INDIGENIZATION IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Whenever I talk about Indigenization, I recognize that it's often customary, in an Indigenous paradigm, to 'situate' myself in the work (Wilson, 2009)—I might talk about where I'm from, or my family, but I'll give you the Coles Notes version. I'm originally from Newfoundland, traditional territory of the extinct Beothuk people. I grew up in Nova Scotia on the edge of a Mi'kmaq community; the Mi'kmaq are considered the founding people of Nova Scotia and are one of the signatory nations to the Peace and Friendship Treaties of that area. I'm living in Treaty 6 territory, which is a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples; the Indigenous peoples of the Cree, Nakota Sioux, Dene, Blackfoot, Tsuu-t'ina, Iroquois, Ojibway, Salteaux, Anishinaabe, Inuit, Métis, and many others who reside in Edmonton whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to enrich our community. I teach and develop curriculum with a community college that also acts as a regional steward.

I also recognize that I am likely writing for a Western readership, and so I am mindful that it is customary to begin with some background or a rationale for my topic: Indigenization in the ESL classroom.

Indigenization is rooted in the emergent consciousness of the detrimental effects of colonization; this has increased the demand to decolonize education. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)'s Calls to Action (2015) urge institutions to address the issues inherent to colonialism and systemic racism. Many educational institutions, like mine, have responded by developing Indigenous strategies. Our strategy is founded on the Seven Sacred Teachings and, as an 'organic' document, will grow with us. Some of the fundamental ideas include making the infrastructural, curricular, and pedagogical changes required to promote the balancing of Indigenous and Western worldviews, values, and ways of knowing as an act of Reconciliation.

ESL programs do not ostensibly serve Indigenous learners, but we should not be exempt from Indigenization. My college's language training program began Indigenization with questions: What would an Indigenous Strategy look like for us? What are the opportunities? I recently authored an in-house report that sought to answer this; 94 recommendations for program leadership, curriculum developers, and instructors were generated, including a recommendation to "take it slow". There is much in the literature describing failure when the human element of policy change is neglected, when policy is written and curriculum is changed without considering the instructors who will be responsible for living the policies and using the curriculum.

For example, in South Africa, policy changes were implemented to "cleanse" education of racism and sexism. However, there wasn't enough information on how to implement the changes and teachers lacked both pedagogical and content knowledge. The instructors resisted the policy and adhered to familiar teaching approaches and content, even though they knew this would perpetuate the systems of sexism and racism they desired to disrupt (Chisholm, 2005). Case studies like this underscore the prudence of conducting a needs analysis *prior* to drafting new policy. Instructors should inform policy, not the other way around.

So, as a graduate studies research project, I conducted a needs analysis of ESL instructors to explore the interrelationship between instructor knowledge and beliefs (including what they believed were sound teaching practices or beliefs about Self), unconscious bias, self-efficacy, the impact of training and professional development, Indigenous ways of knowing and TESL congruence, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and policy implementation.

What Did We Learn From This?

There are several things to consider when it comes to ESL instructors and Indigenization. We learned that instructor beliefs are largely established by personal experience(s) before entering teacher training (Pajares, 1992). Interestingly, stated belief does not always align with practice (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009). What this means is that instructors may already espouse beliefs about Indigenization, and these beliefs may affect engagement with this policy. For example, some are reluctant to include Indigenous content because they believe it "subordinate material which detracts from more important information" (Dewar, 1998, p. 17).

We also learned that professional development doesn't always lead to the desired changes in what instructors believe or how they teach. In many cases, PD about social justice or Indigenous cultures results in (or reinforces existing) attitudes that perpetuate stereotypes, especially with teachers who did not have a habitually reflexive practice. Such classes or workshops are often a study of content/subject matter and don't often have a reflective component or any mechanism for ongoing learning and reflection in professional practice—the PD is a "one-off". In PD related to social justice or Indigenous cultures/histories, instructors sometimes have difficulty confronting unsettling subject matter and defend behaviours or entrenched beliefs, or become blind to them. Some want to give the "right answer" rather than reflect on Self or explore the possibility that they have participated, however unknowingly, in systems of privilege or marginalization. Sometimes, knowledge gained in PD leads instructors to conclude they have reached a level of "mastery", which precludes any need for further reflection or growth. Many construct an image of themselves as a "helper", someone who perceives themselves as innocent of perpetuating racism, as being well-intentioned, and as being atypical of most Canadians (who were presumably more racist than they perceive themselves to be).

The reasons for this outcome are complex and hard to pin down, yet what the research is clear on is that more knowledge without reflective practice can result in the inability to identify various forms of oppression, and an inability "to see how [teachers'] own biases and stereotypes...perpetuated... inequities" (Castro, 2010, p.203). Ultimately, knowledge alone leads to less self-reflection, and that can lead to bigger blind spots. Instructors who are not reflective or supported in a reflective practice might unintentionally participate in more othering or have difficulty shifting perspective. Many deny may deny the experiences that are informed by differences, like systemic racism (Schick, 2000).

Let me give you an example. Two employees (of an organization I'll keep anonymous) were part of educational program planning for children. They wanted to incorporate Indigenous content into the programming. The two weren't Indigenous and had no first-hand knowledge of Indigenous cultures or histories, only a theoretical knowledge from a Native Studies class, which had provided them with information, but not understanding. They wanted to choose the Indigenous content and provide their own interpretations of the cultures. Some of the symbols and artifacts they wanted to include were sacred, and they wanted to conduct ceremony or wear traditional regalia in what can only be called an act of, albeit unintentional, appropriation. As well-intentioned as they were, the two did not recognize any of this as an act of othering or as a kind of silencing or neocolonialism. As my colleague Roberta Bear reminds me, "Never [teach] about us without us."

Having developed intercultural communicative competence can help instructors shift perspective or be more self-aware in cases like this. This does not mean we *must* approach Indigenization through an intercultural framework, even though we *can* (Ermine, 2007; Nakata, 2007). It means instructors who have developed ICC are more effective at noticing the things necessary to decolonize practice than those who haven't developed ICC. In an ESL classroom, we already occupy an intercultural space. More interculturally-competent instructors can negotiate that space with more dexterity.

We learned that, as language teaching is a political act, we need to consider that power dynamic in our classrooms. We must recognize ourselves as powerful (and political) change agents. We are integral in the transformation of Canada as a more intercultural, inclusive, equitable society; the transformation of learners to recognize and dismantle systems of inequity; and, the transformation of learners' abilities to participate in a multicultural/pluralistic society (Courchêne, 1996). We must teach versions of Canada that include accounts of both overt and systemic racism, such as excluding minority groups and perspectives. Including this could create a culture that "reflects the existing and historical contexts" (Courchêne, 1996, p. 6). We should not provide representations of Canada as "an unproblematic and inevitable progress towards our status as the world's 'best place to live'" (Fleming, 2003, p. 76) but rather as a complex and dynamic land with histories and stories that span thousands of years and only recently intersect many cultures and experiences. We must avoid generalizations and static, monolithic representations of Canadians, cultures, or histories.

Something we learned in the needs analysis is that ESL instructors want *learners* to be more open minded: "[My students] see First Nations as the low of the low, and I don't think that's right... And [my students] seem to be more hateful than other Canadians when they talk about [First Nations people]. I don't like it. I want to put a stop to it in my practice if I could." However, I also heard comments like, "My learners aren't interested in Indigenous stuff," an assumption I take issue with on many levels.

I would argue that our learners are more than ready to engage with the stuff of our Indigenous peoples and Truth and Reconciliation. Many learners have come from countries have been colonized, or have experienced cultural oppression, or are presently in the process of decolonization. Some come from countries that have their own Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Many learners have been waiting their whole lives to engage in these kinds of conversations and find that Canada, or the right teacher, is giving them the space to do so.

But it's really the word *stuff* that I'd like to deconstruct.

Stuff means, "things". It means subject matter. It means, "what we *study about*," not "what (or who) we *engage with*." Many misunderstand Indigenization as adding more content. Understandably, nobody wants too much "stuff" on top of all the other "stuff" we as instructors are accountable for. Yet, if we see Indigenization as "stuff", we fail to understand that Indigenization is about people and relationships, relationships with our communities, relationships with our shared histories and the Treaties, relationships with the land, and how those relationships are communicated in language.

That's not to say we should ignore content. The *truth* part of Truth and Reconciliation means there are things that we must learn: the legacy of the Residential Schools, about Treaties, or the Indian Act. We must also engage in the stuff of contemporary relevance, like water security, Steven Harper's claim that Canada has never experienced colonialism (Wherry, 2009), or Idle No More (n.d.). But we can't stop at stuff.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Indigenization could mean making explicit how language reinforces established power relationships. Many language learning outcomes already support building a critical awareness of these relationships. Looking at the Canadian Language Benchmarks, decolonizing goals are already embedded in the outcomes from a very low level where learners should be able to identify mood or tone or reader/writer relationship, up to the advanced outcomes where learners should be able to identify values and assumptions or infer biases and motives.

Not everyone possesses an innate lens to readily identify bias or language that empowers or marginalizes. To support this, I developed, for lack of a better term, a 'noticing instrument' that helps instructors approach existing materials like textbooks with that critical eye. It's

a monocle, but it's a start. The instrument guides a noticing process by asking questions that help instructors make decisions about how to use the materials they teach with. I've even used it in class with my learners. For example, something it asks is, "How are different perspectives included?" and offers this checklist:

- There are pictures of people from visibly diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds

- There are audible voices that reflect a diversity of language backgrounds

- There are characters or people who self-identify as being from diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds

- There are texts written by authors of various cultural or ethnic backgrounds

- There are characters or people who behave, think, or talk in ways that they identify as being a rooted in their cultural or ethnic, etc., origins

- There are texts or audios describing different perspectives, written or narrated by someone who is <u>not</u> of that background

- There are texts or audios describing different perspectives, written or narrated by someone who is of that background

- Other: _____

When my learners applied some questions from the noticing instrument to a textbook chapter (from a widely-used ESL textbook series…), they noticed a lot: Indigenous languages were described as "dying out" or "endangered", which implied that languages were disappearing naturally rather than deliberately threatened. Learners noticed the article author (a White European, according to their Google search) claims Indigenous cultures are dying out because Indigenous peoples "refuse" to assimilate. Learners identified dichotomous comparisons between "'civilized'" and "'savage'", "'modern'" and "'primitive'" and noticed frequent usage of passive voice, which learners described as a strategy for those responsible to avoid accountability for oppression. Based on their observations, it was possible to develop supplementary lessons on vocabulary or grammar like the passive and incorporate notions of (dis)empowerment.

Indigenization should also mean a shift in teaching processes. An Indigenous teaching/ learning cycle is sometimes compared to an inquiry cycle (Kanu, 2011), and there are parallels between this and a task cycle in task-based teaching and learning (TBLT). The strength in the Indigenous model is that the task must be authentic, must engage the community, and must be reflective. It's holistic in nature. It's exciting, because for an immigrant learner, the addition of an Indigenous paradigm could mean the exploration of identity development, empowerment, and citizenship within a Canadian context in addition to the language acquisition, or rather, as an integral part of it. What this could mean in language training is seeking out ways for production tasks to extend beyond the confines of the classroom. My learners, for example, began an inquiry process by visiting an LRT station with art that celebrates (!) a Residential school on one wall and a mural by an Indigenous artist on the other. (There is quite the tale of Reconciliation behind the Grandin

Station artwork, for those interested in seeking out the story—check out Samantha Power's 2016 online article *The Art of Reconciliation*). I just dropped them off on the second day of class and asked them to return to the college with a notebook full of observations and questions. Their (many) questions led to an exploration of the art grant application process, in which they identified systemic barriers excluding Indigenous artists and other marginalized groups from participating. The task? They have written the mayor and to the arts council identifying the issues and providing recommendations. More than this, they have come to see themselves as participating citizens of their city, and as empowered advocates. I could write another article on the emotional and spiritual journeys some of the learners took in the process of this community engagement, but those things aren't in the outcomes I'm supposed to assess.

Of course, there are simpler ways to include Indigenous ways of knowing in TESL practices. My peers and I have transformed traditional talking circles (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009) into reading and listening circles. Storytelling, also widely regarded as an Indigenous approach, is an established way to engage in language learning (e.g. Atta-Alla, 2012; Kim, 2010). We can include more visual or experiential learning in our TESL practices, or can look for more critical ways to deconstruct the grammar and vocabulary we're 'studying' with our learners. I have developed lesson plans that 'decolonize' grammar and explore the power relationships embedded in forms like the passive or the present perfect. There is space for our Western-rooted teaching and learning approaches to coexist, in equity, with the holistic approaches of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. The possibilities are, truly, endless.

We must also work on ourselves, not just classroom practices. Accumulating knowledge is insufficient to support Indigenization. While ESL instructors should learn more about Indigenous cultures, holistic teaching/learning practices, and our shared histories, it is more important that, as we do this, we develop a deeply reflective practice. My colleagues and I regularly engage in teaching triangles, for example. When we do this, we must be willing to ask ourselves some hard questions. What is my worldview? How was it shaped? How does this affect the way I teach or what I believe about learning? To what extent does my teaching align with my stated beliefs or with research? We must also prepare ourselves to reflect, no matter how uncomfortable the reflection is. We must acknowledge that Indigenization will always be a work in progress. We must accept that we will always be learners, not masters, in the journey. If we wait to become masters, we will never begin.

Ultimately, Indigenization is an opportunity to become a part of a solutions framework. It's a chance to become active in nation-to-nation relationship building. Indigenization creates a community of problem solvers; I am grateful for the many relationships I may never have established without jumping over some proverbial fences. My community of practice is growing. Any steps we take for ourselves or our learners, no matter how small, will be towards Truth and Reconciliation and a vital contribution to a Canada that includes all its peoples.

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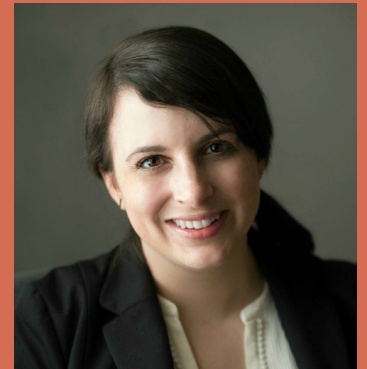
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