Chapter 5
"Inconclusive Present"

5.1 Research Summary

Having conceptualized identity and critical pedagogy as ever-growing and changing, taking unpredictable shapes and untimely forms, it would be disingenuous to end a narrative of identity transformation and an imperative for constant questioning with a "Conclusion." Instead, my title for this chapter takes its name from Bakhtin (1981), and emphasizes both the open-ended, ongoing nature of identities, and the perpetual process of problematizing our assumptions, which is required by critical pedagogy. In this chapter, I will attempt to report the lessons that I have learned from my experiences with Mayumi, which have in turn shaped my attitudes and beliefs about teaching. In doing so, I will suggest steps we can take as educators to restructure and reshape TESOL into a field that is both more critical of the global capitalism and inequities which often underpin it in practice, and more understanding of the actual needs and desires of its practitioners. Through this I hope to address this work's original aims, (1) to show how one woman, Mayumi, was able to use TESOL to reach her goals and how doing so interacted with processes of identification and (2) how critical pedagogy, a focus on identity and subjective narrative inquiry can further our understanding of TESOL.

5.2 Problematizing TESOL by Understanding "Linguistic Postmodernity" and Multilingual Identities

In preparation for this paper, I interviewed a young woman from a Chinese community in northern Thailand, Joy, who claims to have spoken exclusively the Akha language in her home until she was about four or five, though she never learned to write it. Around the same time as she began learning Thai in public schools, she began learning Chinese in private schools. Because her community was mostly Chinese, but included other Akha and Lahu, Chinese became the language she used most often to socialize with friends and neighbors, though she also sometimes

PAYAP UNIVERSITY

switched to Akha or Lahu. Thai meanwhile became the language she used for school and, after leaving her Chinese community, for her professional life. Add to this an eagerness to communicate with her basic understanding of English and, I would argue, by the multicultural standards of today's globalized world, she has been a very successful language-learner – a role-model for future multilingual generations. Nevertheless, her achievements in all four languages cause her insecurities because of the pressures to be a "native-speaker" and the unfulfilled desires to be accepted by any of the four arguably imaginary groups which influence her desires. By a monolingual's standards, she has no "native" language. Today, her Akha is shaky but comes back to her quickly when visiting her parents, she feels insecure about her Chinese when speaking to Chinese people (this is the group she most strongly identifies with), and her Thai friends sometimes remind her that her Thai is not perfect. In addition, were any of her languages to be "measured" by the general standardized means (and TESOL practitioners would also ask she pay nearly a month's salary for the opportunity to be quantified in such a manner) I doubt the values generated would reveal her competency. She would fail the test, fail to gain access to professional or academic goals that such tests guard, and suffer further insecurity, greater envy, and perhaps increasing ambivalence toward the imaginary group which rejects her membership. This process is both destructive to the learners' sense of identity and to the field of TESOL, for having lost a realistic role-model for multilingual identity in favor of the idealized learners portrayed in my former school's lesson books (often chatting to NESs about borrowing tennis rackets or going shopping).

David Graddol discusses recent trends in English learning and the current trajectory of the field in *English Next* (2006). In this work, Graddol demonstrates how beliefs and attitudes regarding language-learning have been reflected by paradigmatic shifts in human history: he calls such shifts the Premodern, the Modern, and the Postmodern. For the Premodern paradigm, Graddol says, "Foreign is the next valley or village," "languages are not standardised and codified but vary according to geography," and "people learn new languages through contact and use different languages for different purposes" (p. 19). Next, Graddol characterizes the Modern paradigm – as indicated by 19th century Western culture wherein Enlightenment science, capitalist economies and colonial expansion signify power – with the following attributes in regards to language: "nation states provide new unified basis for identity and hence a new understanding of 'foreign,'" "national, standardised languages serve multiple communicative functions," and "nations strive to become monolingual: regional languages are marginalised or suppressed" (p. 19). Finally, Graddol points to a future of "linguistic postmodernity," wherein "identity is more complex, fluid, contradictory," "society and families are more fragmented," and "multilingualism becomes the norm," (p. 19). Graddol argues that the postmodern era can be characterized by the expansion of communications technology, globalisation,

PAYAP UNIVERSITY

and “the erosion of national boundaries, greater multilingualism, and fluidity in identity,” (p. 21).

By this model, TESOL’s international agenda follows markedly modernist epistemologies. TESOL tends to assume that English is a standardized structure, exemplified by its use in its largely monolingual “native-speaking” countries, and that learners ought to imitate such an example. In reality, languages change and if NNESs must speak like NESs, they will constantly be playing catch up. TESOL also tends to assume that “progress” in language learning can be measured, even pinpointed (for example, on a scale from 10 to 990 as TOEIC figures it), and that it is indicated by continued and hierarchical movement upward. As I have shown in Chapter 2, such psychometric preoccupation was influenced by behavioral and cognitive psychology, neither of which attempted to account for the social or contextual interaction between mind and body. When we do account for such interaction, as I have attempted in Chapter 4, we see that more complex processes are taking place than those which could be measured by TOEIC or modeled with boxes and arrows. Such measurements are no more useful for language learners than knowing one’s “IQ” could be for a high-school graduate trying to get into college.

If, by contrast, a postmodern, multilingual model is constructed and positioned as goal for language learners, my Akha friend discussed above can be repositioned from “failure of many languages” to positive role-model. Likewise, as many of the excerpts in 4.6 demonstrated, TESOL practitioners, including myself, are currently quite capable of interpreting Mayumi’s story, ultimately, as a failure to complete her transformation rather than as an empowering and very real example of how language learning and processes of identification mitigated by power, struggle, and desire, play out. In doing so, we risk constructing our own imagined identities on behalf of our students, thereby depending on Western discourses regarding the liberation and emancipation of women especially, from countries perceived as being oppressive and anti-feminist. “The ‘immigrant woman’ […] turning her back on her own kind to grasp freedom and opportunity in the United States is one of America’s most resonant foundational images,” (Kelsky, 1999, p. 245). Therefore, to serve the actual needs of 21st century learners and to foster shifting “postmodern” understandings of multilingual or inter-lingual identities, TESOL must be able to easily conceptualize Mayumi’s transformation from learner to teacher as a positive role model – an arrival to the profession, a legitimate claiming of ownership of English, and a re-structuring of her sense of identity. Through much struggle and anguish, Mayumi managed to claim professional success and to simultaneously cast off illusions and stereotypes from both Japanese and Western discourses, thereby constructing for herself a truly trans-national identity.

PAYAP UNIVERSITY

5.3 Reshaping TESOL

Critical Pedagogy, as a tool for exploring society's dominant discourses, assumptions and myths, and understanding richer and deeper meanings and contexts, gives TESOL practitioners the opportunity to reflect on, and problematize, their own experiences. It would be overly-simplistic and oddly hypocritical for me to present a list of generalized rules here as clear-cut implications for other teachers in other situations. The lessons that I learned through my experiences with Mayumi and my attempt to critically reflect on the experience are, by design, the opposite of the knowledge produced by Kincheloe's FIDUROD or Freire's Banking Education (discussed in Chapter 2). What I take away from the experience is therefore subjective, highly contextualized, and still changing, and the point of Critical Pedagogy is, after all, to constantly pose problems, not to solve them. However, by viewing TESOL from a perspective grounded in Critical Pedagogy and a focus on identity, I was able to problematize the following issues, thought to underpin TESOL in many of the contexts in which it is internationally practiced. Individual teachers may discover their own unique "solutions."

5.3.1 TESOL's Inequitable Power Relations

In *Ideology and Curriculum* (1990), critical pedagogue, Apple, argues that "one of the most fundamental questions we should ask about the schooling process is 'What knowledge is of the most worth? [...] a better way of phrasing this question, a way that highlights the profoundly political nature of educational debate, is 'Whose knowledge is of the most worth'" (Apple, 1990, p. vii). In the case of TESOL, the resounding answer is the knowledge of the NES. This is problematic not only for the resulting gap created between NES and NNES identities (Pennycook, 1998), seen for example in wage differences and the amount of legitimization accorded to the NES's very presence (Phillipson, 1992), but also for the implication that NES and NNES are clearly-defined, naturally-existing categories to begin with (Holliday, 2005). These categories can be shown to have been shaped during modernist colonial contexts, when the valorization of national identity came packed with a preference for monolingualism but are not so applicable in postmodern contexts wherein learners are attempting to cultivate multilingual, multicultural identities. It should go without saying that NNES's – or, as was the case with the South-African who applied for an English-teaching job with me, people who *look* like they might be NNES's (in chapter

PAYAP UNIVERSITY

4.1) – should not be discriminated against as learners or teachers. Likewise, unqualified NES's are too often the preferred English-teacher.

While this seems commonsensical, the practice of committing such discriminations has become so naturalized that it is almost invisible until expressly pointed out. Critically reflecting on my own experiences and the privileges I have been afforded has been key in my understanding of Mayumi's contradictory stance on NES's.

5.3.2 The Need to Re-conceptualize Language Identity

As a result of the legitimacy appointed to the "NES" and the inferiority appointed to the "NNES" (or those who look like they *might* be NNES's), issues regarding identity may run rampant through the minds and imaginations of English learners, sewing discord with the learners' abilities to position equitable and genuine motivations and goals. I have attempted to provide an example of how at least one corporation took advantage of the insecurities and desires of its learners/customers to create an endless loop of English consumption which the learner was never able to graduate from, and have also shown how at least one of this school's students was led to simultaneously desire access to, and resent, the category of "NES." For Mayumi, "NES" took on a symbolic and imaginary meaning and value that purchasing lessons and TOEIC scores as commodities became conflated with. As McLaren warns us of predatory culture, "buyers are beginning culturally to merge with their commodities while human agency is becoming absorbed into the social ethics of the marketplace," (1995, p. 1).

In McDonaldized language classes or even more "legitimate" university programs, English teachers are not often explicitly taught how to acknowledge such politics of identity, much less that such issues even exist. This is partly owing to TESOL's appeals to the decontextualized and easily-generalizable mandates of the psychological epistemologies which inform it. To re-create TESOL as a field which acknowledges the 21st century needs of our multicultural students, instructors, policy-makers and students alike must become better informed of the political nature of our practice. Allowing and acknowledging subjective voices of actual experience, rather than generalized prescriptions, can change the ways we come to view linguistic identity.

PAYAP UNIVERSITY

5.3.3 Contextualizing Language Policy and Practice

Kumaravadivelu (2003) has posited that a "postmethod pedagogy" would include a sensitivity to location and specificities. Likewise, Canagarajah (1999) has argued that, when forging multilingual or "hybrid" identities, we remain mindful of English's hegemonic history. TESOL has transformed from its roots into a field which arguably could address the concerns of globalization and multicultural communication more thoroughly than either Linguistics or general Education studies. To complete this transformation, an understanding of the local and specific sites and individuals who participate in everyday TESOL must act as a starting point. The relationship between Mayumi and myself is one such site and acts here as an example of multicultural identity and an over-commercialized version of TESOL's insufficiency at managing such. Canagarajah reminds us to be "alert to the power of dominant ideology to create illusions of freedom, clarity, and agency," (2004, p. 141). Only by critically examining such ideologies and the specific examples which are affected by, and perhaps in turn effect, them, can be we begin to develop such a postmethod pedagogy.

5.3.4 Epilogue

It was only through the process of writing this work, which has become a completely different work through that process, that I have been able to critically reflect on my experiences. Through this critical reflection, I also found myself feeling extreme guilt about some of the more dehumanizing epistemologies in which TESOL is thoroughly imbricated, about assigning people's attempts at self-expression discrete values based on my magical NES hunch, about beating multicultural friends down with unasked-for corrections. I have described my past-self several times throughout this work as having no genuine interest in language-learning or teaching, and as taking advantage of the system in order to live abroad. Travel and living abroad are still very much my goals, but I am now uncertain about engaging with TESOL. If offered a good TESOL position in a good school, I am not sure I would take it. My relationship with Mayumi problematized the way I saw language-learning, encouraged a critical reflection on my interactions with students, specifically her, allowed me to identify taken-for-granted assumptions, challenge them, and then left me feeling like her equal, rather than her teacher. Like a good NGO, the point of teaching should always be to arrive, eventually, in a position where it is no longer necessary. This is Freire's second stage – complete equality and solidarity and the

PAYAP UNIVERSITY

dissolution of the structures which we once invested with power. Freire also says that "discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not lead to solidarity with the oppressed" (2005, p. 49). Both TESOL as a whole, and myself as an individual, need to continually and critically problematize the tools, methods and relationships we create and disseminate in the form of values, knowledge, and potential identities, before such "solidarity" can become a reality.

Freire's pedagogy is, of course, incomplete if one has merely attained awareness. Freire's call for praxis is a call for revolutionary action with the intended effect of change and transformation. When those who make or implement policies are unaware of issues which spread destructive epistemologies, critical pedagogues must, even if at grassroots levels, protest such policy and discrimination. Mayumi herself, by writing a thesis discouraging NESs from teaching English in Japan, has attempted to become such an agent of change. As for myself, I am skeptical that this change will occur on a large scale – that overly-commercialized schools like the one where I met Mayumi, will all suddenly close down, or that regulated, standardized testing, will ever loosen their monopolistic agendas, or even that grassroots movements within universities to pressure administrators to stop requiring tests like TOEIC will ever succeed (much less occur). But I am also still experiencing the "anguish" that Freire spoke of. My thesis advisor has reminded me that Freire's pedagogy is also a pedagogy of hope. If I do find myself working within TESOL again, it will be with the aims of enacting change and achieving solidarity.

Teacher-education often focuses on classroom management or even, when teaching children anyway, appropriate disciplinary actions. To achieve more critical pedagogies and resist the dominant ideologues which perpetuate discrimination and dehumanization, teachers must be taught to reflect on their own experiences and on the production and political and historical contexts of the knowledge they are "transmitting" in class. For example, becoming aware that the banning of a language-learner's mother-tongue within the classroom is a by-product of the colonialist project can generate the awareness that learners in modern contexts are learning to be multilingual and to exist in multilingual worlds. If behavior in the classroom is to replicate the actual realities these learners will be living, language-switching might even be encouraged!

Likewise, the identities of our students, their genders, nationalities, ethnicities, and other affiliations must be acknowledged, rather than generalized. Standardized tests such as the TOEIC pretend to present reliable ratings and results no matter where in the world they are given. This perpetuates the oppressive discourse that learners are learning to become a homogenized group, rather than acknowledging that transformation is unpredictable and untimely. This creates desire and pressure in learners to transform into imagined identities, sets a dollar amount to such transformations, and encourages a perpetual loop of consumption.

PAYAP UNIVERSITY