

“Sharing Your Belief” or “Bible Bashing”?

The debate between Christian and Critical English Language Educators

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Introduction

Christian missionaries have been involved in the EFL profession for centuries. In various regions of the globe, they have engaged in English language instruction with a view to converting their students to the Christian faith. These missionary endeavors have been criticized as ‘cultural imperialism’ by many, yet it cannot be denied that local populations have benefited in many ways from missionary activities.

Japan is in no way different to the rest of the world when it comes to this issue. Christians have engaged in EFL as a means of evangelism for over a century. Even now, there is a heavy Christian presence in English classrooms all the way from Hokkaido down to Okinawa. We have no concrete figures on the numbers of missionaries engaged in EFL, but the most reliable source estimates that 3,500 missionaries currently work in Japan (Operation World, 2010). Of these, native speaker missionaries number 1,477 from the USA, 76 from the UK, 74 from Canada and 50 from Australia.

We cannot say that each of these missionaries teaches English, but it is safe to assume that the majority do. There is no concrete data to support this, except my own experience. I’ve personally met and spoken to 15 full-time missionaries from all over Japan. Of those, only two had never been involved in evangelism through English lessons.

In addition, there are a number of Christian English teachers engaged in secular work at *eikaiwa* schools and cram schools, elementary and high schools, colleges and universities, who have some commitment to spreading their faith.

Despite this significant Christian presence in Japan, there is a virtual absence of recognition from the professional ELT community. There is no dialogue concerning religious belief and ELT, no research into missionaries using English classes as a tool for conversion, and no debate about the relationship between mission and *eikaiwa* (teaching English). On the global stage, this dialogue concerning values-based teaching has been mostly conducted between those of the critical pedagogy (CP) camp, and those in the Christian English teachers (CET) camp (Canagarajah & Wong, 2009).

The ELT community in Japan would benefit greatly from some discussion of this issue. Christian and non-Christian English teachers have a lot to gain by exploring the issue of faith and belief in teaching practice. It is hoped that this article can shed some

light on an important global issue in EFL that has been largely ignored in Japan.

Criticisms from Critical Pedagogy

Those in the critical pedagogy school maintain that all classroom interactions are bound up with issues of power and dominance, and that no classrooms are ‘value-free’. Therefore, teachers need to make efforts to ensure that students are empowered and liberated, not exploited and dominated. Some scholars have been strident in their critique of teachers who attempt to ‘win’ students into their religious beliefs. Their criticism can be summarized into four main arguments.

1. Evangelism by stealth.

Julian Edge (2003) asserts that Christian missionaries often engage in evangelism by ‘stealth’. They frequently move into countries hostile to Christianity under the pretext of teaching English, and attempt to win converts covertly. In other words, there is an absence of transparency.

“Transparency, I suggest, enables learners and, where appropriate, their parents, to make informed judgments about the conditions under which English lessons are on offer. If such transparency is to be ruled out for tactical reasons, and the argument is that the end (saving souls) justifies the means (deception and manipulation), then I am simply bewildered, and finally repelled, by the morality of the stance being taken.” (pg 705).

In this view, CETs act like wolves in sheep’s clothing: pretending to be honest English teachers, when their goal is to ‘deceive and manipulate’ students into attending an evangelistic crusade.

2. English as ‘bait’

A second strong criticism of CETs is that they use English as ‘bait’ to lure students (Pennycook, 2003). As local people are unlikely to walk into a church off the street, cut-price or free English classes are used to lure potential converts. This means students of a lower socio-economic status who are unable to afford big secular schools are more ‘vulnerable’.

3. Lack of qualifications

A third argument concerns the lack of ELT qualifications of many missionaries (Pennycook,

2003). As their primary goal is to win converts, they are unconcerned with issues of professional practice. Therefore, the standard of the whole ELT industry is lowered by these unqualified teachers.

4. Colonialism

A fourth critique is that CETs are (witting or unwitting) tools of colonial powers seeking to dominate foreign peoples. Pennycook writes:

“The legacy of missionary linguists is a world in which a particular view and use of language has been promoted under the guise of Christian proselytizing. Christian missionaries have played crucial roles not only in assisting past and current forms of colonialism and neocolonialism, not only in attacking and destroying other ways of being, but also in the language effects their projects have engendered.” (Pennycook, 2005: 153)

Accordingly, CETs are not only guilty of pushing their own brand of religion onto local populations, but also their culture, politics and all the other baggage that goes with colonialism.

The Response from Christian Educators

The response from CETs to each criticism will be considered, in light of the Japanese context.

1. Concern for transparency

In reply to Edge’s charge of ‘stealth evangelism’, Griffith writes:

“As to disingenuous Christian evangelism, I think most Christians in the field share Edge’s concerns for transparency. I know that I share them—I routinely identify myself as a Christian to new classes, but I bend over backward not to proselytize through my teaching. I’ve never had a student complain of pressure to adopt my perspective, and I hope I never do. If Christians lure students to evangelistic English classes without being up front about the purpose, that’s wrong.” (Griffith, 2004: 714).

Purgason (an influential Christian ELT trainer) writes: “I must say very plainly that I do not advocate direct evangelism in the classroom. It violates the teacher-student trust relationship. To preach to a captive audience who came expecting something else is unethical.” (Purgason, 1998: 35).

It cannot be denied that some Christian mission agencies are bold and unapologetic about using ELT as a pretext for covertly entering nations hostile to Christianity. However, these nations are few in number, as are such agencies. In Japan, this is a non-issue. Missionaries are allowed to enter Japan on missionary visas, and there is nothing to be gained by operating covertly.

A related issue to transparency is whether CETs should acknowledge their faith at all. Brown believes not: “It is important that the teacher’s personal opinions or beliefs remain sensitively covert, lest a student feel coerced into thinking something because the teacher thinks that way.” (Brown, 2004: 24). However, it is not possible for teachers to leave their beliefs at the classroom door. Teachers often ask students for their beliefs and opinions on different issues, and encourage discussion of these in class. For teachers to keep their own beliefs hidden, while expecting students to be honest and open, is highly duplicitous.

2. Delivering what you promise

Rather than use English as ‘bait’ to lure locals into church, CETs insist that EFL classes be taught to a consistently high standard. Donald Snow, a well-respected ELT trainer and Christian, writes: “CETs should view the quality of their teaching as the primary means through which they bear witness to God and share his love with students... [It’s important that] CETs be genuinely concerned with their students’ well being, academically and in general, and make a serious effort to understand students and meet their needs.” (Snow, 2001: 66).

For a sincere Christian EFL teacher, delivering quality education is of paramount importance. In Japan, many churches hire short-term missionaries to teach EFL. Often, following these classes, there will be a short bible study given by the missionary or pastor. However, these remain separate from the actual English class. During the 45 minutes when students are studying *eikaiwa*, the primary objective of the CET is to deliver a quality lesson that meets students’ needs. Rather than ‘bait’, students are getting exactly what they expected.

3. Qualifications are important

Although it is true that some mission agencies send out untrained volunteers without any qualms, the majority of mission organizations recognize the need for proper training. Purgason notes that without adequate training, “you may feel you are cheating your students who expected ‘real’ teaching, you will soon burn out from the effort of inventing the wheel again and again, and you will not have energy left for other ministry goals.” (Purgason, 1998: 34). At both the practical and moral level, the dominant voices in Christian ELT recognize that suitable qualifications are crucial.

In Japan, it is undeniable that some Christian groups employ undertrained staff in ELT positions. However, this is not limited to the Christian community. Small and large *eikaiwa* schools often employ any native speaker with a generic university degree, as do schools and universities.

This is an issue for the ELT industry in Japan as a whole, and there is no reason why Christian groups should be specifically targeted for criticism.

4. A separation of Christianity and culture

Christian missionaries increasingly recognize the importance of separating ideas of “the West” from that of Christianity. Snow advises: “As CETs have occasion to discuss Christianity, they should also make it clear that the Western chapter of the history of Christianity is only one part of the story and that the Christian faith has always been and continues to be a part of the lives of many outside the West.” (Snow, 2001: 75). This is particularly pertinent in the 21st century, which has witnessed the boom of Christianity in the two-thirds world, and the steady decline of Christianity in the West.

Missionaries have nothing to gain by allying Christianity with notions of ‘the West’ in general and with English in particular. As Seargeant’s research shows, after decades of English in Japan, it still remains essentially ‘foreign’, and situated as ‘the other’ in the Japanese mindset (Seargeant, 2009). Any attempts at combining Christianity with notions of ‘English’ and ‘the West’ are likely to have mixed results for the missionary.

Towards a deeper understanding

The issue of religious belief and ELT is multifaceted and complex. I am well aware this brief article only scratches the surface, and raises more questions than it answers. But there are some issues CETs and their critics need to keep in mind.

Christians engaged in the ELT profession need to take transparency seriously, and make efforts to be open and honest about their activities at all times. If they truly care for their students, they will commit themselves to getting proper training and qualifications, in order to teach classes of a consistently high standard. Critics of Christian missionaries need to accept that a majority of CETs do not engage in ‘stealth evangelism’, and are seriously concerned about meeting student needs (in this case, their need to learn English).

Both camps should acknowledge common goals. As post-positivistic educators, CETs and their CP critics share a belief in empowering students and helping to develop moral values. Canagarajah, who sees himself as having a foot in both CET and CP camps, writes:

“I am committed to sharing my perspectives with others, constantly examining our mutual positions in a respectful manner, challenging ourselves to move to higher moral and spiritual grounds, thus ceaselessly transforming personal lives and social relations. To use the jargon of the insiders in both

camps, such a practice is *evangelizing* from the Christian tradition or *conscientization* from the critical position.” (Canagarajah, 2009: 86).

I believe all ELT professionals in Japan want to see their students grow and mature, not only as proficient English users, but also as human beings. An open, honest discussion of these issues, leading towards a deeper understanding of the role of faith in the classroom, can help us to achieve this end.

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