

POVERTY, TESOL'S NARRATIVES AND "OTHER LANGUAGES": HERMENEUTIC TENSIONS IN TEXTING-RESEARCHING PRACTICES

Vaidehi Ramanathan
Department of Linguistics
University of California, Davis
vramanathan@ucdavis.edu

Abstract

This brief response addresses concerns raised by Ruanni Tupas in his reading of my book, *The English-Vernacular Divide*. It provides some background about my study, and attempts to uncover some researching and texting tensions I experienced when writing the book. Straddling as I am different geographic spaces—India and the US—with different discourses regarding English language learning and teaching in each space, the response details how my focus on the local and everyday became a way of showing how some discourses about English (its being a democratizing force, or the language of empowerment) run the risk of turning a blind eye to issues of poverty, access and “other languages, issues that are crucial for TESOL to address.”

Keywords

language politics, language teaching, postcolonialism, vernacular languages

About the author

Vaidehi Ramanathan is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Davis. She was Director of the ESL Program of UC Davis in 2003, and Director of the MA-TESOL Program of the University of Alabama from 1997 to 1999. She is the author of *The English-Vernacular Divide: Postcolonial Language Politics and Practice* (2005), *The Politics of TESOL Education: Writing, Knowledge, Critical Pedagogy* (2002), *Alzheimer Discourse: Some Sociolinguistic Dimensions* (1997), and many articles in refereed journals and anthologies.

Author's note

I thank Brian Morgan for reading through an earlier draft and for reminding me that I need never sound apologetic about complexities.

The problem of consciousness in our work is thus multifaceted: it is about content (a problem of discourses), about changing such content (a problem of counter discourses), and about initiating change amidst conditions of unfreedom (a problem of structures). Fortunately, it is the recognition of the limits of our own choices and actions that can pave the way for the re-articulation of hope through remembering: English linguistic imperialism is *not yet* a thing of the past. (Tupas 20)

If theorists and academics want to engage in meaningful exchange with practitioners, they should also consider exploring a whole range of labor-related

issues that might appear extraneous to language, but I would argue, determine the conditions in which successful language learning can take place. (Morgan 131)

When I was first contacted about responding to Ruanni Tupas's commentary of my book (*The English-Vernacular Divide*), my reactions were simultaneously ones of elation and hesitation: elation because the key issue of the book—that TESOL be more mindful of concerns such as poverty/class and other languages—had resonated strongly with another postcolonial scholar in a different part of the world; hesitation because my relatively inexplicit engagement with some of the discipline's key narratives—that Tupas wishes I had done more of—had been a deliberate rhetorical maneuver on my part, one that I had struggled with, and am ambiguous about writing now. This invitation to supplement his commentary, then, has me in a double-bind: my early impulses of sidestepping what seems to be fast becoming TESOL's dominant narratives around "English as a world language" are still strong; there are many aspects of these now dominant strains that are troublingly simplistic, and my not engaging with them very directly in the book is partially a result of my "reading" them in certain ways given the geographical spaces I straddle. But Tupas's insightful point about how my (intentional) indirect engagement with them might end up drowning the very point I am trying to make (that west-based TESOL has turned a blind eye to issues of class and other languages) has me wondering about several issues, including our individual and collective hermeneutic practices: what are we individually and collectively engaged in when we "read," "fill in," and "interpret," texts, disciplinary debates, narratives, and how do these directly impact our researching-texting practices? What have Tupas's readings enabled him to uncover about my book and in what ways do those intersect with my "readings" of the discipline's narratives about English? In what follows, after some necessary background, I attempt to uncover what in my thinking had held sway when I wrote the book, how my choices—deliberate (dis)engagements, sidestepping and intensely local focus—are strong counters to prevailing TESOL narratives.

Tupas's incisive commentary allows me to directly speak to two big intertwined issues in the field to which the book (at the time I was writing it) was partially responding. The first was that current narratives around world English/es at the time did not adequately address how the world's other non-western languages fall along lines of class and "vernacular-mediums" in many recent postcolonial spaces (Tupas, Mazrui). English emerges as a global language only in relation to the world's other languages, and it is in the tension-filled in-between spaces that changes and transformations by institutions and people float into view. It was this space where the struggles of humans along with their

efforts at untying themselves from binding structures that interested me. The narratives around English and globalization—which so crucially inform our field—seemed at the time to not cast adequate light on this. Second, I was also interested in countering TESOL's broad, universalizing strokes about language teaching by focusing on the local, including interactions with local languages in those contexts (Lin; Morgan and Ramanathan), and issues of poverty and access crucially informed these "localities." While my focus is on India and local socio-political-linguistic stratifications there, the larger points about TESOL being blind to both poverty and other languages is of relevance in the west which still remains "the center" of English.

WRESTLING WITH LOCAL COMPLEXITIES, WRESTLING WITH THEORIES

A general impetus for my long-term endeavor has been to arrive at a fuller, historicized understanding of colonialism's lasting impact in the very educational spaces that I was raised and schooled in. My entry into this project, begun ten years ago, was motivated by my wanting to arrive at a better understanding of the struggles that students schooled in the vernacular-medium (VM) go through as they encounter English in English-medium (EM) colleges. Needless to say, the endeavor proved to be a most complex one, and I realized very early on that prevailing west-based narratives around "English as democratizing" and "English and globalization" and "English as the world language" were all completely intertwined with issues of social access, poverty, and localized articulations of gender and caste. When writing the book I found that I needed to find a way of addressing these societal concerns in relation to numerous intertwined complexities in educational domains, including language policies, collective and individual histories, language ideologies, teaching practices, pedagogic tools, teaching practices, teacher orientations, institutional realities, and "other languages" to show how they all collude with each other in the most intricate of ways to shut doors on vernacular-medium (VM) students. And I had to do this without losing sight of how humans and institutions in these complex scenes counter societal pressures and language policies. While I had the choice of selecting and "massaging" my data to fit one of the pre-existing west-based narrative grooves—that may have been the simpler, less risky road to take—doing so meant being dishonest to the complexities in front of me and that I was a part of; it also meant not being able to directly highlight the crucial point about poverty and other languages that I wanted to make. My writing-texting processes had to reflect my "reading" and "interpreting" of these complex, knotted, local scenes; but they also had to indicate my "reading" and

interpreting of certain west-based narratives that I found problematic. The question was: how was I going to discursively achieve this? To which set of discourses was I to speak? Those in Gujarat? Or those in the West? (See Ramanathan's "Of Texts AND Translations AND Rhizomes" for a detailed account of tensions in translating the non-west for western reception).

Because I didn't want my book to fall into these old, overscripted, abstract arguments, I decided to make it an intensely local, situated reaction to them, and instead of just talking/debating about these positions, I wanted my researching-texting practices and the voices of the teachers, administrators, and students I have worked with to speak for themselves. My situated focus, then, is my rejoinder. Tupas's hermeneutic engagements indicate that not only has he been able to pick up on my intensely local response to these narratives—local forms of appropriation and resistance, local forms in which globalization and its surges have to be understood, local stratifications of class and caste that position teachers, students and institutions vis-à-vis language policies and each other in particular ways—but has also been able to sift out the fact that I am stepping into the globalization metanarrative by asking who is left out, why, and where on the local and west-dominated TESOL landscape they get positioned. Thus, a strong sense of remaining committed to capturing the complexities around English, other languages and poverty, coupled with sheer weariness of and concern about how the now relatively over-etched nature of the world English/es strain might colonize my rejoinders and reposition the local kept me from engaging with them more directly. Sidestepping overly direct engagement with these ("colonial") narratives, then, became the more preferable ("postcolonial") "reading." It seemed rhetorically more judicious to not engage with them extensively, but to make my issues salient by pointing towards the local, the ordinary, and the everyday.

But my relative inexplicitness seems to run the risk of seeming "mixed" and thus "inconsistent," and Tupas wonders about my postmodernist-postcolonialist theorizing. But once again, his filling-in is keen and sharp. Poststructuralist thinking is, indeed, deeply uncomfortable with binding societal categories of class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, and strives to splinter pre-set notions of individual agency and actions being governed by them. But, as I point out in the book and as Tupas underscores and Morgan (131) echoes, societal inequities around poverty cannot be wished away, and west-based TESOL needs to be more mindful of how lack of access to materials directly impinge on language learning and teaching in a myriad of ways: teachers in poorer institutions cannot bring photocopies to class, students have to sometimes rent textbooks because they are unaffordable, and often have to take two or three buses to make it into college everyday, libraries cannot boast

subscriptions to the latest periodicals and journals and will often house textbooks for those students who cannot afford to rent them, administrators of some institutions even have to consider buying clothes for their Dalit students. It is amidst these stark, communal realities that humans and institutions defy their societal categories: Mr. P at the poor, women's college organizes buses that ferry Muslim students to their exam centers, and finds ways for them to take shelter in the college during Hindu-Muslim riots; the Jesuit institution in the same city proactively changes its policies to reach out to the poorest of Dalit students (for detailed accounts see Chapter 5 of *The English-Vernacular Divide*, which is about resistance and one institution's response to changing its policies to address stratifications of caste and class), the lecturer in charge of admissions at the elitist business college works to counter English proficiency policies that tend to disallow VM students. How was I to present my "readings" of these extremely complex intersections in ways that would be "readable" both in the west and India? What theorizing would I draw on that would do them relative justice and how could I draw on conceptualizations in ways—that they, like west-based TESOL narratives—would not "govern," "contain," and "colonize" the messes and contradictions?

These issues were (and are) hard to think around and at the time I decided that it would be prudent to combine my critical-socialist leanings (see Fraser; although "socialism" is by no means a monolithic term) with aspects of poststructuralist and postcolonial thought. While distinct, these modes of conceptualizing are sometimes posed in opposition to each other (McLaren, Fraser), but they allowed me, in my intensely situated project, to not just address complexities and paradoxes around stratifications and efforts at countering them, but to counter theoretical polarities. A focus on poverty—while running the risk of becoming a binding category—did not cancel postmodernist positions out, I found. Assuming a (somewhat Derridean) position of combining and making do with the tools at hand, rather than going along with prevailing modes of thinking, or carefully crafted blue-prints, whether they be postmodernist, Marxist, or postcolonialist—so as to create a sense of "consistency" and "unification," my aim in the book, then became to straddle them all—thereby splintering their containedness. Indeed, a major impetus of the book was to keep from having an overly strong sense of alliedness to any one theoretical position, since tensions and contradictions defy at every turn easy slotting of ourselves and our thinking-reading-interpreting endeavors into pre-existing researching-texting-theorizing-languaging-disciplinary camps. Ironically, in some ways, Tupas's sense of "mixed signals" are a compliment; the book was intended to be a mix, and it has achieved its purpose if that is what he has "read" and "interpreted."

All of this, of course, brings me to back to what I began this response with: what does it all say about our discursive practices? Our hermeneutic endeavors—our “reading,” “filling in,” and “interpreting” (whether it is me “reading” the Gujarat educational scenes and working to text them in ways relevant to the west or whether it is Tupas reading my text to see how they relate to west-based tropes)—impact all aspects of our researching-texting practices. It is crucial that we occasionally take stock of our intellectual comings and goings, how our positioning between geographic spaces (India and the West, Philippines and the West) and the local issues and tropes in both defy simple categorizations and spill out of ourselves and our texts and into our communities, pasts, histories and memories. For Tupas, forgetting the Philippines’ colonized past is not an option; as he evocatively points out in the epigraph leading this essay, we need to move ahead with language policies and planning, both in our “home” spaces and in the west by remembering and by pulling the imperialistic past into the present, since that is a way of addressing unfreedom. For myself, speaking from another postcolonial space, teaching English (TE) in the west without actively considering the other languages (OL) is not an option, just as “reading” and speaking of “social access” and “cultural capital” as empty, theoretical containments (that do not directly address class issues) aren’t either. Once we arrive at a hermeneutic plane that allows us to viscerally experience societal, linguistic, (neo)colonial, class-related, pedagogic, researching-texting strains in refreshingly knotted forms, we are awakened to rethinking prevailing disciplinary strains. Disciplinary narratives that tend to lull us into replication and reproduction need occasional tears and breaks—Kierkegaardian *Augenblicke*—that remind us to both remain honest to the full meaningfulness of local and everyday complexities. For both Tupas and myself, TESOL needs to directly confront issues of inequity not by simply promoting more English—the way it has tended to—but by complicating its position around policies by connecting histories and pasts to present pedagogical moments that take account of “OL” and issues of poverty. Indeed, can we really afford to do otherwise?

WORKS CITED

- Fraser, Nancy. *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Post-Socialist Condition*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Lin, Angel. "Doing English: Lessons in the Reproduction or Transformation of Social Worlds." *English Language Teaching in its Social Context*. Eds. Christopher Candlin and Neil Mercer. London: Routledge, 2001. 271-86.
- Mazrui, Ali. *English in Africa: After the Cold War*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2004.
- McLaren, Peter. *Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy Against Empire*. NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.
- Morgan, Brian. *The ESL Classroom: Teaching, Critical Practice and Community Development*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1988.
- Morgan, Brian and Vaidehi Ramanathan. "Critical Literacies and Education: Local and Global Perspectives." *American Review of Applied Linguistics* (2005): 151-69.
- Ramanathan, V. *The English-Vernacular Divide: Postcolonial Language Politics and Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2005.
- Ramanathan, V. "Of Texts AND Translations AND Rhizomes: Postcolonial Anxieties AND Deracinations AND Knowledge Constructions." *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 3.4 (2006): 223-44.
- Tupas, Ruanni. "History, Language Planners, and Strategies of Forgetting." *Language Problems and Language Planning* 27.1 (2003): 1-25.