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Ethical subjectivity and ontologies of English: implications for social justice in English language education

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Ethical subjectivity: Who we think we are

We are two English language teachers, mother (Rachel) and daughter (Clara); one born in the UK and currently teaching about English language teaching at a university in the UK, and one born in Indonesia and currently teaching English in Japan. In this chapter, we focus on the hiring, teaching and testing practices that constitute what 'English' is. We explore our own roles in these practices, and how these practices work by excluding options for individuals and groups, thereby limiting their freedom to be what/who they might like to be. We show how we have tried to take responsibility for challenging these exclusionary effects.

Our aim in writing this chapter is to demonstrate that thinking about 'English' is a necessary first step in deciding how we want to teach English in ways, and with outcomes, that we consider to be ethical, that is, socially just. We have tried to write the chapter in a way that makes it obvious how we have arrived at where we are; through being born in a particular place, educated in a particular way, and having had the teaching experiences that we have had so far.

We hope that this attempt (to show how we have arrived at where we are) will allow our readers to consider the circumstances/resources and actions on which their own selves are contingent. We also hope that awareness of these contingencies offers the possibility of being, thinking and doing different selves. In order to do socially just work, we think that it is very important to try to understand how we have built/claimed our identities, how we play our part within social groups, what we are capable of, and what we should (not) hope for and fear, and how we could be different. This is an approach that has been described as a way of attempting to dismantle the hierarchy between teachers and students and, in this case, us as writers and you as a reader of our chapter; a 'pedagogy of vulnerability' (Christodoulidi, 2023). The 'care of the self' that we attempt to show in our writing is a form of ethical practice that is not 'self-care', in the popular sense of promoting one's own well-being, but a social practice that requires us to curate our selves, and to pay careful attention to how we become our selves through our interactions and relationships, and to the effects of our selves on others (Foucault, 1984, Foucault 2000). As Shin (2022: 106) explains,

what the self is, does, and thinks serves as a resource for other's experiments in constructing who they are and wish to become. The care of the self thus involves a chain of reciprocal obligations [...]. In this interdependent, dialectic relationship, the practice of the care of the self is a political phenomenon that ultimately cultivates the disposition and capacity to position oneself as the Other [...]. Indeed, the construction of ethical subjectivity can be understood as art [...].

For us, social justice in English language learning and teaching is, as Charity Hudley and Flores (2022) say in their epilogue to a special edition of the Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, not a conclusion, but a way of moving forward, of taking action. The action we are taking here is our

critical engagement with ideas 'out there' through critical engagement with our own ideas and experiences – reflecting on how we are complicit with social injustices in English language teaching but also as a way of bringing alternative ways of thinking and being into practice. Specifically, in writing a chapter about socially just English language education we hope to serve as a resource for you, as our reader, and to provide encouragement for you to be accountable for the constitutive effects of your thinking on yourself and on your students and fellow teachers. In their introduction to a book on vulnerability, challenge and risk, inspired by the British Association for Applied Linguistics annual meeting at York St John University in 2018, Cunningham and Hall (2021: 4) sum up this aim,

As applied linguists we need to challenge ourselves to be individually and collectively vulnerable [...] and take appropriate actions in our teaching, research and activism as a result of this work.

Vulnerability is a technology of resistance (Butler et al, 2016) which offers us an opportunity to take responsibility for social injustices by attempting to create an environment (in this chapter) in which we as writers, and you as our reader, can learn (see Charura & Clyburn, 2023, for an example from psychotherapy research). In the case of this chapter, our critique of our own understanding of 'English' is an attempt to show, as transparently as we can, how the care of the 'self' is a political activity. What we think we are, as English language teachers, is related to what we think English is. It is these assumptions that participate in the creation of structures which, in turn, create opportunities and limitations for our students. If we wish to take 'appropriate actions' towards social justice in language education, we need to accept and respond to the ethical challenge of knowing our selves (in the ontological and political sense) and observing the effects we may have on the possibilities for our students and their learning. Ethical subjectivity, or paying attention to our selves (as Charity Hudley & Flores, 2022, also argue) and the role that our ontologies of English play in our understanding of self is, as we hope to demonstrate here, an important component in the creation of a journey towards social justice in English language education.

We begin the creation of this resource with a description of Rachel's early encounters with the question of what English is, as an English language teacher trainee, and then in her first teaching job. Again, our aim is not to reveal what is unknown or hidden about ourselves, though that is one way in which this chapter could be read, but to create some examples of the circumstances in which we learned, and what the consequences of this learning were for our selves, as teachers, and for our students.

2. Rachel's classroom encounters with 'English'

One of my first encounters with the 'language' part of the phrase 'language education' happened in a classroom, in the first few weeks of my first teaching job, a critical incident that I will return to later in this section. At the time of the critical incident, I had recently completed an undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature. In the summer after graduation, I moved to London and took a four-week pre-service English language teacher training course, which was then called the RSA/UCLES Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (CTEFLA), now known as the Cambridge English Language Assessment Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA). The conceptualisation of English as a *foreign* language in the title of my course is one that continues to have a profound influence on much of the English language teaching profession. Manifestations of this influence include: a focus in classrooms and in research on 'errors'; beliefs about 'negative transfer' from the learners' other languages to English; the valorisation of the 'native speaker' and of 'native' varieties of English as more intelligible than 'non-native' varieties, and therefore the best 'target' for all learners; and the characterisation of learners as deficient

monolinguals rather than incipient bilinguals. The introduction to a book still used on some pre-service teacher training courses illustrates some of these assumptions,

This book is a practical reference guide for teachers of a foreign language. It is meant to help teachers to anticipate the characteristic difficulties of learners of English who speak particular mother tongues, and to understand how these difficulties arise. (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. ix)

The chapters in the book *Learner English* have sections on the geographical distribution of a variety of different named languages (Arabic, Indonesian, Spanish etc.), followed by descriptions of how the phonology, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary of the languages differ from 'English'. The differences between these languages and English ('standard British', that there may be other varieties is not acknowledged), are assumed to predict and to explain learners' communication problems. Misunderstanding is conceptualised as a deficiency of individual interactants, namely, English language learners, rather than as an interactive phenomenon, or as an inevitable feature of all communication no matter which language is being used (Taylor, 1992). It is assumed that the job of an English language teacher is to help students learn 'the English' they need to avoid misunderstandings when communicating with other users, often assumed to be 'native speakers', of English.

Back to my first critical incident. By September, I was teaching English at a girls' boarding school in India and re-cycling the lesson plans I had sweated over on the CTEFLA. My pupils were very polite indeed, but I could tell that something was wrong with my teaching. My carefully crafted situational presentations, designed for example, to contrast the present perfect with the past simple, were very boring. Eventually, I realised that one of the reasons, and there were probably several, for my boring teaching was the lack of challenge in my lessons. But it was not simply that my pupils were more advanced learners of English than I had realised, it was that they weren't learners at all, they were users. Of course, the learner/user dichotomy is a false one; all learners are users and all users are learners. But what I gradually realised was that English was not a foreign language to my pupils, no more than it was to me. We had all already enjoyed reading the novels of Charles Dickens. I abandoned the presentations of bits of grammar and vocabulary from my four-week CTEFLA course, kept some of the task design and classroom management elements, and switched over to teaching literature written in English, in its many varieties, over various times and places.

This account of my classroom encounters with language may appear to be one of English language versus English literature. Even at the time, however, I realised that it wasn't so simple. It was something much more interesting about what a named language, such as English, is and what the implications are for teachers of that language. The borders of English were less clear than I had thought at the end of my CTEFLA and the centre of English wasn't in London, or in any other place. It was also beginning to be clear to me that the question of what a named language, such as English, 'is' is not only a factual one (in the sense of what things are and how we know what they are) but also an ethical one (in the sense that the answers to 'what/how' have benefits and drawbacks for different individual users and groups of users).

I had already experienced the benefits of an association between English and England in getting my first job as an English teacher with only a four-week training course. The benefits to the UK economy of this association were made clear by a visit to India in 2008 by the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. In a speech made during his visit he promised a 'new gift' to the people of India – the English language. The speech promised increased business and access to knowledge, as well as improved progress and respect for other nations and cultures. The gift, he claimed, was to help, 'anyone - however impoverished and however far away' (Brown, 2008). The speech did not mention the disrespect, economic and political troubles experienced between, and within, countries where

English was already spoken. It also did not take account of the fact that, as my students taught me, English is well-established in India, having, by the time of Brown's visit, been used by multi-lingual speakers for many, many generations (Gargesh, 2006).

Questions of what a named language 'is' are especially relevant to English, given the promotion of English as a 'global' language of business, science, diplomacy, education, and the simultaneous description of it as a 'foreign' language to users outside of a short list of countries in which it is assumed to be used by all citizens. Scholars of English have explored this question of what named languages, such as English, 'are' from a variety of perspectives, including critical applied linguistics, World Englishes, English as a lingua franca, translanguaging, and post-humanist applied linguistics (Hall & Wicaksono, forthcoming). Having started this chapter with my route into the profession, I now show how I began to engage with some of these new perspectives.

3. Linguistic imperialism

After a year teaching English in India and another year teaching English in the UK, I got my third job, at a teacher training college in East Java, Indonesia. There I was employed to teach English to student teachers of English for Junior and Senior High School, on a programme that was sponsored by the UK government. Journal articles were not available to me at this early stage of my teaching career; the internet was not yet accessible, and I didn't belong to a university library. I had some English language teaching coursebooks, published by either Oxford or Cambridge University Press, a couple of books about teaching methods, and I bought a few more books from bookshops, as I came across them. One of the first of these, and one of the best, was Robert Phillipson's 'Linguistic Imperialism', published in 1992. Phillipson documents how the spread of English around the world was linked to the agendas of the multinational business community, and the economic and political interests of the UK and US governments. As a teacher on a UK government-sponsored project, reading this book was my second critical incident,

That there are now several centres of power that compete in promoting several native models of English and market distinct [English language teaching] methodologies cannot be denied. The motivation is clearly the exploitation of the economic power of English, as is obvious from the following quote: 'As the Director of a dynamic worldwide chain of English language schools puts it, "Once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad, now we are sending English teachers"'. (Phillipson, 1992: 8)

The speech by Gordon Brown, made after I had returned to the UK, showed how strong the idea was/is that English is exportable from England, for the benefit of the English. As an English teacher on a UK government-sponsored programme in year that 'Linguistic Imperialism' was published, this was a critique that I had to consider. Notwithstanding my four-week training course, I didn't know very much about English or about teaching. I was in Indonesia because of UK government funding and the belief (hope?) of the leaders of the teacher training college in East Java that I would be able to benefit the learning of the student teachers there. The motivation for the Indonesian government in accepting UK-funded workers is not clear to me, though seems likely to be more about relations between governments (diplomacy) and bi-lateral trade (gunboats) than any desire to learn English from quite poorly trained and inexperienced teachers. The students themselves were somewhat interested in English football, of which I knew nothing, and in hearing about my annual trips to Singapore to renew my visa. Singapore was where some of them imagined their best possible future and Singaporean English was their 'target variety'. The belief in my competence, as a user of English and as a teacher, was strong enough on the part of the Indonesian government and the leaders of the teacher training college for them to be willing to accept my presence there, though there may

have been other political benefits. But the students were not particularly interested in my 'native models of English'.

The idea of 'native' models and speakers of a language is controversial (see for example, Firth & Wagner, 2007). 'Native speakerism' is the assumption that the desired outcome of additional language learning is, in all cases, 'native' competence in the 'standard' variety, and that native speakers have, therefore, an inbuilt advantage as language users and teachers. 'Nativity' is also often conflated with nationality. Since national borders are not consistent with linguistic ones however, this geography-based native/second/foreign typology is extremely problematic. In addition, the terms (non-) native speaker idealise what are extremely heterogeneous groups of language users (Canagarajah, 1999; Davies, 2013; Joseph, 2017). And in fact, there is, as Clara's account near the end of this chapter shows:

- lexico-grammatical and phonological variation within all languages (depending on the age, location, education, job, hobbies, religion, ethnicity, subculture, gender, etc. of the speaker);
- no accent-free version of any language;
- variation within the language use of individuals, depending on their role in the conversation and their relationship with their interlocutor;
- mixing of languages for maximum communicative effect by multilingual speakers;
- no clear boundary between 'native' and 'non-native' users of a language, with some users who have learned a language at school or later in their life indistinguishable from those who have used a language since birth.

I have tried to write about the idea of the 'native speaker' of English in TESOL (Wicaksono, 2020), because of its ongoing global influence on decisions relating to the hiring and pay of English language teachers. As Canagarajah (1999) and Firth and Wagner (2007), amongst others, have pointed out, the linguistic resources we acquire are the ones that surround us in childhood, but acquisition continues into adulthood, and we use these resources flexibly depending on our communicative context. But the concept of 'native speaker' of English as it is used in hiring decisions is not related to context-specific communicative competence and has little to do with English language learners' imagined future selves. 'Native speaker', as it is used in hiring decisions, is instead related to passports and visas, and to the marketing strategies of English language schools and colleges. The reality of linguistic imperialism had made it easy for me to get jobs as an English language teacher and has sold millions of copies of the course books, published by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, that I used in India and in Indonesia. What I had found there, however, was that the students I had taught were only somewhat interested in the 'gift' of English, and only as far as this 'gift' could be used as an addition to their existing communicative competence and re-purposed for their own current/future needs.

4. World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca

After several years of teaching in Indonesia, I (Rachel) came back to the UK and got a job at York St John University, where I taught 'international' students on an English for academic purposes foundation programme and 'home' students on an undergraduate TESOL programme. By that time, I had also completed the Cambridge Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults, an MA TESOL, and had started a doctoral programme in Education. With access to a university library, I continued to explore ways of thinking about English that challenge the passport-based understanding of English and the prescriptivist attitudes which have historically characterised much of the English language teaching profession.

As part of my doctoral research into the navigation of understanding in mixed 'home' and 'international' student groups I explored the world Englishes literature. World Englishes scholars Braj

Kachru and Cecil Nelson (1996) have argued that speakers of established 'new' varieties of English such as Indian or Singaporean English are not attempting to sound like speakers of British or American English. Kachru's three circle model of the spread of English (Kachru, 1992) describes speakers of these 'new' Englishes as being in an 'Outer circle', with speakers in the UK, USA, Australia etc. in the 'Inner circle' and all other speakers (in, for example, Indonesia) in the 'Expanding circle'. Speakers in the Outer circle, like those in the Inner circle, are likely to have grown up speaking a well-established variety of English; though unlike speakers in the Inner circle, they are much more likely to be multilingual.

Kachru's model of Inner, Outer and Expanding circles of English has itself been challenged for, amongst other things, its privileging of colonial Englishes, and its positioning of these varieties of English as separable from other varieties and more central than them (Jenkins, 2003; responded to by Kachru in 2005). Despite these criticisms, Kachru and Nelson's (1996) argument that labelling the English of whole speech communities as 'fossilised' (and therefore deficient) ignores the socio-historical development and socio-cultural context of local Englishes and is the result of a monolingual bias, is a powerful one, and one that I had seen play out in my teaching in India and in Indonesia.

Work associated with the World Englishes paradigm also foregrounded the interactional, and unpredictable, nature of the English that is used in international contexts. Smith and Nelson (1985: 333), for example, showed how 'intelligibility is not speaker or listener-centred but is interactional between speaker and hearer', and how 'being intelligible means being understood by an interlocutor at a given time in a given situation' (Nelson, 1982: 59). The conceptualisation of intelligibility as interactionally accomplished links intelligibility to specific contexts of use, involving factors related to the speaker, the listener, the linguistic and social context, and the environment.

A more broadly interactive approach to the use of English between speakers of different languages suggests that 'language awareness' is the key to effective communication. Canagarajah (2007), for example, claims that successful lingua franca users,

are able to monitor each other's language proficiency to determine mutually the appropriate grammar, lexical range and pragmatic conventions that would ensure intelligibility. (Canagarajah, 2007: 923 - 924)

I also drew on the work of scholars of English as Lingua Franca (ELF), including Jennifer Jenkins (2002) and Barbara Seidlhofer (2001). Jenkins' work with university students on TESOL programmes documented the phonological features of ELF. These features are part of what Jenkins, in her early work, labelled the 'Lingua Franca Core'; the elements of English which international communicators need to have in their repertoire for possible use in ELF situations, where they are most likely to be used and understood.

The data collected for my doctoral research aimed to shed light on the use of English by pairs and small groups of 'international' students on the foundation programme and 'home' students on the undergraduate TESOL programme at York St John University. I audio-recorded the students talking about their learning experiences in the past and present, transcribed these recordings and then used an applied conversation analysis-inspired approach to describe how (mis)understanding was navigated. Corpus analyses such as those carried out by ELF researchers have obtained traces of consistent use of phonological and lexico-grammatical features by a selected group of speakers who are assumed to have their communicative context in common. I found, however, that, while 'lingua franca' usage was one possible context for the interaction between my students, I was not able to predict in advance what purchase this context (as opposed to all the other contexts in simultaneous operation) had over their actual language. The analysis of my data also showed that there is no

causal relationship between speaking an Inner circle ('native speaker') variety of English and being intelligible in an international context. I concluded that it is vitally important for all speakers of English (including those in the Inner circle) to be willing to practise adjusting their speech in order to be intelligible to interlocutors from a wide range of language backgrounds. The potential consequences of this position for TESOL, and for UK universities aiming to produce internationally competent graduates, are profound; undermining all previous assumptions about users of Inner Circle or 'native speakers' as the ideal users and teachers of English.

5. Changing Englishes with and for English language teachers

As well as teaching foundation and undergraduate students, I was also teaching on the MA TESOL at York St John. On the MA programme, I had the opportunity to work with both intending and experienced teachers of English from around the world. Together with students on the programme, as well as alumni who had returned to their English language teaching roles, we explored the extent to which their colleagues continued to adhere to ideas about a 'standard' language, against which other varieties are judged. The belief in a standard form of English has long held a very powerful grip on the TESOL profession, despite research which has shown that 'standard' varieties of English are inevitably social rather than cognitive entities (Hall, 2005; Hall, 2014) and that individual speakers have their own unique, though overlapping, linguistic repertoires (idiolects).

Working with two graduates of the MA programme, and their Head of Department, we conducted a study of the ways in which English language teachers at a university in China conceptualised 'English' (Hall *et al*, 2013; Hall *et al*, 2017). Interviews with the teachers suggested that they did believe in a 'standard' English, as a variety with a core and clear boundaries outside of which only non-standard English existed. Our data showed, however, that these 'monolithic' conceptualisations of English were associated primarily with classroom contexts, and that they tended to be associated with the teaching of grammar. In seeming contrast to these ideas, we also found that the teachers understood English to be varied and dynamic in use outside of the classroom, and that these more 'plurilithic' conceptions of English were associated with the use of lexis and pronunciation.

The next phase of our work was to create an online course, launched in 2013, to support teachers to challenge the deficit view of learning inherent in monolithic understandings of English: www.changingenglishes.online. Throughout the five units of the course, teachers are invited to ask themselves the following questions:

- What *is* English?
- How is it *used* beyond the classroom
- How is it *learned* in the classroom
- How is it *learned* beyond the classroom
- What does this mean for my *teaching* How can I influence *policy* about English learning, teaching, and use?

Working with my students on the MA TESOL programme, during and after their studies, and with my colleagues at York St John, allowed me to start to understand that English isn't only varied in its use around the world and in different situations, but that it is varied in its conceptualisation – that is, what its users, learners and teachers think it 'is'. This realisation led to another project, described in the next section, which resulted in the development of an ontological framework for English (Hall, 2020).

6. Constructing an ontological framework for English: connecting theory to social justice

The project, which took place over about six years, had two components: a seminar at York St John (in 2015), funded by the British Association for Applied Linguistics and Cambridge University Press, entitled '(De)Constructing Englishes', and an edited book (Hall & Wicaksono, 2020). At the seminar, we invited a small group of scholars to talk about conceptualisations of English, and the effects of these understandings on students and teachers in various first and second language learning contexts.

In chapter two of the edited book that came out of the seminar, Hall (2020) outlines a four-part framework that shows how 'English' corresponds to a series of ontological categories of different, but related, entities which are significant for English language learning, teaching and assessment. The four domains of the framework are: social, expressive, notional and cognitive. In the social domain are conceptualisations of English as a phenomenon that relates to group activity and identity, including groups that are believed to be unified by their membership of a nation. This is the understanding of English that underpins 'native speakerism'; the idea that there is a single linguistic code, the so-called 'standard variety' that maps onto political borders and from which any variation is either a 'dialect' or 'incorrect'. In the expressive domain are the novels of Charles Dickens, and other products (of the cognitive potential for language and the activation of this potential via social interaction) that get described as 'English'. In the notional domain are ideas about English as something that can be abstracted from actual users and remain representative of their language use. The generalisations about grammar and phonology to be found in English language teaching course books are an example of this type of thinking about 'English', as are language policies which prioritise the preservation of a language over the needs of its current users (Sayers, 2023). Finally, in the cognitive domain are ideas about English as a set of individual cognitive resources, which develop through experiences, and which overlap with the resources of language users who have had similar experiences. In thinking about English at the level of the individual learner/user, rather than at the level of the group, we are reminded of the benefits for learners who are recognised as individuals, and the potential drawbacks for individuals when the needs of a/n (imagined) group are prioritised.

Contributors to the seminar and to the book showed, in a variety of contexts, how fair, effective and valid teaching and assessment of English is most likely when teachers have an awareness of how they are theorising English, in other words, of their ontology of English. Without such an awareness teachers risk teaching and assessing something that their students cannot have (for example, because it is an ideal that no language user has) or don't want (for example, because it is a product that their students don't have access to or that they consider irrelevant to them). The question of what things 'are', and how we know, has, therefore, profound implications for social justice. Without careful consideration of our ontological commitments (to an idea of English and to an idea of our professional selves), we risk professional practice that is both unfair and unsustainable.

Most recently, I have begun to think and write with colleagues (Hall & Wicaksono, forthcoming) about how 'English' may no longer be a meaningful concept for multilingual users/learner who are deploying (or who want to learn how to deploy) a wide range of linguistic resources that are integrated with a wide range of other ways of communicating (see also, Kim & Canagarajah, 2021; Pennycook & Otsuji 2022). Perhaps the labelling of things as 'English' benefits only very few people (including me), some publishing companies, and, via the income generated by testing, some national governments. A 'post-English' scenario, I now think, is much more likely to be a more comprehensively socially just one. As to how this scenario could be brought in to sharper focus, my current teaching, in 'research methods' modules, continues to explore questions of what things are, how we think we know (for example, in Wicaksono & Zhuravskaya, 2020), and what the benefits and drawbacks for individuals and group might be, now and in the future.

In the next section of this chapter, we look towards this future, turning to Clara's early encounters with the question of what English is, as an English language teacher trainee, and then in her first teaching job. As we said at the beginning, our aim is not to reveal what is unknown or hidden about ourselves, though that is one way in which this chapter could be read, but to create some examples of the circumstances in which we learned, and what the consequences of this learning were for our selves, as English language teachers, and for our students.

7. Clara's classroom encounters with 'English'

A post-English scenario is already part of my students' present. I regularly notice their skilful deployment of a rich range of communicative resources (including things that they have learned at school, and in class with me, which might be described as 'English') in their professional and personal lives. But I also notice that being 'an English teacher' can be a barrier to their acceptance of themselves as skilful communicators. This version of my self, which seems to imply that English is something I 'have' and that can be 'taught' to my students, is both unhelpful and helpful. It sets up an understanding of English as something that my students have not yet got, but it does get them in to the classroom with me, where we can notice the effect of our communicative resources on each other.

As for the circumstances which have brought me to where I currently am, I studied at the University of the Arts, London, graduating with a BA in Fine Art, and an MA in Culture, Criticism and Curation for which I wrote a dissertation on 'belonging' in relation to colonization in cultural institutions. My educational background is one that I'll always be grateful for, in encouraging me to question what institutions are. I never thought I would find myself teaching English like both my parents.

To be honest, I took a Cambridge CELTA course (almost exactly the same course that my mum took more than thirty years ago), because I needed a way to fund my desire to live in different countries around the world, rather than out of any interest in English or in teaching. This sceptical start, together with the research I had done for my Master's dissertation, led me to ask many questions during the CELTA; for example, in a unit on correcting student's 'errors'. The main language I spoke in my early childhood was Indonesian. Probably due to this, there are some so-called 'errors' that I still make in my English today, such as my pronunciation of 'computer' with an 'n' sound in the middle.

Despite being a secret 'non-native' speaker of English, I qualified with the highest grade on my CELTA course. But when I began to apply for English Teaching jobs, I realised how unimportant this qualification actually was to my hireability compared to my British passport and 'native speaker' label, which were requirements of every job I applied for (and received offers from).

I now work in a small town in Japan that I've fallen in love with. I work in a senior teaching position (despite my lack of experience) in a type of English Language school called 英会話学校 (Eikaiwa gakkō). 英会話学校 translates to 'conversation school', typically privately operated and marketed as providing an opportunity to use English.

My students are great, they all have very interesting lives and are enthusiastic about learning English. Recently, I asked one of them, a doctor learning English in her spare time incredibly diligently, what she thought it meant to be 'fluent' in a language. She responded that her ideas of fluency were to be able to speak with (what she and others considered to be) a 'beauty' and a 'natural ease'.

I thought again about my language ‘errors’ and my struggles when I first came to England as a child – and how little ‘beauty’ or ‘natural ease’ there was in my experience. Once in a class about sea creatures in primary school, I found the confidence to ask what a ‘limpet’ was (a kind of aquatic snail, with a conical shell, that covers rocks at the British seaside), the whole class laughed at me.

When my mum asked me if I wanted to co-write to this chapter, I wondered what contribution I could make to this discussion, as someone with just over one year of experience of English language teaching. I feel like all I can do is to question the structures which propelled me into the role of English teacher, and how through very slight changes in my life, the same structures might have made it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to be teaching English, as a ‘native speaker’, in Japan. Then again, perhaps it is this transparency/vulnerability that I can encourage and which could, in turn, encourage my students and other English language teachers, regardless of their experience, to ask themselves questions about what English is for them. If a ‘post-English’ scenario is much more likely to be a more comprehensively socially just one, then I am prepared to open up conversations with my students about the circumstances which have brought us to where we are. I will work on raising our awareness of how these circumstances are institutional/political, and how they underpin our understandings of what English is.

8. Socially just language teaching and ethical subjectivity

The account of our selves, ‘who we are’, that we have presented to you in this chapter, is an attempt at objectivity; an attempt that separates us out from each other and from you, our readers. As mother and daughter, despite currently being physically far apart, we are probably pretty psychologically interconnected. But our effort to write about our own roles in, and experiences of, the hiring, teaching and testing practices that constitute what ‘English’ is, has been more of a philosophical than a psychological exercise; an effort to think about the histories and the associated practices of our ‘selves’ in a way that may enable us to think differently.

We hope that our attempt to provide an account of the circumstances we have encountered, and what we think English ‘is’, will allow you, our reader, to consider how you might select/create your own resources. In our experience, as teachers and writers, this ‘pedagogy of vulnerability’ can act as an encouragement to other teachers and English language learners to reflect on, and curate, their own selves and, at the same time, to consider the possibility of different ways of being, thinking and doing. This is a care of the self, an ethical subjectivity that has the potential to bring into being new options for each other, and for our learners.

How to end? In our email correspondence about this chapter, Clara said,

For a conclusion, I wondered if we should/could bring it back to 'teaching'? When I first came to GENKI, I felt this insane pressure in my lessons to 'teach' something. I wonder if it's also important to consider the teacher/student dynamic alongside the 'native'/'non-native'? Ultimately, students should be at the centre of teaching, right? We talked about how if we prescribe and reinforce so-called 'standard' English, we are the 'new gunboats and diplomats'. Not only does questioning 'English' begin to dismantle these structures, but it also recentres the students. We talk about that, but it might be nice if this is the thing we conclude with? What do you think?

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