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The Teaching of English in Lebanese Classrooms: A Critical Look at the Dominant Curricula and Practices

Nadia Bhuiyan¹

Despite proclaimed attempts at post-colonial curricula, I argue that the teaching of English in Lebanon is a pronounced example of the deep-seated perpetuation of colonial privilege vis-à-vis curricular choices. To counter this cycle of privilege, I call for the application of culturally relevant pedagogy in English classrooms as a step in the direction of liberatory curricular reform in Lebanon. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) attempts to use students' cultural competence in an empowering manner to help them achieve academic success. This article examines the use of the imposed curriculum in one English for Academic Purposes classroom in Lebanon, followed by the inclusion of culturally relevant additions to the existing curriculums. I propose the use of gaps in the curriculum or tasks in expressive forms as critical learning opportunities in English classrooms in Lebanon to promote student empowerment and combat the perpetuation of the status quo.

Introduction

“The new textbook and packed syllabus are simply not working.” “It’s clear this text was intended for American students.” “I’m doing my best to make it interesting and get them involved, but I feel like teaching this material has lowered my self-confidence as an educator.” These were just some of the concerns English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors at an American university in Lebanon voiced following their department’s decision to change the textbook for their course and to call for a more rigid

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objective-centered, less student-centered program. The schedule was packed with material from either the new textbook or its online lab, creating more of a checklist system rather than a class that speaks to its learners. To make matters worse, the content, designed for English language teaching across North America, relied on examples to which the intended Lebanese student audience simply could not relate.

With today's heterogeneous classrooms, the educational implications of cultural and linguistic diverse learners require consideration. This issue has garnered much attention in the American context with classroom demographics increasingly reflecting diversity (Howard, 2003; Sharma & Christ, 2017). Lopez (2011) calls attention to the underachievement of diverse students and the subsequent look into teachers' curricula and practices. Thus, it is not surprising that teacher education research indicates the need to account for this cultural diversity of the student population in the consideration of curriculum. "Students who for a range of reasons do not match the people in the minds of curriculum planners deserve to see themselves in the academic content" (Bomer, 2011, p.11). Situations like these can be addressed through culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) that draws on students' culture as a means of achieving academic success and increasing student engagement (Bomer, 2011; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lopez, 2011; Sharma & Christ, 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). CRP employs the "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming" (Gay, 2000, p.29). Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced culturally relevant pedagogy to encompass student empowerment and cultural integrity *along with* critical approaches. The essence of such pedagogy lies in its dismissal of cultural diversity as a hindrance to learning, and acknowledges the cultural capital students bring to the learning experience (Howard, 2003; Islam & Park, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Bomer (2011) also advocates for an appreciative stance, as opposed to a deficit perspective. Zawacki and Cox (2014) propose alternative

approaches faculty can take when it comes to peer review, feedback, and even writing assignment design that are culturally inclusive and cater to the needs of their second language writers.

Little attention, however, has been given to the importance and application of culturally relevant pedagogy in the Middle East (Habli, 2015; Hamdan, 2014), in general, and to the Lebanese context, in particular, where foreign textbooks dominate classrooms of linguistically and culturally diverse students. The real issue here runs much deeper than a mismatch between textbooks and students. It is the reason(s) behind the choice and use of American textbooks that are of interest. In this paper, I will argue that despite proclaimed attempts at post-colonial curricula, the teaching of English in Lebanon is a pronounced example of the deep-seated perpetuation of colonial privilege vis-à-vis curricular choices. To counter this cycle of privilege, I call for the application of culturally relevant pedagogy in English classrooms as a step in the direction of liberatory curricular reform in Lebanon.

A Timeline of the Diverse Lebanese Linguistic Landscape

In order to understand the context of this story, I will discuss Lebanon's history of linguistic and cultural complexity. The country's multilingualism dates back to the 1800s, mainly as a result of colonialism for commercial and educational purposes, which undoubtedly left a mark on the national educational system (Bahous & Bacha, 2011). The presence of American and French missionaries led to the establishment of the country's leading higher education institutions. From 1920 to 1943, Lebanon was under the French mandate system, and French and Arabic were the country's official languages. In 1943, when Lebanon gained its independence, the country saw an increase in the number of English as a Second Language (ESL) schools and marked the beginning of English as a linguistic presence in the country (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). A new national curriculum came about in 1994 that called for a mandatory second 'foreign' language in all schools, either English or French (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). Thus, depending on the primary medium of instruction, students are 'English-educated' or 'French-

educated,' something that ultimately becomes an identity marker for them (Baladi, 2018; Diab, 2009). In addition to the national language of Arabic as well as English and French, Armenian is also another leading language given the Armenian presence in the country. While it is clear that multilingualism prevails in Lebanon, a number of factors, however, play into the allegiance to and privileging of certain languages over others. For example, certain religious and political groups tend to align themselves more closely to one foreign language over another (Esseili, 2011). French is tied more closely to Christians, while English is the preferred foreign language of Muslims. Furthermore, the forces backing and overseeing each educational institution determine the medium of instruction. The diglossia² that exists as a result of Lebanese spoken Arabic and the more distant written standard Arabic complicates the linguistic rivalry even further. As Thonhauser (2001) mentions, many Lebanese prefer to write in English or French rather than standard written Arabic for this reason. These linguistic decisions at the governmental, social, and individual levels have remarkable consequences on issues of identity and culture, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Exploring a Lebanese EAP Classroom: A Case Study

Research Site and Researcher Positionality

The context is a private English medium institution of higher education in Lebanon, founded by missionaries. The student body consists of nationals, citizens of neighboring countries, and even Western countries. Tuition fees are considered relatively expensive. This means that many students come from privileged backgrounds. There are, however, a number of different forms of financial support provided for students from less affluent socioeconomic backgrounds.

² A situation in which two languages (or two varieties of the same language) are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers. The term is usually applied to languages with distinct "high" and "low" (colloquial) varieties, such as Arabic.

As one of the EAP instructors who sensed a mismatch between the curriculum and the students, I selected the intermediate level academic reading and writing class using this foreign textbook and its corresponding online lab resources. The course is one of five levels that make up the institution's required Academic English Sequence, and course placement is based on students' entrance exam or standardized test scores. My position as the instructor in this case allowed me to be critically reflective (Howard, 2003) and reflexive (Pillow, 2010) of the pedagogical decisions I made and of their meaning on students' conflicting linguistic and cultural identities.

Participants

Twenty-four students from a variety of academic disciplines were registered in the class that semester. Since the course is a prerequisite, the students were all in their first year at the institution.

Data Collection

Using qualitative case study to collect data in spring 2018, I examined a single bounded case in order to draw a detailed understanding of it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once I had committed to this project, my first step was a careful review of the syllabus and textbook to locate windows for potential change. One very important facet of culturally relevant teaching is reviewing the curriculum in place. Teachers can use the material as an opportunity to encourage critical literacy development. One chapter of the text called "Sociology" included reading passages and corresponding writing activities about the civil rights movement in the United States. I saw this particular chapter as an opportunity to have them address the text's lack of consideration for regional issues. To do this, I asked the class to write about a local or regional social cause about which they care.

Data Sources

Data sources included classroom observations, informal conversations regarding the textbook, and the assigned (out-of-class) writing responses. Field notes were taken to record observations and oral responses after students were asked to complete exercises in the text during class sessions. Students were asked to submit their responses to Turnitin for plagiarism detection.

There were two focal areas in the form of the following two questions:

1. How do Lebanese students in my intermediate English for Academic Purposes class respond to the content of their foreign textbook?
2. Can culturally relevant additions to the existing curriculum, in the form of writing responses, help these students feel empowered?

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I used the constant comparative analysis (CCA) approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), to group conceptually similar data together under thematic categories during the coding process. Following data collection, I carried out the data analysis in three stages. First, I transferred all student responses into one electronic document. Next, I completed a line-by-line analysis of this document for thematic coding purposes. I then manually coded field notes based on observations and dialogue with students for emergent themes.

Themes

In this section, I discuss the following two themes that speak to the research questions: 1) Student Resistance to Imposed Curriculum; 2) The Use of the Personal to Foreground Potential. As I discuss each theme, I refer to data collected from student responses, in oral and written form, and from field notes taken.

Theme One: Student Resistance to Imposed Curriculum

1. How do Lebanese students in my intermediate English for Academic Purposes class respond to

the content of their foreign textbook?

Prior to embarking on a journey of critical reflection about the course, I made an attempt to follow the proposed course material from both the textbook and online lab. Student participation was minimal and some students openly questioned the purpose of these exercises. To add to this, many students would leave their textbooks at home in what appeared to be a form of resistance (Norton & Toohey, 2011). One example of the distant connection between the students' cultural background and the textbook material can be found in the "Economy" chapter, which focuses on the state of US economy after the 1929 stock market crash. In the same chapter, students were asked to paraphrase the following:

If you want to study high-earners, you'll need to use data from the US Treasury department (which includes the Internal Revenue Service), which unfortunately doesn't do much to describe low-earners because many of them do not need to file taxes (Zweir & Vosters, 2016, p.172).

Since Lebanese citizens are not required to file tax returns, this passage is also indicative of the distant link between the content and the learners. This example also represents the larger issue at hand. While many scholars have emphasized the relationship between language and culture (Kramsch, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994), Modiano (2001) makes a claim about the dangers of this relationship in classrooms just like this one: "It [an activity] establishes a view of the language, which, because it is culture-specific, presents English as the property of a specified faction of the native-speaker contingency...There is a danger that its spread dilutes the distinguishing characteristics of other languages and cultures" (p.340). While it was evident to many of the other teachers that the blind usage of these American textbooks was problematic, the potential implications of their usage on Lebanese student identity, both linguistic and cultural, may not have been as clear. According to Thonhauser (2001), "Students in Lebanon do experience studying in English as a challenge to their identity and native language – and it is the responsibility of educators to respond to this fact in their teaching practices" (p.57). Thonhauser adds that individual decisions related to foreign textbook use in the country are, in a sense, how teachers enforce certain norms that influence student identity. This

advice is still relevant and necessary at present. It may be easier and perhaps safer to use the prescribed material and practices without regard to how they discount students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, doing so is merely a continuation of colonialist privilege and could be considered a form of subscription to linguistic and cultural imperialism (Phillipson, 1992; Golding & Harris, 1997).

Theme Two: Foregrounding the personal is foregrounding student empowerment

2. Can culturally relevant additions to the existing curriculum, in the form of in-class writing responses, help these students feel empowered?

Part of being a critical educator and working towards culturally relevant teaching could entail asking students to respond to the representations, misrepresentations, or omissions in the text (Lopez, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The imposed curriculum did not leave room for assessments beyond the academic reading and writing requirements tied to the textbook. This lack of expressive outlets, along with the distant content of the textbook, left students disempowered, and in a Freirean sense, oppressed by the course design. By making the move from critical reflection, which Howard (2003) describes as teachers inwardly examining their own beliefs and worldviews and how they are contributing to student achievement, I attempted to actualize my culturally relevant visions.

I asked students to choose a social movement with which they identify and write a response explaining their choice. Although the assignment did not restrict students to national causes, many of the responses I received were mainly about Lebanon. Some wrote about the national garbage crisis and their concern about its potential to affect the health of Lebanese citizens if government inaction persists. A few females in the class wrote about the Lebanese nationality law that prohibits women from passing on Lebanese citizenship to their children. For the class, this was not 'an assignment.' The subject was not only relevant to them, but also, to their society at large, a strategy Villegas and Lucas (2002) underscore. One student wrote about the postponed parliamentary elections, with a clear tone of frustration and concern:

Lebanon is known as one of the “most democratic countries in the Arab world”. This country is dominated by representatives from various religions in order to create equality between the religious and ethnics groups living in it. Lately, in the last decade, we have been facing many social, economic and political issues due to many wars and unstable politics. Unfortunately, the government that is supposed to preserve equality is not being able to set reforms or even provide people with the least of their rights. We might ask ourselves why Lebanon is never progressing, why are we still stuck in the past? Well, the parliament representatives are one major cause to what is happening to our country. Deputies are careless about population interests...Unfortunately, the last parliament election was in 2009. ...We should not accept to postpone the elections. We should seek change in order to have a better Lebanon.

It is clear from this excerpt that this task offered this student the space to voice her own concerns about something highly significant on both a personal and societal level. According to Lopez (2011), “for students to experience academic success, their learning must be relevant to their lives and experiences” (p.78). Overall, this writing task served not only as an opportunity to help the students critically identify the gaps in the textbook’s representation of important social causes but also as a chance to fill in those gaps with their writing. Whether the inclusion of this type of critically eye-opening task has led to student action beyond the classroom remains to be seen. Such action, though, could offer insight about the range of tasks, like these, intended to evoke Freire’s concept of *conscientizacao*, or social consciousness, that this critical stance embodies.

Getting to know more about students through these tasks can also provide culturally responsive teachers with the insight they need about students’ lives, identities, and worldviews (Sharma & Christ, 2017). Bomer (2017) defends the use of the personal as a viable critical tool: “If students are bringing their lives into the curriculum ... then they trail with them into the curriculum their kitchens, their celebrations,

their language, and their relationships” (p.14). Teachers are expressing their interest in each student’s story and everything it entails by allowing room for the personal. They are positioning students at the center of their learning, and drawing the attention away from the standardized or non-culturally inclusive curriculum. Most importantly, the information that teachers gain from these tasks can bring them closer to identifying their students’ strengths. Thus, in the socio-cultural context of Lebanon, culturally relevant additions to the English curricula can lead to student empowerment by offering students a voice, not only in their learning, but also when it comes to divisive issues in their context. While these critical additions do not negate the presence of foreign textbooks, they allow teachers an opportunity to disrupt the norms of their language courses that perpetuate the status quo and marginalize them as a result.

Recommendations for the Future

Using case study analysis, this paper highlights the need for greater consideration of how English language curricula in Lebanon promote colonialist privilege via foreign textbook appropriation. As Baladi (2018) points out, “with such an incredible combination of different languages, cultures, philosophies and political identifications, in addition to the increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan world we live in, one can imagine the magnitude of the identity crisis taking place in 21st century Lebanon” (p.1). Until curricular reform becomes a reality in the Lebanese context and until the discourse surrounding Lebanese learners of English becomes less oppressive, it is recommended that educators use critical reflection to create spaces for their students’ voices in their English curricula as a means of addressing the privilege of the imposed curriculum.

Moreover, continuous effort must be put into the development of teacher education programs in the Lebanese context and the consideration they dedicate to multilingual and multicultural classrooms. This needs to go beyond simply explaining the goals of culturally inclusive teaching. Preservice teachers need to see real examples of experienced CREs in the classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), and receive feedback

on their own attempts. Since mindset is just as important as actual enactment, they must be willing and committed to engage in reflection and to devote the time and effort necessary to tailor their pedagogy and curricula to their learners.

Furthermore, given the lack of available research on the application of culturally relevant pedagogy to English language teaching in Lebanon, it may be worthwhile to consider how this need can continued to be addressed.

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