, also, I interpreted that the participants considered English to be a benign language—not threatening or harmful to themselves or to their cultures or languages. In several of the interviews, I began sensing the non-threatening tone and followed up later in the conversation by asking more directly whether the participant considered the English language to be in any way harmful or threatening. Each participant responded differently to my follow-up questions. So, in the interest of understanding more individual and complete

perspectives on English's negative potential, I look at each participant's thoughts separately below.

Stephy was the only participant to point out that "language is not a neutral tool," and gave illustrations about the way that English standards can affect students' mentalities, causing them to base their self-worth on the level of their fluency. She explained that, from her perspective, English learning tends come with "whole other social and cultural issues." Her phrasing, "not neutral" came up three times in the conversation, and was one of the most negative of all comments made by all the participants about the effects of English. As she is the only participant with critical training, it was not surprising that her responses differed in this area.

After being asked directly, Obb also conceded that there may be negative repercussions to English spread. He comments that "maybe it's a problem. Some people start to say that. . . . and it has some negative things with it, maybe we can try to stop that in other ways." However, he was concerned that the negatives of English not be seen to outweigh the benefits. "But we can't stop using English," he protested. "If we do that, it will close our education, close our opportunities." For him, a reduction of English learning and skills for his people would mean loss of access to opportunities, books, and "real information." After I asked more questions, he suggested that perhaps some attitudes might need to be changed, starting with Westerners' mindsets. Interestingly, these comments came after considerable probing into a single comment he made. Earlier in the interview, Obb had told me: "About your topic, something, I want to say that my English, it's not really affect my Thai or my culture." Also, he equated English with his education, his job, and commented that he never wanted his children to think English is more important than Thai. Following our discussion of possible negative associations with English, he

explained that he thinks people mistakenly conflate the results of English with its values.

However, he urged that people not attach values to English just because of what it can do or get for them. He concluded this advice saying that English has its status “because of the international world and the academics and politics, not because the language is better.”

Compared to the other participants, Salima most directly discussed potential negative effects of English. For her, everything has a positive and negative side—the negative side of English is that, as a world language, it could endanger other languages. She connected this language danger to other areas of society, too, commenting that if English becomes the first world language, “there will be no variety in languages, cultures, and traditions” because if a language dies, culture is also at risk. Though she doesn’t consider English a personal threat or a real danger for her country and culture and languages, she did say that other peoples’ national languages or minority languages might disappear if English continues to grow in power and use.

For Jacques and Wadha, it seemed that my questions about potential negative perspectives of English were unexpected and surprising. Jacques explained at length the opportunities and benefits that English offered people in his country. He also said that American education shouldn’t think they hurt him or his people. He said, “we don’t feel that America is doing something bad, or English is hurting our culture or language or something, we don’t feel that way.” He repeated the ways that English opens access, commenting that not having English would mean not being open to people, not understanding people, and not being able to help people. Because of English, he feels that Congolese people have many opportunities, and have fair chances. With Americans, he explains, “you feel that it is fair. They have transparency . . . you don’t have to worry about corruption, paying extra money, or needing connections.”

Throughout our conversation, Jacques showed how American English, for him, represented

goodness and trust. “So,” he concluded, “we don’t feel that they are imposing, or like, American English should stop no. No.”

Wadha also responded strongly, discounting ideas of English being problematic or negative. For her, it was simple—“we need English.” She was worried that, if English spread were considered negatively, it would cost her the access she had worked so hard for. She mentioned access to information, research, and being published. Then, she gave an example about the internet, “how the ministry of defense in America had the internet for a long time, but then they finally allowed it to the rest of the world.” This example made two points—first, that English has been the language of global information spread from the beginning; second, like the internet, English has finally spread to be learned and used in the rest of the world. She concludes, then, that she needs English if she wants to know and participate in information creation and sharing. Secondly, she has just recently gained access to English and does not want anything to threaten that access. Finally, I asked her if she thinks there are any people who are upset about English spreading everywhere. She answered:

No, not really. Because even the religious extremists in Saudia [Arabia], they are happy that they can learn to communicate and understand the enemy. So, they are happy, they are okay with it. We can’t, we don’t even want to complain about this.

Theoretical connections.

Choi (2003) observed that non-native English speaking nations often present English skills as neutral, global language that aspiring professionals need in order to participate in the world economy and cater to Western country’s markets. The participants’ narratives show the influence of this kind of neutral rhetoric, which I termed a “benign” understanding of English earlier in the analysis. However, some of the participants did agree that there may be negative

repercussion of English language spread. Stephy's comment about English not being a neutral tool was directly in line with Tsuda's (2008) explanation that learning a language involves learning a way of thinking, and can impact people's personalities and feelings. However, Obb pointed out that the benefits of English outweigh potential disadvantages. This is an inversion of many critical scholars' analyses of the English spread situation. They argue that, though there are benefits that come with English, the learners and their countries make immeasurable sacrifices (Asante, 2008; Miike, 2008). Obb also connected the political and international system to English's superiority, a connection which is in harmony with Canagarajah's (1999) theory that the language has been exploited by the nations in power.

English Language as Powerful

Though issues of power were present throughout the other themes in both subtle and obvious ways, the participants also made more direct references to power. This theme of power appeared in two main ways. First, participants were concerned about their access to power, and named English as the key to that access. Second, participants mentioned the role of English in distribution of power in their home cultures and in their professions globally.

Access to Power.

There were several times in the conversations where the participants demonstrated a need to retain English in order to maintain a share in power. For the participants, English spread seemed to be connected with a spread of power. Like in Wadha's internet analogy above, the participants seemed to feel that having an English voice gave them an ownership and agency, a share in the Western power and access. When I asked questions about English language teaching being problematic, unfair, or slanted, all except Stephy seemed afraid to lose access to learning and improving their English. They articulated that, without their English skills, they'd be locked

out from education, information, jobs, social status, greater respect, ability to develop, and on and on. Salima and Jacques commented many times of the humanitarian, tourism, environmental, and other non-governmental organizations in their countries which operated through English: without that English foundation, their countries would likely not be able to host these kinds of businesses and organizations. Salima also explained that English's spread to her country is likely the primary reason that her country has entered global markets for agriculture and engineering. Obb agreed, saying that people in his country really “can’t stop using English” at this point.

Distribution of Power.

The participants’ narratives also made it clear that English plays a key role in the distribution of power in their societies. Though she commented that it is problematic, Stephy also considered it common that “we use English as the language to judge people’s ability and smartness.” Not all people have the same access or capital in relation to English language learning and skills, but English has taken over as the language that shows your abilities, she said. Among non-native speakers, the idea of Standard English enforces differentiation between what Jacques called “kinds of English.” Jacques and Stephy agreed that those with English affected by an African accent or a thick Asian pronunciation are considered inferior. Their skills need further refining. Jacques elaborated on this idea, saying that he didn’t agree with a World Englishes approach because, to him, that means settling for something less useful. He prefers a standard approach to English, because “if I am taught Standard English, if I can sound more like an American English, then I can communicate, I can go anywhere.” Wadha also perceived some Englishes to have more power than others, with American English being “the best option.”

Theoretical connections.

The way that the participants discussed hierarchies within English matches up with Simpson's (2009) observation that non-native speakers often struggle to compete with native speakers' standard accents and pronunciation. Along with that, Tsuda (2008) comments that a lack of perceivably fluent English is often regarded as a marker of inadequacy and stupidity. The participants' discussions of their struggles with accents lined up exactly with that. They narrate wanting to learn "the best" English, in America, and wanting to perfect their accents, vocabulary, and intonation as much as possible in order to achieve closest possible proximity to native speakers. Choi (2003) demonstrates how English has been used in many places as a determiner of social status, and this was reinforced by the participants' stories about the power associated with different kinds of English language skills.

In general, there was significant tension between the participants' data and the theoretical literature. After finishing my grounded analysis, I looked back over what the scholars said and found that they had predicted several areas of the participants' narratives. At the same time, I found a lack of connection in areas of critical perspective. In discussions of power and language values, the participants and the literature seem to be at odds. In the next section, I will develop how these tensions relate to my initial project questions, then discuss the limitations of this study and thoughts about a future extension of the research.

CONCLUSIONS

Research Questions and Answers

I began this study hoping to explore critical pedagogy and its applicability to ELT, but my participants did not feel comfortable exploring that area. After my advisor urged me to pursue the topic a bit further, I asked some of them a second time in second-round interviews to discuss pedagogy with me. The participants were still reluctant, and I finally decided to follow

their themes instead of looking for my own. This study became what my participants made it— an exploration of the position and impact of the English language in their lives and choices. This practical knowledge of my participants has helped me situate a global, abstract topic in local, familiar voices. Knowing the perspectives of key scholars on English language learning and teaching around the world allows me to understand how the topic is framed, presented, and criticized.

Based on the literature I read and my participants' narratives, I was able to answer my first research question more clearly than my second. My first question was open, seeking to learn more about my participants' perspectives on the current nature of English language learning. The themes I discussed and analyzed revealed a survey of the background and motivations behind my participants' ELL experiences in various countries around the world. The interviews demonstrated that my participants have many perceptions in common about English, specifically U.S. American English, and that the participants had very similar motivations for learning English despite their vastly different cultures, backgrounds, and skills. The participants discussed their reasons for needing to learn English, and their narratives connected directly with the theory I read prior to conducting the research. The participants demonstrated both personal needs for English as well as systemically-enforced needs for English language skills. Though they termed their choices as "needs," they also were clear about their agency in the process, emphasizing that no one had forced them to learn English, but that they needed the skills to be able to pursue the goals they had for themselves.

Besides the discussion of needing to learn English, the participants also connected directly with the theory I read in terms of their discussions of language hierarchies and native/non-native speaker tensions. Throughout the interviews, there were clear themes of

language hierarchy. The participants discussed very clear power distances between varieties of English, and between people with varying levels of English language skill. Along with that, the participants repeatedly discussed differences in power and prestige between native and non-native English speakers, regardless of skill level. ELL researchers and theorists agree about these hierarchies, though the participants seemed to be more accepting of the status quo than the theory implied they might be.

Interestingly, the participants consistently discussed English language spread as a relatively benign phenomenon. It was not clear whether this was an internalized rhetoric or an actual belief, because several participants also made observations and comments at other times that belied the neutrality of English. The participants, similarly, all accepted the global status of English, suggesting a belief that nothing can really change the way that English now controls the global market and academic world. Not all theorists agree with this perspective, particularly writers who are working to promote development of an Asia-centric or Afro-centric scholarship (Asante, 2008; Miike, 2008). My participants seemed certain that more and more people will continue to learn English; in fact, all of them are actively encouraging friends and relatives to do so. They recognize potential disadvantages of English's status as an international language, but rather than fight the system, they focused on getting involved in it.

The second question was more of a personal implications question—can teachers, with the information we have, find ways to teach English to non-native speakers in a resistance-supportive way? In other words, how can I teach English language without reinforcing the values and power structure associated with it? I do not feel that this question has been entirely answered by my limited research here. However, I started to form a perspective of a pedagogy that encourages participatory resistance. By this I mean a resistance method that plays by the

system's rules to a certain extent, with the goal of working resistance in small, personal, everyday ways. For example, participants mentioned teaching students in the U.S. to better understand and respect other languages and cultures. They also mentioned the need for teachers that encourage an open-minded approach to learning and curriculum, and a reduction of censorship in terms of materials. The participants seemed sure that the demand for ELT will only continue to grow, and seemed concerned that the access should continue to be extended to non-native speakers through high-quality programs and excellent teachers. From the perspectives they shared, it seemed that I would more likely be considered an ally in resistance if I continued teaching in a critical way, than if I quit ELT to work in another arena. I say that because the participants' suggestions about ways to improve ELT all included the work of teachers who have more critical perspectives and respect for the learners. In a later follow up conversation, Wadha pointed out that a native-English speaking teacher with a critical approach could potentially effect more change in the ELT discourse than a native speaking teacher, at least now, while many learners are indoctrinated by the native/non-native English hierarchy. That is because learners are more likely to view the native speaker as credible and respectable. Despite this apparent need for critical ELT educators, I struggle with the ways that my participants discussed and viewed English and need to continue research about ways to work in ELT in a transformative, resistant way.

Limitations and Future Ideas

One of the reasons I struggle to form a solid perspective on the second research question, I believe, is that my participants and I did not spend much time discussing pedagogy and resistance directly. I thought that, because we are all teachers, we would want to bring in a pedagogical component to the research. Because of that assumption, I developed a small critical

pedagogy section in my literature review and included interview questions about the topic. However, after I wrote the proposal, I began informal conversations with some of my participants. It was here that I realized my mistake—I had proposed to my advisors this pedagogical component that I assumed my participants would want to explore, but I didn't actually consult the participants directly about it. Wanting to adhere closer to my original purpose—to focus on the participants' ideas and insights, not my ideas—I asked them what things they might want to talk about, what questions they felt would be appropriate for an interview, and what areas of the topic they felt comfortable for me to quote and analyze.

In some ways, then, this approach limited my project because we focused only on the topics and themes that the participants brought up. Because I used an emergent grounded theory approach, the project depended on the participants' themes, not on a hypothesis or agenda I chose (Charmaz, 2007). In a future study with a longer time frame, it would be interesting to pursue multiple rounds of interviews around a set of readings or a mini-course. This would follow a focus-group format in which the researcher would provide some outside topics and information but still use a grounded, emergent approach when analyzing the participants' responses to the materials over the course of the study. In particular, I would have liked to include a discussion of basic critical pedagogy materials, so that my participants might have felt more comfortable discussing that topic in our conversations.

The sample size was very small, only five participants, so a larger group of informants would likely also have expanded the kinds of topics and themes we discussed. Even though all the participants were from different countries and had vastly different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, many of their responses and narratives were surprisingly similar. I had planned to conduct a group interview, but participants' travel schedules didn't allow that—

perhaps a group interview would have further highlighted ways in which the participants' ideas and experiences overlap.

So, in the future, I would hope to include more focus on critical pedagogy and its role in supporting resistance. One way to do this might be to prepare a mini-course on critical pedagogy and work with participants who either already know about the subject or really want to learn about it. Then, the study might use a focus group approach with the participants as they learn and process the critical pedagogy material and relate it to their experiences. A future study might also be enhanced by focus on at least two group interviews, whether or not they are conducted in a focus group style. This could enrich the discussion and perhaps develop a more cohesive, co-constructed perspective on all the topics by all the participants together.

Final Thoughts

Though not always overtly discussed by the participants, this project was permeated by issues of power. All of the participants saw learning English as a path to power, and used their opportunities in English to advance their social and economic statuses. Through this, they become sharers (at a certain level) in the power system that previously held them out. The participants discussed the ways that language hierarchies and gatekeeping affect them as non-native speakers, but there was another relatively hidden dimension to the conversation: the participants are still the only ones in their extended families that are fluent in English, which puts them at a different level in the global and local power structures that surround them. Like the participants, I too have chosen to use English for my education and job, though I could have chosen other routes. What motivates those choices? Surely necessity, as some participants explained, and also access to information. But the underlying impetus behind choosing English? It is the more powerful choice. With degrees and jobs in English, we become part of an elite

group in the world; that is undeniable. Resistance work as described earlier in this paper, then, is also resistance work against parts of ourselves. Though as a Western-trained critical scholar I was looking for matters of power in certain terms, the participants demonstrated different ways and perspectives on discussing the dynamics surrounding ELT. Throughout the study, I encountered various paradoxes of ideas, experiences, and narratives. This is clear in the analysis section, and even within individual themes. My participants helped me work through a desire to resolve the apparent tensions, and urged me rather to accept the in-congruencies as part and parcel of English Language spread, learning, and teaching. I also began to explore and learn from those paradoxes, rather than trying to square them away. Ending this study, now, I no longer work at the ELT program in which I met many of the participants. I have found that my participants' accounts pushed me to try different forms of ELT practice, to explore how I can best discuss English and present a critical perspective while still meeting my students' needs in terms of skill development and materials instruction. I have become more aware of the rhetoric students use to discuss their ELL process and motivations. And, I have become more aware of the privilege that surrounds the choices we have made, like the decision to be writing this research report in English, for example. The next steps are to explore and learn more about how and where to put that privilege to work in service of resistance.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol*

1. Tell me about your current program of study. And what do you think of it? Is it what you expected? Do you feel it is preparing you well to teach in your home country?
2. When did you start learning English?
3. When did you begin to feel comfortable and/or fluent in English?
4. How many of your friends and family members speak English?
5. What percent of people in your area do you think speak English fluently?
6. Why did you decide to learn English?
7. What do you think of the way that English is a “world” language?
8. How do you think people in your country and culture think or feel about English?
9. How has English affected your country/people, from your perspective?
10. What are ways to make English learning or access more just?
11. How can teachers teach ELL in a more helpful, respectful, or critical way?
12. What does “critical thinking” mean to you?
13. Many people, both researchers and students, talk about the kind of English language as a form of domination or hegemony. What have you heard about that? And what do you think?

* Not all questions were addressed with all participants. Also, many more sub questions and follow-up questions were pursued in each individual interview as each participant’s answers led in different directions and to different themes.

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