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Excursions: Deconstructing TEFL

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Abstract
The TEFL industry is booming in Asia. This explosion has witnessed the rapid dissemination of a variety of teaching materials and pedagogies across the region. While most of this come from global textbook publishers, others come from more personalized sources. One common theme that runs throughout this body of material is the privileged location/ subject position of the white western figure aka "the native speaker." While this figure may appear as voice or body or as a combination of both, its narrative location, authority and effects are always the same, namely to create for itself a point of reference with which comparisons with the 'native other' are invited. This presentation draws from postcolonial theories of narration and identity to locate such operations of power/knowledge in the work of two TELF texts being used in Thailand. It begins by deconstructing this narcissistic form of colonial self-referentiality in TEFL materials before looking at ways in which practicing teachers can engage productively with such texts.
Keywords: colonialism, globalization, TEFL, Thailand

1. The Scene of White privilege

In the November 2005 issue of a *farang* magazine published in Bangkok, an English speaking white female teacher tells about the privileges her whiteness allows her in Thailand. With great excitement and triumphalism, as if she had "came, saw and conquered" innocent natives, she shares her 'native English speaker' experience with her implied *farang* audience.

> Teaching English was one of those things I had thought about but never seriously considered until a few months ago, when I found myself back on Khaosan Road, tired of traveling and low on funds, but not quite ready to go home yet. I decided to respond to one of the many ads for English teachers. Bangkok is notorious for its cowboy operators and rogue dealers, so I was a little concerned that I might get whisked off and sold as a sex slave…. I had no experience or qualifications but the next day I was enthusiastically embracing my new role as Teacher Alison, strutting around with a microphone, dramatically scrawling all over a blackboard ….
>
> One of the schools [where I taught English] was located in thick rainforest near the ancient ruins of Ayuthaya. It's hard to imagine a more exotic location and the school was nestled inside a huge complex of ornate temples and built almost entirely on water. Classrooms rose up on stilts and were connected by a series of wooden bridges. Water lilies and elaborate sculptures filled the water. It was the first time a foreign teacher had come to the school and I was welcomed like a movie star.

I have quoted this passage at length because the text offers a vivid display of the kind of privileges which Whites in Thailand enjoy as a result of their real and/or imagined proximity to the English language and the way these experiences of privilege are culturally handled. The text also offers insights into the continued salience of colonial Self/Other relationships between Caucasians and Asians which are made available in and through the global spread of teaching/learning of English.

Alistair Pennycook (1998) has argued, quite convincingly, that colonialism can best be seen as a site of cultural production, that its cultural products are discourses of Self/Other and that these discourses adhered to English as a whole and to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in particular. In the above text, for example, we catch a glimpse of the cultural politics of representation in the worlds inhabited by the 'native speaker' and the native Other. The aim of this paper is to follow Pennycook in exploring this relationship between English and colonial discourses in more detail by looking at how TEFL lessons work as sites which traffic in colonial discourse. In doing so I shall focus on how key themes such as native culture, travelling and colonialism and their dense web of relationships circulate in several TEFL texts to produced raced and gendered identities.

To understand the global role of English today, we need to see it in relation to, and as an aspect of, the form of modernity disseminated globally by transnational corporations in Anglo-American mass culture. English is key to this global mass culture, as instrument, as a dimension and as a commodity. As an *instrument*, it is

integral to the global movement of images, ideas, information, commodities and people, that is, to the phenomena that we have come to call globalization. In this capacity, English facilitates globalization processes and appears as being beyond politics and without substance. As a *dimension* of global mass culture, it is part of the cultural export of Anglo-American civilization through concerted government and business policies and the movement of Western peoples around the world as tourists, experts, teachers, entertainers, business people, and customers. Finally, as a *commodity*, it is an object tied to intense passions and interests whose standardized form a handful of governments and global corporations control and which people struggle to acquire, adjust to or use meaningfully. Globally, people import English and use it not just for instrumental communicative purposes but also for acquiring and displaying class and status identities, and to exercise power. Two of the most powerful features of this global mass culture are its Eurocentricty and its English monolingualism.

2. The Pleasures of the TEFL Text

A major site on which the cultural politics of race and gender are at work is TEFL curriculum, most of which is available via TEFL course books, work books, teacher books, and activity books. In addition to these, a great deal of material is also available in newspapers and on-line ESL-related websites such as www.ajarn.com and www.eslflow.com. In this section, I analyze a lesson which appeared in *Bangkok Post* before taking a close-up look at one of the most popular course books now used in Thailand, *Cutting Edge* (all further references to *Cutting Edge* are to this text). The *Bangkok Post* lesson appeared in the newspaper's June 1, 2004 edition of *Learning Post*, the paper's weekly educational supplement. Like most other EFL lessons, this one entitled "Operation Crowfoot," was designed with the communicative methodology in mind and requires minimal preparation by the tutor and students. Its aim is to enhance students' oral communicative skills by giving them the opportunity to discuss a topic which appeals to them and allows them to have fun while learning. The topic is supposed to also be open-ended to allow students at all levels of English proficiency easy and comfortable entry into the discussion. From an institutional TEFL perspective, "Operation Crowfoot" would be considered a good lesson idea. However, in trying to meet the institutional norm of comfort and fun in TEFL lessons, "Operation Crowfoot" opens a pathway for the teacher and students to revisit a deeply colonial site: adventures on a tropical desert island populated with "hostile inhabitants," a colonial trope first found in Columbus' encounter with the native peoples of the Caribbean and in the imaginative fiction of Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe*.

The lesson is a classic example of how colonial constructions adhere to English and are put in circulation via TEFL. As it appears in the newspaper, the text and graphics occupy the size of an A4 sheet of paper, with the graphic serving as the background image. The written text, which covers about one-third the space, is superimposed on the image of a close up shot of a sea fronted by three tall coconut trees. The silhouettes of four men facing the sea with their backs to the viewer are the only signs of animal life. Here is the full text:

WORKSHEET
Operation Crowfoot

"*Your class is on an excursion in the Pacific Ocean, on the cruise ship Crowfoot. Everything proceeds normally until one day the engines break down. That night a tropical storm hits with such fury that it is necessary to abandon ship. Luckily, the lifeboats are sturdy, and every member of the class survives the storm, miraculously keeping together.*

After two days and two nights, you see an island in the light of early days. As you approach the beach, you see the rusted hulks of WWII tanks amongst the palm trees. But, other than birds, you see no living creatures, just an expanse of beautiful white sand, and the green vegetation. As you land, you gather what has been salvaged from the ship.

5 knives, 2 axes, 2 boxes of wooden matches, 3 first-aid kits containing bandages and morphine (a pain-killing drug), 288 chocolate bars, 150 cans of fruit, 100 apples, 25 tins of butter, 3 bottles of alcohol used to sterilize operating equipment, an inner tube for a bicycle, a book of poetry, a pocket watch that works, a bugle (trumpet), 6 wire clothes hangers.

It has been decided that precautions should be taken in the event that there are hostile inhabitants of the island who may demand goods. Your group must select five items that it would be willing to give up to please them. Complete agreement without voting is necessary".

The first impression that strikes the viewer on encountering this *English* lesson idea is the colonial and imperialist imagination at work. This is suggested in the combination of the tropical island image of palm trees, beach and sea with the words "**Operation Crowfoot**." The combination of the image and title registers its effect by opening two major pathways in the teachers' and students' imagination. First, the sea/palm trees/beach image combined with the word "Crowfoot" puts into play Defoe's Crusoe and the footprint he found in the sand. This image sets the native English speaking reader in a dialogic relationship with the colonial imagination of Crusoe

and his cannibal Others, and invites him to vicariously go where Crusoe had gone before: on a colonial adventure.

The second, narrower pathway is opened by the military metaphor "Operation" and functions to update and upgrade this British colonial adventure to a contemporary American type military expedition. From this first encounter, the lesson begins to work to confirm the colonial/imperial self of the native English speaking teacher and to disseminate this English form of subjectivity among erstwhile Thai students seeking to learn English. It is in this sense that we can say with Pennycook that colonial constructs adhere to English and that TEFL conducts a public traffic in racism by placing these constructs in global circulation. The lesson's details serve to confirm the initial colonial and imperialist trope opened in the first encounter. The readers' initial impression that the lesson would involve a tropical island expedition is confirmed in the first sentence when they read that the class "is on an excursion in the Pacific Ocean" when "a tropical storm hits." The first line of the second paragraph which begins "after two days and nights, you see an island in the light of early dawn" works to confirm the colonial imaginary by recalling Columbus journey to the Americas. Until this point in the lesson, the teachers and students are on an old fashioned colonial adventure characterized by raiding and plundering in the lands of others. Signs of modern navigational and communication equipment are absent, as are other ocean going vessels and other aspects of contemporary ocean travel.

However, the next two sentences introduce something quite different, namely a sign which works at modernizing and consolidating the identity of the EFL teacher and learners as colonial cum imperialist expeditioners. This is the sign of the dangerous Other signified in the image of "rusted hulks of WWII tanks among the palm trees, [b]ut other than birds, ... no living creatures." With this updated version of the footprint in the sand cited by Crusoe, the expeditioners are suddenly catapulted through time to face the remnants of a failed twentieth century military engagement, a move which accommodates more of the Thai imagination and effectively localizes the lesson. This abrupt shift also marks the recognition of possible resistance by the Pacific Ocean islanders against foreign intrusion and the fear which it inspires among the intruders. Two paragraphs later, the English teacher, as captain of the ship, shall direct the students to the main activity of the lesson, asking them to select five items they are willing to part with to please possible "hostile inhabitants of the island who may demand goods." While this may be read as the colonizer being in total control, from another perspective, it could be interpreted as meaning that the 'natives,' through their possible hostility, have forced their way into the decision making process and unsettled the voice of the text's colonial authority. In the ensuing discussion, the students will practice speaking English and may thereby enhance their English speaking proficiency. Indeed. But what more would the students have learned through this lesson?

I would like to suggest that while a lesson like this may indeed add to students' communicative competence, as all opportunities for language practice could, it would also contribute to a *particular* concept of Self and Others, that is to say, to the formation of a colonial identity and to a concomitant notion of and attitude to difference. Most distressingly, it is the inhabitants of the Pacific Ocean islanders who would constitute the Other in the identity of these Asian students. Their native English speaking teacher as captain of the ship and as living embodiment of countries which know something about dealing with failed operations on tropical islands would stand as the master model for the students' identification. As *hostile* inhabitants, the Pacific Ocean islanders would, however, constitute not just the students' Other but would stand as a threat and enemy to the students' identity while their White English teacher provides the image of desirable subjectivity. Thus, if this lesson is taught as uncritically as suggested in the instructions, it would disseminate the racial colonial hierarchy of desirable/undesirable referents that have been constituted within discourses of colonialism. As Phillipson suggests, in such a situation, the EFL teacher would be following in Crusoe's footsteps in teaching his students "everything that was proper to make him useful, handy and helpful" under contemporary globalized conditions of work.

"Operation Crowfoot" also traffics in this colonial economy of desire and refusal through space and things. Like classic colonial narratives which represent colonized lands as vacant and colonized peoples as short of everything and with little needs, in this English lesson "you see no living creatures" on the island except the shipwrecked students. Despite it being vacant, the group shall nevertheless plan ahead in anticipation of hostile inhabitants by selecting "five items that it would be willing to give up to please them" [hostile inhabitants]. Interestingly, the students would do this by discussing and selecting from among the items "salvaged from the ship" five things which are *least* useful to them on the island. What is interesting here is that the selection of items would obey a principle of reciprocal exclusivity in the needs of the students and the island's hostile inhabitants. In other words, the refuse of the students would satisfy the simple appetite of their 'native' Other so much so that the latter's hostile inclinations would be tempered. As in the preceding paragraph, here again we see in "Operation Crowfoot" the mapping of Self and Other through colonial categories, in this instance, vacant space and trinkets. And, as before, Operation Crowfoot's racist cartographic ordering is again not original but borrowed from colonial discourses and redeployed in the linguistic theatre of a globalizing English.

2.1 On ethnicity and beauty

Cutting Edge's module five, titled "Appearances," deploys the colonial Self/Other binary primarily in terms of time. In this module, the colonial binary is established along aesthetic lines, with the modern and Western occupying the privileged place of a universalized desire while the pre-modern and non-Western are relegated to strange and curious tastes of Others in other times and places. The text creates this effect by juxtaposing five photographic images representing modern and traditional concepts of beauty accompanied by a short text. The title of the text, "You're gorgeous!" is placed above the photograph of Cindy Crawford, the first of four photographic images of women in a single row across two adjacent pages. Crawford's close-up image has the famous American model with auburn hair flying in the wind dressed in a bright pink turtle neck sweater, squarely facing the camera and smiling broadly. Next to this is a dull photographic image of an early modern European painting. It shows six plump, gaudily dressed European women almost piled on top of each other idling their time away. The next two photographs, one representing a 'long neck' Paduang hill tribe woman with a bright pink head scarf and the other a pale image of a pale faced wigged woman of Elizabethan England are inserted side by side at the beginning of the text on the adjacent page.

The layout of the images along a horizontal line makes it possible to view them serially. Thus, one first encounters the text's title "you are gorgeous!," then Cindy Crawford, then the other images. However, Crawford's red turtle neck sweater and the red head scarf of the Paduang woman, coupled with the receded images of the women in the other photographs, invite direct and immediate comparison between the two twentieth century contemporaries, Crawford and the Paduang woman. Thus, not only does the layout of the text effectively nominate Crawford as "gorgeous," but having done so, uses her global image to relativize the aesthetic appeal of the others, especially her 'native' tribal other. In doing so, the text is quite effective in suggesting that while pre-modern European concepts of beauty have evolved into today's universal, desirable body, Europe's contemporaries living in other lands are stuck in a backward time lag. Rendered as a people without history, they represent the antithesis of the global aesthetic. This message is reinforced in the reading passage which follows. Beginning with a paragraph which nominates Cindy Crawford as "the perfect American dream girl…. as 'The face of the Decade'" [1990s], it contrasts outlived European concepts of beauty before settling on Crawford's contemporary Others. It informs its EFL readers that "Ideas of beauty can be very different according to where you live in the world, too. For the Paduang tribe in South East Asia, traditionally, the most important sign of female beauty was a long neck." Thus, we find Crawford's contemporary competitor being rendered as tribal and traditional, while she possesses the universal measure of beauty and desirability, 'The Face of the Decade.' One can only guess what the students' responses would be to these questions which immediately follow the text:

a) Who do **you** think is the most attractive man/woman in the world? Why?
b) Which is the best explanation of the saying below? Do you think it is true?
Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder"

Interestingly, the emphasis on the "you" in question 'a' seems to indicate an uneasiness within the text, suggesting perhaps a self-consciousness that the text has set limits to what it is possible for the students to think, that is to say, to have asked a begged question.

Seemingly, not quite satisfied with this highly racist, gendered and closed construction, an image of the familiar figure of Pierce Brosnan, the current James Bond character, immaculately dressed in black tuxedo with gun in his hand, facing the camera appears at end of the text to continue the colonial assault. Accompanying this flippant liberal move for gender balance are the last three paragraphs comparing Brosnan's putatively athletic and manly appearance with earlier European concepts of male beauty before again settling on Europe's colonial others. The final paragraph begins by telling its readers that "even now, James Bond might not find it so easy to attract women if he visited the Dinka tribe of Sudan. They have always believed in the saying that 'big is beautiful.' Traditionally, each year, men compete to win the title of the fattest man."

As in the Crawford example, here again it is Brosnan's contemporaries in Sudan who are rendered strange and stuck in a time lag as compared against the 'normal' figure of one of the West's idols. Once more it is not enough to say that Europe's Others are strange or different or even inferior, but to insist that their aesthetic concepts are without history. And, once again, their "tribal" and traditional status are seen to weld them to a primitive past while the West moves on. With the West's idols positioned as setting the universal standard, the Paduang and the Dinka are offered as not just examples of unmodern or pre-modern concepts of beauty, as in the case of Elizabethan women who glorified white skin and British men who thought crying was gentlemanly; rather, these excolonized stand as living examples of the contra-modern, outside of the privileged space of the West and beyond the wheel of time. And this, despite the devastating impact which Euro-American colonialism and imperialism has had and is having on the Paduang's and Dinka's cultures and livelihoods through today's global flows of images, information, people, finance and commodities.

In such circumstance, what possible response can any student studying English in our post and hypermodern world have to the questions which follow the text? Can we expect our well-off urbanized EFL

students to buck the trend, turn away from the Cindy Crawfords and Pierce Brosnans and assert that indeed beauty is relative, that the now globalized idols bear the trace of colonial and imperialist violence? Given this ordering of knowledge, can we realistically expect them to even want to get close enough to know about the Dinka and Paduang, let also lustfully desire their bodies as we are invited to feel for Cindy Crawford and Pierce Brosnan? What are the implications of this cultural hegemony for Thai students as they seek to trans-form themselves through English and other globalized agencies?

3. Conclusion

This essay has sought to highlight the ways in which the race, gender, status and class hierarchies of colonial and global modernity adhere to English and are at work in and through it. To that end, we have examined their complex operations within the general economy of English as well as in the marketing, employment and curriculum practices of TEFL. Drawing from a wide range of sources, the chapter has shown that in this particular vein of 'international education', people of European descent, Whites, are empowered and privileged while non-Whites, including Thais, are more often than not, marginalized, excluded and treated with disdain. Importantly, these illiberal exercises of power are neither tangential nor contingent to English education in Thailand, but are in fact consistent with the goals of the nation to become competitive and modern under globalization.

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