Cultural Resistance through Local EFL Curriculum Development: Three Conditions for Its Sustainability

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Abstract

This article reviews the nature, causes and mechanisms of resistance to the teaching of English in its western cultural context which is an undeniable reality in many EFL situations. First, the causes of resistance to the teaching of western culture in ELT programs are discussed from a critical pedagogy perspective. Then, the phrase 'cultural resistance' is operationally defined and the issue of local EFL curriculum development which is seen as a possible resistance strategy to the perceived hegemony of English is given some attention. Next, the author elaborates on three important conditions for the sustainability of cultural resistance through local EFL curriculum development. Finally, a model of sustainable cultural resistance is introduced based on the aforementioned requirements of sustainable resistance.

Key Phrases: Cultural Resistance, Local EFL Curriculum Development, Sustainable Cultural Resistance, Critical Pedagogy, Language and Culture

1. Introduction

For many applied linguists, EFL teachers, EFL learners' parents and policy makers, the teaching of English in its western cultural context is by no means acceptable.

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In a recent study conducted by Kasaian and Subbakrishna (2011, p. 235), Iranian high school students' parents said "they would be concerned if their children's English textbooks contained pictorial and textual description of such concepts as cohabitation and mixed student dorm rooms which are permissible in the west but strongly discouraged by their local culture".

In Morocco, too, many educationalists stressed the "need to dissociate the English language from the cultures of what Kachru (1985) terms the 'center circle' of English speaking countries" (Hyde, 1994, p.295).

Another case in point is Turkey where resistance to the teaching of English in its western cultural context is unwelcome for many. Abdullah Coskun (2010, p. 3) refers to the findings of a relevant study done by Kiziltepe (2000) in which the Turkish learners of English said, "it is unimportant for them to have conversations with British and American people and there is only a little interest in British and American culture". But the question to be answered here is 'why should the much-supported teaching of the native speakers' culture through English be resisted at all?'

1.1 A Plausible Answer

The answer to this question is best given when one approaches the issue from the standpoint of 'critical pedagogy'. Heavily influenced by the pioneering works of Paulo Freire (1970) and the seminal contributions of Michael Apple (1982), Peter McLaren (1989), Ira Shor (1992), and Henry Giroux (1997), critical pedagogy emerged as a series of attempts to challenge the assumptions that took the neutrality and fairness of education for granted.

The clear commitment of critical pedagogy has always been to unravel the well-planned but hidden attempts in the educational systems to promote certain ways of life and belief systems at the expense of many others.

The following questions asked by Shor (1992, p.14) challenge the partiality of education: "Whose history and literature is taught and whose is ignored? Which groups are included and which left out of the reading list or text? From whose point of view is the past and the present examined?"

These rhetoric questions have been asked to lift the learners and educators onto a vantage point from which they can look critically at what is fed into the learners' minds under the rubric of 'education'. Applied to ELT profession, Shor's (1992) questions signify that the purpose of native-speaker controlled ELT is not to produce a user of the English language who preserves all the parameters of his cultural identity and comes to use English to express his individuality and way of life but rather to produce a Westernized speaker of English whose likes, dislikes, beliefs and viewpoints are changed to the ones the Western world welcomes.

Very simply put, critical pedagogy has "promoted reflection on the hidden curriculum that sometimes underlies language teaching policies and practices" (Richards, 2002,

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p.3) and has questioned the validity and righteousness of the view that holds the teaching of English is a neutral, saintly and apolitical activity meant to provide its learners with a means of communication and has seriously criticized it for serving to tilt the balance of power towards the native speakers and everything associated with them (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Contrary to Wardhaugh's (1987, p. 15) assertion that English is "tied to no particular social, political, economic or religious systems, or to specific racial or cultural group", it is now argued that English "can no longer be taken as simply teaching English" (Holborow, 1996, p.172). English is now viewed as an imperialistic tool in the hands of the powerful English-speaking nations which "aids the dissemination of social and cultural beliefs and practices emanating from the west that impact negatively on the social fabric of developing-world societies" (Modiano, 2009, p. 220).

> Much is at stake. To continue promoting Standard English as an Anglo-American commodity can be linked to supporting an Anglo-Americanization that can potentially eradicate social, cultural and linguistic diversity locally as well as globally. (ibid)

An unsurprising corollary of this attitude has been the formation of a cultural resistance mechanism that refuses to abide by native speakers' norms of linguistic accuracy and socio-cultural appropriateness in ELT.

2. Cultural Resistance

Cultural resistance, in this article, is operationally defined as all the actions and attitudes of individuals or group members of one culture to oppose and block the unwanted influences of a foreign culture that are deemed to have the potentiality to humiliate or marginalize their native culture, jeopardize their people's loyalty to their own cultural norms and values and impose on them those foreign cultural norms that conflict with their long-established local cultural values.

2.1 Cultural Resistance through Developing Local EFL Curriculum

Resistance to the unwanted influences of the western culture in the field of English language teaching has been shown both at the macro- and micro- levels. One important micro-level strategy to avert the undesirable cultural influences of ELT has been the development of local EFL curricula whose cultural and ideological contents are locally decided and controlled and are, therefore, free from those undesirable influences that concern the educationalists. Zughoul's (1999) observation about the cultural content of the ELT materials in Jordan is relevant here.

> It is to be made clear that a measure of caution should be practiced on the inclusion of foreign content. Since our students are young boys and girls, 1-16 years of age whose cultural identity is being formed, they could be influenced and even disturbed by the kind of image portrayed for the target

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culture in the textbook. The teaching of culture is to be differentiated from acculturation. (p. 90)

Cortazzi and Jin's (1999, p.200) remark about textbooks (as an important part of ELT curriculum) can explain the thinking behind developing local EFL curricula as a way to resist the cultural hegemony of English: "[T]he textbook can be seen as ideology, in the sense that it reflects a worldview or cultural system, or a social construction that may be imposed on teachers and students and that indirectly constructs their view of a culture".

Moreover, as Margolis, et al (2001, p.3) contend, "[f]ruitful work can be done in the secret garden of the curriculum where sexuality, power, and knowledge lie coiled like serpents". These remarks clearly show the reasons why the EFL educators and policy makers in many countries of the world have favored the development of local EFL textbooks.

Morgolis et al's (2001) use of the phrases 'secret garden', and 'coiled like serpents' is further explained by them when they say these hidden intentions are purposely kept secret because they "will not work if made visible, and in fact will produce resistance if revealed"(ibid). It seems that they are at least partially revealed to many nations and have led to their natural resistance through developing their own EFL curricula.

2.2 Possible Effects of Cultural Resistance on EFL Curriculum Development

Cultural resistance can affect EFL curriculum development in different ways. Ideally, cultural resistance through the development of local EFL curriculum is shown in such a very skillful and professional way that its intended goal of averting the undesirable influences of the western culture through ELT programs is achieved without taking toll on the technical efficiency and the overall acceptability of the EFL curriculum. This kind of well-managed cultural resistance is sustainable and successful as its effects on the language learning of the beneficiaries of the resistance-inspired EFL curriculum are constructive and positive. However, when cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development is shown without the consideration of its pitfalls, its effects on the efficiency of the EFL curriculum becomes detrimental and the beneficiaries of the curriculum will naturally turn against it.In such a case, cultural resistance loses its sustainability. Therefore, an important concern in EFL situations where EFL curricula are designed locally to gain control over their cultural aspects should be managing cultural resistance in such a way that its overall effects on the EFL curriculum are constructive. This is important because if the resistance–inspired EFL curricula fail to be technically efficient, even their highest level of cultural safety will be of no use.

If a resistance-based locally-developed EFL curriculum happens to be unsatisfactory in terms of its technical quality and overall acceptability, it will, in the long run, dishearten the learners and teachers by making them feel that all their precious time and resources spent on learning English are wasted in the name of cultural resistance.

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To put it in a nutshell, if the bathwater of cultural hegemony is to be thrown away, we should make sure that we do not throw it with the baby (all the good professional qualities ELT curricula are expected to enjoy).

This will become possible if and only if we keep the totality of the curriculum in mind and see it as a systematic whole whose efficiency is contingent upon the consideration of all aspects of a 'total curriculum' in which concerns about the 'formal curriculum', 'the informal curriculum'. 'the planned curriculum' and 'the received curriculum' (Kelly, 2004), are as important as those about 'the hidden curriculum' (Jackson,1968) and 'the null curriculum' (Eisner,1994). Only if a local EFL curriculum is balanced and pays the due attention to all the above aspects can it be considered a clever sustainable resistance that gains something without losing something equally precious.

2.3 Sustainability of Cultural Resistance through EFL Curriculum Development

Sustainability in this article is used as a criterion for determining whether the effect of cultural resistance on EFL curriculum is desirable and positive or unfavorable and detrimental. Well-planned cultural resistance has a constructive effect on the curriculum and is therefore sustainable. Conversely, unskillful cultural resistance has a detrimental effect on the EFL curriculum and lacks sustainability.

Sustainability of cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development is assumed to depend on the satisfaction of the following conditions.

2.3.1 Internal Harmony among the Agents of Resistance

On the face of it, curriculum seems to be a purely educational enterprise which is the business of education experts in the ministry of education. In actuality, however, curriculum is influenced by the decisions and comments of so many people some of whom may never be thought to have anything to do with it.

Marsh (2004) asserts that there are many individuals and groups whose decisions have great influences on the type of schooling that the students experience. He divides these people into three categories of a) 'decision-makers' b) 'stakeholders' and 3) 'influences'. He starts with 'decision-makers' whom he describes as "those individuals or groups who, because of their professional status or position, are able to make specific decisions about what is to be taught, when, how and to whom. Obvious examples of decision-makers include education systems and their senior officers and school principals and senior teachers. But there are many others including textbook writers, testing agencies, accreditation and certification agencies" (Marsh, 2004, p.160).

The second group of people whose decisions and comments can influence the schooling are 'stakeholders: 'Stakeholders' are individuals or groups of persons who have a right to comment on, and have input into, school programmes' (Arends, 2000). In many cases they may have the authority to ensure that their inputs/directives are implemented, such as head office education directors or regional directors. Then

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again, they may have no official powers but rely upon their modes of persuasion, such as parent groups or newspaper editors" (ibid).

The third group that he calls 'influences' " are individuals or groups that hold common interests and endeavor to persuade/convince authorities that certain changes should occur. They may be content to push a certain slogan/ideal or they may focus upon specific activities or processes that should occur in schools. Examples of such influences include various local interest/lobby groups representing environmental issues or specific religious beliefs" (ibid).

Decisions about the nature of EFL curriculum are not made in vacuum. It has to be made by taking heed of all the forces and influences that come from 'decision–makers, stakeholders and influences.' How can an EFL curriculum be developed in a country without taking heed of the viewpoints and worries of the influential groups mentioned above.

One important point about the views of the three groups mentioned above is their go-togetherness and internal harmony. If the views and attitudes of the three groups clash with one another, ELT curriculum is torn apart in the scene of this clash. For cultural resistance through EFL curriculum to achieve its desired positive effects and remain sustainable, it must necessarily be free from the possible conflicting attitudes and views of three agents of resistance discussed above.

2.3.2 Proportionateness of the Null Curriculum

Curriculum is popularly expected to describe what education needs to focus on, but it is also expected, though not so popularly, to describe what it is not focusing on and is excluding from its educational goals and the experiences of its learners and to investigate the repercussions of this exclusion. This latter aspect of the curriculum constitutes the core of what Eisner (1994) termed 'the null curriculum'.

> There is something of a paradox involved in writing about a curriculum that does not exist. Yet, if we are concerned with the consequences of school programs and the role of curriculum in shaping those consequences, then it seems to me that we are well advised to consider not only the explicit and implicit curricula of schools but also what schools do not teach. It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problems. (p. 97)

As far as the topic of this article, cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development, is concerned, the 'Null Curriculum' is a very relevant aspect of the curriculum because cultural resistance partly relates to the issues that are discussed under the null curriculum.

Cultural resistance through local EFL curriculum development is actualized by making sure that the unwanted aspects of western culture and ideology are not taught in local ELT programs. And this is the essence of the null curriculum as put forth by Eisner (2005 p.146): "What is taught in the first place is of primary importance. One way to increase the probability that something *will not be learned* is to ensure that it *will not be taught*, that is, to make a subject matter a part of a *null curriculum*".

2.3.2.1 Who Decides What to Exclude from the Curriculum?

A very subtle point that should not escape our attention is the question of 'who decides what to exclude from the curriculum' because what not to teach is highly dependent on the curriculum developer. When the ELT curriculum is designed and developed by the native speakers of English, it is they who determine what not to teach. Surely enough what is not taught is not necessarily what the local consumers of these ELT materials do not need or do not want to learn; conversely, it might be their preferred way of life that is excluded and replaced by what the developers of the curriculum have chosen for them to learn. As Rubdy (2009, p.159) asserts, "[t]he culture of inferiority extends to various dimensions of the classroom, including syllabuses, textbooks and instructional materials, where certain ideas, behaviours and products are privileged, while those of the learners themselves are frowned upon". What is not considered worthy of teaching in one nation and accordingly is made part of the null curriculum may be considered highly essential and therefore emphasized in an internationally-marketed ELT program. It is the same 'one man's meat is another man's poison' story.

2.3.2.2 The Contentious Nature of the Null Curriculum

When what should not be taught to the learners is contentious, the null curriculum should necessarily be decided either locally or regionally. By way of exemplification, in the Islamic countries, photos of women in revealing clothes are not supposed to be part of their ELT materials because the local educators think this way of life should be discouraged and not taught. This can show how cultural resistance relates to the null curriculum.

The phrase 'inappropriate materials' in the following quotation from Pennycook (1994, p.6) refers to what should become part of the null curriculum in Islamic countries and be replaced by necessary concepts for the Muslim learners of English that have been made part of the null curriculum from the authors' perspective.

> [C]urriculum writers are not only required to ensure that there is no inappropriate material in textbooks (such as the non-Islamic celebration of birthdays), but they must also include aspects of the new Muslim dominated moral curriculum in their work.

2.3.2.3 Resistance to Western Culture through a Proportionate Null Curriculum

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In countries where there is a strong resistance to the influences coming from the western culture, attempts are made to exclude the manifestations of the incompatible aspects of the western culture from the ELT curriculum. This is because they do not want the western cultural values to be adopted by their local learners and therefore choose not to teach them at all.

In these countries, the education experts and policy makers consider it their responsibility to ensure that the incompatible aspects of the western culture like western inter-gender relationships, public partial nudity, certain eating and drinking habits, as well as western worldviews and ideology are not taught and promoted in ELT materials. However, we must not forget that although excluding the undesirable aspects of the western culture from the local EFL curriculum is considered as one of the possible strategies to avert the unwanted cultural influences of ELT, the exclusions must always be limited to the most incompatible cultural aspects and must not be so exaggerated that they deprive the curriculum of compatible foreign culture. The exclusions should not take us from one extreme of hegemonic EFL curricula to another extreme where EFL curricula become void of the necessary dose of foreign culture and, consequently, hamper the development of intercultural competence in the learners.

> The paradox with the use of materials containing largely source culture is that, although the reason often given for their use is that this will help the students to develop their own cultural identity, it effectively deprives the learners of realizing that identity. Since the materials mirror mainly their own culture, students have little opportunity to engage in intercultural negotiation with the text portraying another culture, so they are unable to engage in a dialogue with the text to identify and confirm their own cultural identity, or to ascertain its similarities and differences with that of another cultural group. (*Cortazzi and Jin 1999*, p. 207)

Byram (1997, p. 113), too, stressed the importance of giving the language learners a chance to compare their own cultural beliefs with those of others when he said, "it is through comparison that one becomes more aware of one's own culture, much of which is unconscious and taken-for-granted".

Alptekin (2002) highlighted the necessity of "producing instructional materials that emphasize diversity both within and across cultures" (p.60) and stated that deculturalized materials fail to recognize the international status of English:

> Although attempts to deculturalize or nativize English have a number of educational merits, they are not too different from communicative orientations to teaching through the generally unrealistic, often idealized, and at times monolithic norms of the native speakers and their culture(s). As such they fall short of recognizing the international status of English, and fail to

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provide an alternative to the conventional view that a language cannot be taught separately from its culture (p.62).

2.3.3 Balance and Totality of the Curriculum

The third condition for the sustainability of cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development is making sure that the totality and balance of the curriculum is not harmed by cultural resistance measures. Achieving the cultural safety of the curriculum at the expense of its technical adequacy and overall acceptability poses a serious threat to the sustainability of cultural resistance.

As Kelly (1994, p.199) put it, "the demand that the curriculum be balanced requires that we view it and plan it as a totality and not in the piecemeal fashion hitherto adopted". He further likens the achievement of balance in curriculum development to the job of a juggler who needs "to keep many balls in the air at one time" (ibid, p. 200).

Kelly's (1994) fitting juggler metaphor can be used here to mean that averting the cultural hegemony of English is only one of the objects a curriculum developer juggles and catching it mid-air and preventing its fall must not stop the curriculum developer from attending to the other equally important components of a curriculum which are also thrown up in the air and might fall down and shatter if not attended to simultaneously. Cultural resistance can be done successfully if attention to the cultural component of the curriculum does not prevent the curriculum developers from paying due attention to the technical quality and overall acceptability of the curriculum.

3. A Model of sustainable Cultural Resistance through EFL Curriculum Development

Based on the three conditions mentioned for the sustainability of cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development, the present author would like to introduce a model of sustainable cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development.

This model encompasses three conditions whose fulfillment or violation can have two diametrically opposite outcomes. Whenever the three basic conditions of a sustainable cultural resistance are met, the result is a successful and efficient language learning experience for the intended language learners who can learn English well without jeopardizing their local cultural identity and consequently remain satisfied with the resistance-inspired EFL curriculum and their loyalty to the efficient and safe curriculum protects them from the much-feared hegemony of international ELT curricula.

If one or more of the three basic requirements of sustainable cultural resistance are violated, cultural resistance will have to experience the worst-case scenario of losing the battle to the hegemonic but professionally adequate rival ELT curricula. Figure 1 on the next page displays the model of sustainable cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development.

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Figure 1: A Model of sustainable cultural resistance through EFL curriculum development

Requirements of Sustainable Cultural Resistance through EFL Curriculum Development

If the three requirements are wholly or partly violated,

the language learning experience will be either professionally inefficient and unrewarding or culturally unsafe. In either case the beneficiaries' interest and satisfaction will be lost. This will leave no justification for continuing with the resistance-inspired curriculum and the learners and the teachers who may initially show preference for the culturally safe local materials reverse themselves and begin to search for professionally adequate materials even if they are among the hegemonic imported materials thereby marking the failure of cultural resistance.

Cultural resistance will be renounced.

First Requirement:
Unanimity of the possible cultural resistance

Decision-makers'

Stake-holders'

Influences'

…unanimous rejection of incompatible western culture

Second Requirement:
Proportionateness of the Null Curriculum to the scope of resistance

Elimination of incompatible Western culture in response to cultural resistance

Inclusion of the necessary dose of compatible western and non-western culture required for intercultural communication

Third Requirement:
Balance between cultural safety and technical quality of the EFL curriculum

Optimum Cultural Safety

Optimum Technical Quality

The resultant overall acceptability

If the three requirements are met,

the language learning experience of the intended learners will be both culturally safe and professionally efficient and satisfactory. Therefore, there will be no objection to the resistance-inspired locally-developed EFL curriculum and it continues to be an efficient and sustainable medium of resistance to the unwanted influences of the western culture.

Cultural resistance will be sustained.

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