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Cultural Relations Collection

On language teachers as agents of cultural relations

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About the author

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Foreword

We commissioned this essay in recognition of the important role that English language teachers across the world play in their communities and education systems and the contribution they make to cultural relations.

The British Council invests in, works with and reports on a large audience of English teachers in national education systems globally. They are a key audience in every aspect of our reach: they access broadcasts and publications, and form a large digital audience (for example, there were over six million unique visitors to the TeachingEnglish website and over 135,000 English language teachers engaged in sustained online professional development activity with the British Council in 2020–21). Traditionally, the impact of this work is measured in terms of its reach, changes in classroom practice, and in resulting improvements in student achievement. Teachers are 'multipliers', each one providing benefit to several classrooms of children through improved methodology and access to resources every year.

On the other hand, there has been a strong academic focus in the last 30 years on issues of the English language and ownership. English is 'pluricentric' and, for most users, not a national language but a 'lingua franca' adapted and used as part of multilingual repertoires in a variety of ways, often unconnected to the UK. It is in this context

that these teachers engage both bilaterally with the UK and multilaterally with international communities of teachers, often on our websites, social networks and massive open online courses. Importantly, through these and other professional development opportunities, many teachers actively seek the British Council out, not just to learn themselves, but to exchange knowledge and expertise that we in turn learn from and share. They contribute to international understanding both as English language teaching (ELT) practitioners and as experts in the lives of their students, offering insights into the broader educational, social and cultural contexts where they live and work.

Gillespie et al., in their paper *Cultural value* (2018), state that 'cultural relations practitioners aspire to genuine reciprocity and mutual understanding'. In this essay, through reflection on her own experiences in participatory research with various communities of English teachers, Dr Imperiale looks at the role of language teachers, and specifically English language teachers, in participating in and promoting cultural relations, beyond a transactional engagement which sees them as adopters and transmitters of outside knowledge and expertise. She shows how a cultural relations focus can both reveal broader and deeper mutual benefit to the British Council's work with English teachers, and support a more holistic

approach to teacher development, nurturing and responding to teacher aspirations and promoting teacher agency through increasing their potential for contribution to their own communities and education systems, to the international ELT community, and to intercultural understanding. Her work is particularly relevant as we look for new ways to bring together international networks of teachers, researchers and policymakers on our global platforms. It can help us further align our own values and aspirations as a cultural relations organisation with the work we do with the global ELT sector and focus our activity with English language teachers more clearly on realising those cultural relations objectives.

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Introduction

The concept of 'cultural relations' is multifaceted and complicated, encompassing aims such as developing greater connectivity, mutual understanding, reciprocity and mutually beneficial development (British Council & Goethe Institute, 2018). While the values and benefits to the UK are often presented as financial, the value of cultural relations lies in developing peaceful and sustainable communities worldwide, while nurturing better understanding and relations between people, populations and countries.

Cultural relations, therefore, contribute to the UK's communities and culture; they have an intangible cultural and social value which is perhaps less easily quantifiable than the financial aspects, and it is this wider value upon which I will focus in this essay.

At the same time, cultural relations are developed to nurture beneficial transactions between states, and therefore could be considered – at least to some extent – in terms of cultural diplomacy and soft power (Singh, 2018). As a cultural relations organisation, the British Council is involved both in promoting better understanding between people worldwide and in fostering the interests of the UK through the language industry, as the aims and objectives of its Royal Charter state.[1]

The role of English in cultural relations has already been discussed and its value in building cultural relations is widely recognised (Erling, 2017). For example, English learning has a role to play in peacekeeping missions (Hare et al., 2017) and in contexts of protracted crisis, where it contributes to voicing peaceful cultural resistance and the spreading of counter-narratives before the international community (Imperiale et al., 2017). However, the spreading of English poses problems when it is used in place of a multitude of indigenous and minority languages (Rose, 2018), reinforcing structural imbalances and the divide between countries and knowledges.

The focus of this essay is not language itself – the tool by which cultural relations are shaped – but rather the agents who can shape cultural relations: English language teachers. In this essay I discuss how English language teachers in ODA-eligible contexts [2] contribute to cultural relations through actions grounded in their values and beliefs (agency), and how communities benefit from the work of English language teachers. I discuss different situations in which language teachers are active cultural agents by promoting multilingualism in their classrooms, by being involved in international, participatory, professional development, and by acting as mediators within their own communities. I do not look at their work as if it is limited to the classroom context, but I rather recognise the work of English teachers beyond their schools, as active members of their communities. In the discussion I bring in examples from research I conducted with teachers in ODA contexts in Ethiopia, the Gaza Strip (Occupied Palestinian Territories) and Lebanon.

This essay is structured as follows: first, I introduce theoretical concepts related to cultural relations and teachers' agency; second, I present and discuss empirical evidence from ODA contexts which shows how teachers' agency can be manifested; and I conclude with final reflections and implications.

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1. For more information, the Royal Charter can be found at: www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/royalcharter.pdf
2. Countries eligible to receive official development assistance.

Theoretical concepts

Cultural relations and the role of English and English language teaching

Cultural relations is at the core of the work of the British Council. A recent review written by the British Council and the Goethe Institute (2018) argued that the term 'cultural relations' is frequently adopted by practitioners, even though there is no agreement about its definition. In the review, cultural relations has been defined as:

> *Reciprocal transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities conducted by state and/or non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society. The overall outcomes of cultural relations are greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and cultures, shaped through engagement and attraction rather than coercion.*

British Council & Goethe Institute, 2018: p. 7

The definition is not that straightforward, so let us try to unpack it. Cultural relations seem to have a more genuine and benign motive than cultural diplomacy since the overall outcomes are not directly related to states' interests, but rather to the flourishing of humanity. Cultural relations emphasise the development of trust between peoples and cultures, participation and dialogue for sustainable understanding and mutual respect between different actors.

Rose (2018) suggests that cultural relations are fundamentally long-term, mutual and non-governmental. On the other hand, Singh (2018: p. 5) acknowledges that they develop 'in a continuum of soft power that includes international development'.

I agree with Singh (2018) since in the British Council and Goethe Institute definition above the reference to soft power is clear – even though not explicit – and is evident in the term 'attraction rather than coercion' and the stated aim of achieving 'mutually beneficial transactions'. As such, it is challenging to fully appreciate the non-governmental dimension of cultural relations that Rose (2018) refers to.

The work of the British Council includes the development of cultural relations as defined above – which supports mutual understanding and communication worldwide – and also involves soft power, at least to some extent. The aims of the British Council include generating attractiveness and fostering the spread of English language and British culture, therefore contributing to the economic enhancement and cultural enrichment of the UK (Singh, 2018).

A series of essays have investigated how cultural relations encompass the work of the British Council, noting that English and English language teaching (ELT) are central to the development of cultural relations. For example, Rose (2018) discusses how English is both a 'vector' and a 'commodity', with not only a constructive power, but also one which is potentially destructive in the case that English monoglossia prevails and linguistic diversity is subjugated in favour of one single lingua franca (which is also a colonial language). A British Council-edited book, *English Across the Fracture Lines*, investigates the role that English has in creating and maintaining relationships and stability, locally and globally (Erling, 2017). We therefore can say that English does contribute to cultural relations, even though this may also pose some issues.

The problems posed by the spreading of English have been abundantly illustrated by experts in applied linguistics, the most prominent being Robert Phillipson (1992, 2016) with his work on linguistic and educational imperialism. Linguistic imperialism consists of the practices and ideologies employed in subjugating groups on the basis of language: English dominates over other languages, and hence can be used as a discriminatory and policing tool:

The dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. Here structural refers broadly to material properties (for example institutions, financial allocations) and cultural to immaterial or ideological properties (for example attitudes, pedagogic principles).
Phillipson, 1992: p. 47

In Phillipson's conceptualisation, linguistic imperialism occurs on different levels. It involves economic, political, military, communicative, cultural and social levels (Phillipson, 1992: pp. 52–55). The one-way flow of ELT models exported from the centre to the periphery – from anglophone countries in the inner circle to local communities of the outer circles (Kachru, 1986) – maintains and reinforces the asymmetrical relationship between norm-providing and norm-dependent countries; what Phillipson (1992) calls 'educational imperialism'. The British Council, according to Phillipson and others (Phillipson 1992, 2016; Pennycook, 1994, 1998), is the primary organ of the 'exportation of ELT', and hence contributes to linguistic imperialism.

The apolitical mission of the British Council, which often finds concretisation in educational aids for developing countries, is motivated by the argument that issues of power relations are not relevant to language pedagogy (Phillipson, 1992). However, Phillipson and others remind us that power relations occur through language pedagogy; for example through the exportation of textbooks produced in anglophone contexts and the reputation that 'native' language teachers have as opposed to non-native ones. In these ways English and ELT have the power to subjugate other languages and other forms of knowledge.

The critique that Phillipson (1992) advanced, and which has since been further developed by many other scholars (Pennycook, 1994; Phipps & Gonzales, 2004; Crosbie, 2014; Imperiale, 2017), needs to be kept in mind when discussing and problematising cultural relations and the neutral benign and idealistic motives behind them. I believe that a more

complex picture of cultural relations, one that explicitly and openly discusses issues related to structural imbalances, would help develop better understanding, and therefore better relationships between different stakeholders and various local contexts.

The focus of cultural relations within British Council publications has largely been on the role of English, while the *agents* of cultural relations – English language teachers, especially those in the 'Periphery' (Kachru, 1986) and/or in ODA contexts – have not been in the foreground. Language teachers worldwide are agents of cultural relations, as their work is not only concerned with teaching language skills; it is well known that they are also involved in teaching culture and in promoting intercultural values such as mutual respect, intercultural curiosity, and other significant attitudes that aim to foster dialogue and reciprocal understanding. However, most often language learning is understood in terms of the knowledge and skills that allow us to communicate and to perform a task in another language, and its full educational and political import, as Michael Byram (2014) says, becomes less important.

Undoubtedly language learning is about communication, but I would argue this is not the only purpose. Language learning is also about learning to be hospitable, it is about being humble, acknowledging that we will never be perfectly competent and that we need each other to improve; it is also about learning to learn. In some contexts – particularly ODA contexts – people use English to post on social media to denounce situations of injustice. In other contexts, people use English to read about places they would like to live in or to travel to, even though they cannot move from their own countries. Language learning can nurture aspirations and dreams, and can allow people to read literature and relate to the emotions and imaginary therein. It is therefore more than just performing a communicative task, and language teachers are the people who can convey this message, within and beyond their classrooms.

Colleagues and I have written about this in academic publications (Imperiale, 2017; Imperiale et al., 2017; Imperiale, forthcoming; Phipps, 2013; Crosbie, 2014; Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004; Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020). In our works, we consider ethics to be at the heart of language education, and spell out issues related to social justice and individuals' well-being, arguing that these should be part of language education. In other words, we try to integrate the aims of cultural relations into language education. We all agree that in order to do this, we need a more holistic approach to language learning, one that goes beyond mastering instrumental competencies and skills.

It is within this holistic approach to language education that I understand the role of language teachers as agents of cultural relations. In return, cultural relations may benefit teachers and their development as professionals. Furthermore, it is within this need for doing good work, and acting to transform our planet into a better place for ourselves and future generations, that, I believe, the concept of agency is key. In the next section I explain what 'agency' is and link it to human development.

What is agency and why does it matter?

'Agency' is another complex word. We often hear about it, but there are different definitions, depending on the discipline in which these definitions have been developed. In the field of language and intercultural education, for example, the concept of 'agency' is mostly related to professional development and to the implementation of, or resistance against, language policies.

For example, in a recent publication, Manan and colleagues (2020) investigated the actions that teachers undertook to resist language policies in elite English-medium schools. They argue that when teachers are equipped with critical awareness, and solid knowledge of bilingual and multilingual education, they are able to challenge English monoglossia by adopting multilingual pedagogical practices (Manan et al., 2020).

Another recent study on language teachers' agency investigated the professional development experience of a group of mainstream primary teachers of English as an additional language in Ireland (Wallen & Tormey, 2019). The authors argue for valuing teachers' knowledge and expertise, which also would increase their sense of agency (Wallen & Tormey, 2019).

Agency seems to have the following characteristics: 1) It aims to achieve some sort of *change*, 2) It is *relational*. To achieve change, we cannot rely only on the internal capacity of the individual, nor is agency exclusively dependent upon external factors, but rather it is constructed and achieved *relationally*. For example, Wallen and Tormey (2019: p. 130) write that:

> *Within the specific context of teaching, agency is the interaction between the individual and the structural aspects of social settings including resources, school culture and political mandates.*

Teachers, therefore, can act to make a change in the context of the school, although their work might be constrained by, for example, a lack of resources or poor classroom facilities, and this may affect the change they are able to pursue. Agency therefore depends on the relationships that teachers develop, in addition to their willingness to act. Keeping this in mind helps us avoid a simplistic approach to agency as something innate in the individual.

However, teachers do not only operate within the classroom context, as their work reaches beyond their classrooms and schools. Teachers are members of their communities, of their families and they may belong to a wider global teachers' community. They may be involved in informal education, they may be volunteers in local NGOs, they may help their families and relatives gain access to the wider world, and they may actively contribute to their communities with the knowledge and expertise they have as language teachers. I therefore wish here to expand the concept of agency beyond the language and intercultural field and link it with human development.

The concept of agency as related to individuals' changes and human development has been used in different domains, for example within the 'capability approach' (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This was developed by Amartya Sen (1999, 2002) and Martha Nussbaum (2011), respectively in the fields of welfare economics and philosophy. The capability approach focuses on the well-being of individuals and on the possibility for them to live with dignity. Well-being in the capability approach is understood as the possibility for individuals to live the life they value. To do so, individuals should live in conditions which allow them to be able to act upon what they are able to do and to be – their capabilities – and transform these into achieved outcomes (Sen, 1999). This approach aims at the 'flourishing of humanity' (Nussbaum, 2011).

Sen defines agency as 'the ability to act in accordance with one's chosen goals and values as an element of a person's effective power' (Sen, 2002: p. 289). Agency therefore is not only about bringing change, but is also about considering the values and goals of individuals in order to achieve well-being and development for all. Agency (as integrating change, relations, values, goals and well-being) could be at the heart of both cultural relations and language education.

In the next section I introduce examples of language teachers' agency I have encountered in my research. I do not focus only on pedagogical practices, but rather I approach the idea more holistically, including the micro-context of the classroom and opening up the discussion beyond that.

Examples of language teachers' agency in ODA contexts

In this section I illustrate language teachers' agency, drawing on examples taken from research conducted in ODA contexts in Ethiopia, the Gaza Strip (Occupied Palestinian Territories) and Lebanon. I argue that agency is found:

- within the context of the classroom (for example with refugee teachers adopting multilingual pedagogies and resisting the English-medium of instruction policy in Ethiopia)

- in international professional development opportunities (for example when teachers are recognised as experts of their own contexts and are encouraged to exchange knowledge)

- in the context beyond the classroom (for example when teachers are actively involved in the role of mediators within their own communities).

I argue that these examples demonstrate how language teachers are agents of cultural relations and have an impact on community development.

Classroom pedagogies and multilingualism in refugee schools in Ethiopia

Teachers often work in a variety of languages, adopting multilingual pedagogies despite directions to operate only with the language of instruction as mandated by national education systems. They also use different English varieties, with an understanding of English as a lingua franca. The choice of navigating these linguistic resources is often dictated by the aim of better serving students' needs. Multilingual pedagogies therefore represent a way in which teachers resist and take action against national educational policies within their classrooms.

The following examples come from refugee schools in Ethiopia. Data was collected during a week-long visit as part of the British Council project Ethiopia Language for Resilience.

Ethiopia has a long-standing history of admitting refugees, with the majority coming from South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia. In 2017 Ethiopia announced its commitment to enhance refugees' integration into the state, but currently refugee education runs in parallel to the main education system. Refugees attend schools in their camps, and the education system is supervised and regulated by the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA). Refugee schools follow the Ethiopian curriculum, according to which the language of instruction should be the home language up to Primary 4, and then English.

Within this context the British Council developed the Ethiopia Language for Resilience project, which ran from November 2016 to February 2020 with the aim of developing teachers' capacities, by strengthening teachers' English competence, and supporting teacher education and capacity building.

Language is one of the main challenges of refugee education in Ethiopia. Given the multilingualism of the refugee camps and the lack of educational resources such as textbooks and activity books from refugees' countries of origins, implementing the current language policy on the language of instruction has proved to be challenging at best and is not viable in the immediate future. English acts as a lingua franca among the refugee communities and is therefore sometimes used in Grades 1–4. However, most refugees – both teachers and students – have very limited English competence, which has consequences in Grades 5–8.

In this context, multilingual pedagogies play an important role in the classroom, and as teachers declared in focus groups, there is a creative tension between the need and willingness to improve English and use it in class, and the need to use the languages available in class to ensure that students are actually able to learn. The extract below, from a focus group with refugee teachers for Grades 5–8, demonstrates this tension:

S: We learned a lot during the British Council training, we improve English and we put the techniques in practice in class.

A: I use more English … well, I try, and sometimes we translate in Arabic because most of my students speak Arabic in class […].

G: Yes but we need English and exams are in English, so it is better they [students] learn English.

A: I know, but we all translate, I think it is OK to translate to help them understand … like … with science and the concepts … you need to understand the words.

Here we see that English is useful; as one teacher said, 'we need English for exams', but at the same time 'it is OK to translate to help [students] understand'. It seems that English is functional and needs to be learned to pass exams, but for a deeper understanding of concepts, some teachers resort to Arabic. It is interesting also that difficult or technical subjects like science may be better explained in Arabic rather than English.

In another focus group with refugee teachers in Grades 1–4, teachers stressed the need to get more training in using multilingual pedagogies:

A: Arabic is better for everyone. The students to understand, for us to understand ehm the students, for everyone […].

M: Yes but we don't understand the books, when there are names from Ethiopia, we don't know them, so it is better to work with books in English and just use English in class.

P: And we need more training in English but for other classes, ehm for all subjects like maths and science […].

A: Overall I am confident … we are trained, we have enough knowledge, but I would like to have more training to use English and Arabic at the same time. Yeah, this I don't know.

In this example, some teachers prefer to use Arabic since 'it is better for everyone', while others underscore the value of using English to overcome cultural misunderstanding, for example with the Ethiopian names that are not reference points in students' cultures. As part of disentangling this tension, it can be seen there is a need for more training on content and language-integrated learning (CLIL); 'we need more training in English … for all subjects like maths and science', and more training on using multilingual pedagogies.

Nevertheless, from these extracts, which are representative of many other conversations, it also emerges that teachers work between languages all the time. With their use – or their lack of use – of multilingual repertoires, teachers support intercultural dialogue, better relationships and greater connectivity with their students, and therefore have the potential to strengthen relations among the refugee communities in the camps.

Cultural and linguistic diversity is widely recognised as being important for living in a multilingual world, and studies demonstrate that being open to other languages and being able to use them and work between them supports well-being and strengthens relations (Frimberger, 2016). It is therefore not enough to know and use English, as Professor Alison Phipps said in a TED Talk:

Learning to live in a multilingual world is an ethical necessity for life to flourish. […] English is just one language […] and one language cannot explain the whole world. [3]

Languages can connect us, and especially in challenging situations of structural imbalances, multilingualism can help us restore dignity – even though perhaps only partially – as people are celebrated for their languages and cultural belongings.

Within diverse refugee communities, both English and refugees' native tongues are important for building stronger communities. From the example above, it seems that teachers do choose one language or another to ensure understanding and supporting people's well-being. In doing so, teachers are actively engaged in creating cultural relations that benefit the multicultural and multilingual communities within and beyond the classroom.

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3. Alison Phipps' talk is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZqL7MC8Eys

Teacher training and professional development in the Gaza Strip (Occupied Palestinian Territories)

Professional development is another dimension in which teachers' agency can manifest itself. Professional development is often perceived as an opportunity, and teachers value it especially when delivered by international experts. *Participatory* forms of teacher training activate dialogue and processes of mutuality and reciprocity, which are ultimately the goals of cultural relations and could enhance the ways in which teachers' beliefs and values can be expressed in their professional activity in and outside the classroom, as the examples below demonstrate.

By participatory, I mean that teachers are not passive recipients but become actively involved as experts of their own contexts, co-constructing knowledge and ways of working with trainers. Participatory teacher training models and approaches to professional development have recently been used quite frequently both for research and for educational purposes. What follows are some examples of work done with pre-service and in-service English teachers from the Gaza Strip.

The Gaza Strip, which together with the West Bank constitutes the Occupied Palestinian Territories, has been under blockade since 2007. The blockade impedes the movement of people into and out of the Strip, as well as the flow of resources, infrastructure and basic goods. People in the Gaza Strip live in a condition of forced immobility and extreme poverty which may lead to physical and mental distress. These conditions have been defined as 'de-development' by the United Nations (UN, 2017). Three military operations in the last decade have devastated living conditions, but education nevertheless remains a priority for Palestinian teachers and students (Fassetta et al., 2020).

During my doctoral research, and in several projects since, I have worked with pre-service and in-service English and Arabic teachers from the Gaza Strip, co-constructing, developing and delivering participatory online teacher training courses (Imperiale, 2018; Imperiale et al., 2017; Imperiale, 2017; Imperiale et al., in press; Fassetta et al., 2017).

During the workshops, teachers – even if they were pre-service teachers – were always considered as experts of their own context, and training workshops were grounded in participation and knowledge co-construction. Valuing teachers' expertise and knowledge, and developing frank and honest communication during the workshops, helped foreground teachers' voice and agency (Imperiale, 2018). By voice, I mean the capability to develop self-expression and to find a position in the world (Barnett, 2007); and agency, as discussed in the theorical part of this essay, is about acting and bringing change in relation to one's own values and objectives (Sen, 1999).

This extract demonstrates how a participant nurtured her voice and agency as a result of a workshop series, as she found her position in the world, and decided to act based on her values and objectives. She understood that in her teaching she wanted to be able to refer to peaceful resistance and social justice, which in the Palestinian context involves opposition against the Israeli occupation. However, topics related to occupation cannot easily be included in the curriculum of the schools of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), which provides education for the majority of Palestinian refugees.

> *There [in the schools of UNRWA], it's teaching English you know ... only for exam. I don't want to work there! With UNRWA ... [laughing] they would fire me after one day. You are not free in teaching there. I would leave straightaway ... no politics, no resistance, no justice ... it doesn't make sense how they do education there ... it is not education in fact how I ... ehm, how I think education is, not for exams ... not like they do. [Laughing] No no, UNRWA is not for me [laughing]. I understood this with [the teacher training course], ehm, that I want a job to make me more free.*
>
> N, interview

The interviewee openly stated her disappointment in the UNRWA education system. Over the course of the workshop series she stated that she understood that she wanted a job in which she could feel free, and which allowed her to teach according to her values and goals. It is important to note that in Gaza, young women graduates' unemployment rate was 64 per cent (UNRWA, 2017) when the study was conducted, and UNRWA's contracts (mostly temporary) are among the best working conditions that teachers can potentially aspire to.

The intent of this example is by no means to infer that change cannot happen within a system, but rather to show how teachers, when stimulated and considered experts, can take decisions based on their own values and goals. The courage of this participant must be acknowledged; she decided not to try the UNRWA recruiting test, as being employed within that system would not be pertinent and coherent with her own values. The workshop series helped her find her position within her own society (voice), and act within that society to shape her own circumstances (agency).

As a result of that workshop series, stronger relations were established between the trainees and the trainers, and this led to other research projects and further collaborations. Being involved in knowledge co-construction therefore strengthened the establishment of long-term cultural relations.

The teachers I worked with always valued working internationally with colleagues from a UK-based institution. For example:

> *The certificate that we received at the end of the course is too important for me. It is written that I have attended a course on the 'Use of the Arts of Resistance in English language teaching' from Glasgow University. This is very important.*
>
> A, evaluation form

> *The training was very good because it was given by professional experts from other universities. For us it is a dream to speak with professors from Britain with the important reputation. Thank you so much for making my dream true.*
>
> R, evaluation form

Involving local and international experts in teacher training programmes, while at the same time ensuring that trainees are actively involved in knowledge co-construction, helps build a two-way flow of knowledge into and out of the local context, which is important for building cultural relations.

Nevertheless, power dynamics and structural imbalances (Guariento, 2020) are inevitable and need to be considered: teachers probably value teacher training opportunities because they genuinely believe in the value of education, and at the same time they likely also associate training delivered by foreigners with the chance of better employment conditions, improved working conditions and network building. In other words, teachers may decide to participate in teacher training courses because of the aspirational imagery and connotations associated with international work, all of which is far beyond the reality of what teacher training courses alone can offer (for a more extensive discussion, see Imperiale, forthcoming).

Therefore, despite the value of international professional development, it is also important to keep these structural imbalances in mind as they have an impact on teachers' expectations, on teachers' agency and ultimately on cultural relations.

Teachers as mediators and their role in their communities in Lebanon

Teachers in different ODA contexts do not only work within their classrooms but are often active participants in their own societies, offering support to their peers, students and relatives, and becoming mentors, mediators and advocates. Their English language proficiency can also make them feel responsible for communicating with international groups, contributing to the development of their own society and building cultural relations.

In this section I draw on examples collected during ethnographic research in the north of Lebanon between 2014 and 2015. Lebanon is now on the verge of collapse due to a terrible economic crisis, political instability, the Beirut blast of summer 2020 and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The data collected may appear outdated, but the examples presented are still useful to illustrate the role of language teachers as members of their communities. In addition, fieldwork conducted in Ethiopia and with Palestinian teachers is very much aligned with what teachers in 2014 and 2015 reported in Lebanon.

The extracts below illustrate how some English pre-service and in-service teachers in Lebanon talked about how their responsibilities went well beyond the work done in their classrooms, reaching their families and their communities:

I am unemployed […] I am not experienced as a teacher, but I always help my little brothers and sisters and my nephews with their school homework. They come to my house and we do the homework together and we sing songs in English. I am happy to help them with my English. […] I also translate for my mother and father when they want to know the news.

A, interview

I don't know how I learned English, I went to the same schools as others in the camp but I learned it, even before being a teacher when I was a volunteer at an NGO. It was very useful as I talk with people like you that come to the camp. […] we can tell our stories, of the war and about how we live now […] English is very important for us.

M, interview

I tell my students that they need English if they want to leave. How can they go to ehm Sweden if they don't speak English. Nobody will help them. […] I tell them, you don't want to stay here cooking potatoes for your 16 brothers and sisters, right? So you have to study English too much if you want to leave. […] They [Some students] want to go to NGO and there are volunteers, ehm they don't speak Arabic, so I tell them to try and speak English. […] Once they asked me to go to the NGO to help with translation, so I had to go … and I went one day, and I liked it there. […] They paint, do English classes, music, everything. Now I help them when they need.

A, interview

In these extracts, English teachers highlighted the multiple roles they undertake in their communities. The teacher in the first extract talked about the ways in which she supports her family members: as she explained, she was unemployed at the time of the interview, but she was helping her family members when they needed support with English. For example, she helped younger siblings with their homework and translated news for her parents and older relatives. She therefore opened up a new world for her family, connecting their local context to the global one as they could access news in English.

In the second and third extracts, both English teachers – the first had a refugee background, while the second was from a rural town in the north of Lebanon – talked about their role in building cultural relations with foreigners who were working with international NGOs. In the interviews I conducted it emerged that usually international volunteers – even those collaborating with local NGOs – were not able to speak Arabic, and therefore volunteer translators and interpreters were always needed to ensure the smooth running of projects.

The teacher in the second extract stated that he used English to communicate counter-narratives about the reality and the conditions in which people in the refugee camp lived. He pointed out that his English was rather 'good' compared to his friends' even though he had studied at the refugee schools. Nevertheless, being in touch with foreigners helped him improve his English and at the same time motivated him to master a language in which he could be heard by the international community.

The third teacher mentioned that initially she was not involved in the work of an NGO, but she was asked to attend an event by her own students. She then started co-operating with the NGO, and valued the opportunity of using English authentically, while contributing to her own community. As she further explained, at the beginning she felt there was an expectation from her students that she should have helped the NGO volunteers – 'I had to go' – and then after going she liked the environment because it made her feel useful.

In these examples it is clear that the role of English teachers extends beyond their classrooms, and that this is crucial in establishing the cultural relations that are important for human development. English teachers in ODA contexts can also be mediators and help the creation of relationships of trust between their own communities and international actors. When they translate, they do not only enable the smooth running of NGO projects, they also enable intercultural understanding and dialogue through their bilingual and/or multilingual skills. They enable 'linguistic hospitality', which is about being able to welcome others in language, avoiding the 'us versus them' dichotomy and learning to live in diversity, while also avoiding simplistic 'othering' processes (Phipps, 2013). In other words, they help establish greater connectivity between people, with the important effect of contributing to socio-economic development.

Future directions and conclusive remarks

During a recent job interview I was asked how working with people in ODA contexts has changed me, what benefits I got, what I learned, and what I take with me on an everyday basis. I think that more or less my improvised answer to that question was along the following lines.

Working with English language teachers in ODA contexts and with refugee language teachers who live and work in challenging circumstances has taught me a lot. First, perspectives and the importance of not taking anything for granted. Second, humility and the importance of recognising who the experts are, and in which contexts. Finally, that relationships are at the heart of projects, and are what makes a vision feasible and projects sustainable in the long term.

This was perhaps a partial answer as I learned much more than that, from specific field-related knowledge to different and flexible ways of working, in addition to a useful attitude which I have described elsewhere as 'letting go' of control over projects, ideas, knowledges and pedagogical approaches (Imperiale, 2018).

As a researcher working in a UK-based institution, I have taken these learning points to the academic community, to my colleagues, to my students, to the funders, to my family and to my friends. I am under no illusion that my learning can change structures, but I do know that learning with and from teachers in ODA contexts has changed me profoundly, and potentially 'my' community has benefited as well. At the same time, I would like to think that these relations have also benefited the teachers, stakeholders and academics I have worked with.

Have I been involved in developing cultural relations then? Have these relations benefited the UK? In this essay, I explained that I believe the concept of cultural relations still requires some scrutiny, and perhaps as part of that we need to understand how to better capture its rich intangible, cultural and social value.

Still, I would like to think that, yes, in the research projects I have been involved in, together with the participants, stakeholders, funders, and the academic and non-academic partners in the UK and ODA contexts, we did build cultural relations that fostered dialogue, mutual understanding, better knowledge and stronger collaborations, and that these collaborations have been beneficial for all those involved.

Most likely then, yes, these cultural relations have also benefited the UK, even if this intangible value is much harder to evaluate. The UK National Commission for UNESCO (2020) published a recent report on the value of UNESCO to the United Kingdom, and through case studies they illustrate how this is related to the wider and richer social and cultural value. Activities that have a transformational impact on communities concern five broader areas: education, research, capacity building, conservation, and management and planning (UNESCO, 2020). I would say that my relations with teachers in ODA contexts have had an impact on education, research, capacity building and sustainable development, and I can see a parallel here with British Council activities involved in education, research, capacity building and sustainability.

However, perhaps wondering how relations benefit one state or the other is still asking the wrong question. If we are to think about cultural relations in terms of understanding, connectivity and dialogue, then perhaps we have also to shift the focus on what constitutes real outcomes and impact: first, considering the whole process of establishing relations, not only the products thereof, and second, considering wider relations and human development as more than the sum of the states' interests.

How can we get there? First, I believe we need to think of cultural relations in terms of development. By actively working towards the promotion of better understanding worldwide, and assuming that English is needed in any cultural relations, I believe that the British Council can support local teachers by first and foremost embracing some radical listening, and carefully paying attention to those who are experts of their own contexts. This may not necessarily bring evident measurable benefits in the short term, but may rather be part of a broader cultural relations agenda focused on human development whose value will be measurable in the longer term.

Second, I believe that educators may wish to reflect on a less instrumental approach in language education; one that in its broadest sense looks at individuals as human beings. I genuinely believe the British Council has a major role to play and a unique opportunity to shape cultural relations and language and intercultural education worldwide. I am familiar with the important work the British Council conducts on a daily basis, although I also admit I am critical of instrumental approaches to language and intercultural education. Rather I support a more holistic approach; one that acknowledges that language education goes well beyond language skills, competencies and testing, and recognises individuals' potential to flourish, which in turn nurtures well-being and community development. In other words, one that recognises people's agency.

I believe that to practise this approach we have to take a stance against structural imbalances, and that means valuing local knowledges, local languages and local ways of working that eschew the skill-based type of learning we are constantly exposed to. First and foremost, this means valuing language teachers' agency and the work they do within their local contexts. We can see this approach beginning to be implemented in ideas such as 'language for resilience' and 'language and empowerment', which are topics the British Council is promoting, and I would recommend more work in that direction.

Drawing on the examples I discussed in the previous section, I would recommend that more of the British Council's work could focus on the following:

a. strengthening linguistic diversity and further developing *localised* multilingual and translingual pedagogies, which is important for nurturing *inclusive* cultural relations between students of different backgrounds

b. promoting professional development through *participatory* training courses where capacity building perhaps could be re-phrased in terms of capacity exchanging, underscoring that knowledge and ways of working can be co-constructed. This would ultimately result in valuing local knowledges, contributing to a 'decolonising' agenda which could further promote genuine reciprocity

c. developing an understanding of what English language teachers do *beyond* their classroom; for example what roles they play as international actors, how capacity exchanging could take place beyond the schools, and how they involve communities, families, and people at the margins of education systems

d. further researching the role of the digital in developing cultural relations. In the past months, we have seen that Covid-19 has exacerbated already existing inequalities, but the response to the pandemic has also had the effect of bringing larger numbers of teachers than ever before together online. British Council social network pages (for example the British Council Teacher Community Facebook page) show that English language teachers worldwide – or at least those who have access to appropriate infrastructure – have been increasingly connected with each other, exchanging knowledge, skills, tips and tricks for moving to online teaching. These social networks now count thousands of members and followers, and are active in promoting opportunities for live question and answer sessions, webinars with experts and online conferences. Even though it is still too early to analyse this phenomenon – and thus it is not discussed here – these interactions may also attest to an overall spirit of genuine solidarity among teachers worldwide. The possibilities of the online environment are astonishing, and it is important to capture the *depth* we can reach through online interactions, and how these can be more *inclusive*. Again, this may be harder to capture, but its impact may lead to innovative ways of working and to building knowledge across borders more effectively.

The work of the British Council in these areas may contribute to strengthening cultural relations goals, benefiting individuals and communities worldwide.

To conclude this essay, I would like to ask readers to reflect on the same questions I was asked: what have you learned from the international language teachers/teacher trainers/language practitioners you work with? What did they teach you?

Perhaps in answering those questions, you might find that a lot is about intangible cultural value. Much of our learning when we work with international partners is about reciprocal knowledges, contextualised ways of working, greater connectivity, cultural respect and curiosity. Perhaps, then, we need to value what language teachers do more strongly, we need to understand how their work has an impact on their communities and ours. We need to realise that cultural relations are present in our daily life in the form of relationships between people with a face and a name, with values and goals, with dreams and expectations, and with the determination to act to make the world a better place.

Acknowledgements

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