Christian and critical English language educators in dialogue: Pedagogical and ethical dilemmas

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Is it possible to establish dialogue between camps who differ greatly in basic world view? What are the ethical and professional imperatives of Christian professionals working in cross-cultural settings, and specifically of English teachers? What do these discussions have to do with those not teaching English, but who are Christians seeking to carry out the Great Commission, while serving all and being respectful of all peoples and cultures?

Christian and Critical English Language Educators in Dialogue addresses some of the ethical issues considered by TESOL professionals, especially critics of Christian English teachers who engage in teaching English as a means of gaining entry to countries, where Christian missionaries per se are not welcomed, for the purpose of evangelism. Some of the issues addressed include:

- The exclusivity of Christianity’s claims to be the only way to God and whether this position in itself shows lack of respect for other cultures and religions.
- Lack of transparency of Christian teachers’ motivations in taking teaching positions overseas – is it ethical to take a teaching job overseas (or at home) with the motivation of wanting to proselytize others?
- The lack of professional qualifications of some Christian ESL teachers.
- The question of whether or not it is ethical to teach and thereby promote English as a world language or whether that in itself is linguistic imperialism.
- The identification or self-identification of many Christian ESL teachers with an American conservative political agenda.
- Whether it is ethical for a teacher to reveal or promote herself or her own religious or ethical position, given that teaching is a position of power and students may feel pressure to please or conform to the teacher’s views.

Although this book deals specifically with ethical considerations involved in Teaching English as a Second Language, it has relevance for any Christians working in multicultural settings, and particularly those engaged in teaching or language policy issues. It may facilitate dialogue with
professional colleagues who are suspicious of religious motivations and may sensitize Christians to their concerns.

The first section of the book seeks to establish a platform for discussion between two camps seen as having very different worldviews. One of the editors, Suresh Canagarajah, from Sri Lanka, identifies himself as both an evangelical Christian and as someone critical of some of the practices opposed by other critics in this book. As such he is someone who has a foot in both camps and seeks to establish dialogue. One of the harshest critics, Alistair Pennycook, in his article (Is Dialogue Possible? Anti-intellectualism, Relativism, Politics and Linguistic Ideologies) seems to think there can be no dialogue with evangelical Christians because of the exclusivity of the claims of Christianity. This in itself he finds disrespectful of other religions and cultures because Christians think it would be better if people changed and became Christians. Yet Pennycook is very open about his own values and in fact his agenda, which is to “combat bigotry, homophobia, heteronormativity, racism and sexism” (p. 65). Obviously, he also seeks change yet doesn’t explain how he can seek change and yet be respectful to those religions to whom his values are anathema. Other writers point out that everyone has values and a point of view; the question is to what extent it is ethical to bring these values into the classroom?

One person who seeks to establish groundwork for the possibility of dialogue is Bill Johnston. In his article (Is Dialogue Possible? Challenges to Evangelicals and Non-Evangelicals in English Language Teaching), he sets forth three challenges to evangelical Christian teachers as well as three challenges for their critics. He urges Christian teachers to “come out of hiding,” by which he means to exhibit and take part in the general discussions of the professional TESOL community, rather than using their own publishing houses, training programs, and section of the TESOL convention. This call could be extended to urge Christian professionals in other disciplines to take part in general meetings of their professions and to engage in dialogue in these settings, rather than to separate or sequester themselves. He also urges evangelicals to acknowledge their bed-fellows: that they are primarily associated with the so-called “Christian Right” politics. On the other hand, he urges critics not to “essentialize” or stereotype other groups of people, including evangelical Christians. He also urges both groups to consider “that the other side might be right.”

Section 2 of the book deals with ideological and political dilemmas. Several of the writers address the issues of “power” associated with English as a world language as well as with teachers’ position in a classroom. Sinfree Makoni and Busi Makoni give a very interesting historical account of English and education in Anglophone Africa in their article English and Education in Anglophone Africa: Historical and Current Realities. They point out that missionaries often advocated the use of indigenous African languages, rather than English or French, but that market issues drove English as a language of economic and educational opportunity. They also point out that the African languages adopted by missionaries for teaching or evangelism had an effect on language policy in those countries, but that there was a demand from Africans themselves for education in English because of the advantages it offered.

Those who work in multi-national organizations, including those involved in promoting the use of indigenous languages for education, might consider the “power” issues involved with the use of English as the common language for business meetings and conventions. To what extent does
this decision put partners from other countries at a disadvantage? If English is chosen as the official language, is there an obligation to help partners from other language backgrounds to develop better English skills so that they can be full partners in negotiations and in the work?

To the questions of the extent to which evangelical Christianity is identified with American political conservatism, Canagarajah and other Christians who are not from North America or Europe bring the reminder that Christianity is not a Western religion nor is it defined and controlled by Westerners. Similarly, English is a world language, and there are world Englishes. Several authors raised the question of whether or not English teachers should have the obligation to learn other languages as well as to teach English.

Part 3 of the book discusses pedagogical and professional dilemmas, including the professional standards of teachers, whether or not being a native speaker is either a qualification in itself to be a teacher or even whether or not native speakers make the best English teachers. John Liang of Biola University gives a poignant account of his struggle to find validation as a nonnative English teacher. (The Courage to Teach as a Nonnative English Teacher: The Confessions of a Christian Teacher.) Another ethical issue addressed is that of truthfulness and transparency about the motivations of Christian teachers for working in other countries. The bottom line is whether or not teachers do what they claim to do in their work in other countries. Are English teachers doing a good job of teaching English? Are they following professional standards in the choice of materials for their classes? Are they abusing their power over students if they introduce their own religious views into the classroom or use religious materials as the basis for required English classes? Kitty B. Purgason sets forth Classroom Guidelines for Teachers with Convictions.

All of us aspire to be professional in our work and would do well to consider the professional standards of our field and to make sure that we are abiding by them. The question remains as to whether or not the field has an established code of ethics and if so, who establishes and enforces it?

Part 4 of the book addresses spiritual and ethical dilemmas. Here we return to the question of the exclusivity of the gospel in the claims of Jesus to be the only way to God. This in itself is offensive to many, including some of the contributors to this volume, such as Ryuko Kubota, who describes her hurt and shock at having her cultural identity denied by being given a book that stated that all religion apart from Christianity were false. The great commission, with its directive to go and make disciples of all nations, is also an offense to many, but as Zoltan Dörnyei points out in The English Language and the Word of God it is hardly a secret agenda, being one of the most commonly quoted passages in the Bible. Everyone has values, everyone has ways in which they hope the world would change, and many people work toward that end. Christians, whether English teachers or other educators, are not unique in this, but should be aware of the ethics of their profession, of the laws of the countries in which they work, and of the choices they are making in the exercise of their profession. They should also be aware of how they are perceived by others who are not in their communities of practice. This book is helpful in pointing out the struggles of one group of Christian professionals, as they wrestle with this dilemma and with their critics. It can inform us all.