

Quick-fix English: Discontinuities in a language development aid project

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ABSTRACT: In this classroom narrative article I discuss some of my experiences as a teacher in an Australian government-funded English language development aid project during the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). The program formed part of an emergency response to the devastating violence that accompanied the Indonesian withdrawal from the country after 24 years of occupation. Using journal extracts based on my ethnographic research in East Timor, I outline some telling pedagogical and social disconnections that arose between the development community and the community it purported to serve. I note aspects of my experience that might be relevant to other language development aid projects in a post-colonial, globalising world.

KEYWORDS: East Timor, English, development aid, language in development, UNTAET.

In this classroom narrative article I reflect on some experiences as an English teacher in a language development aid project in East Timor. The project was funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) under the jurisdiction of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) and was established as part of an emergency aid response to the devastating violence that accompanied the Indonesian withdrawal from the country after 24 years of occupation. The vignette with which I open the article captures the pedagogical challenges and dilemmas teachers faced on a daily basis in our English classes at the National University of East Timor in 2001. Using extracts from my research journal based on the participant observation component of my ethnographic research in East Timor, I discuss aspects of my experience that highlight some telling discontinuities in the project and raise wider questions about English language teaching (ELT) as development aid. Drawing on earlier discussions of English in post-colonial education (Hickling-Hudson, Matthews & Woods, 2004; Lo Bianco, 2002; Markee, 2002; Pennycook, 1999a, 1999b), I focus on the physical, social and pedagogical dimensions of my work as a classroom practitioner and I discuss the wider implications of these experiences. I begin by setting the scene and establishing the context of my work.

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EAST TIMOR, DILI, MAY 2001

In the stifling heat of the Dili mid-afternoon, a young East Timorese man sits alone in the empty classroom struggling to understand the information transfer exercise that has been set by his Australian English teacher. The other members of his class have already left as the lesson is over, but the young man, whom I will call Henrique, remains at his desk, either determined or frozen in his efforts to come to grips with the task. The teacher, who has long realised that the task principles are foreign to Henrique, tries to persuade him to call it a day, but Henrique cannot or will not give up. The teacher had written a short model diary extract on the blackboard and students

were asked to write their own diary extracts based on the model. They were then instructed to use their diary extracts to produce sentences in English to describe their plans for the coming week. Eventually, Henrique settles for copying the teacher's model into his dog-eared exercise book. Henrique is a true beginner in English and the teacher does not speak enough of his first language (Tetun) to reassure him that she is not angry and that all is well. The more the teacher says the more bewildered Henrique seems to become. Both of them leave the room feeling troubled and uncomfortable.

In 2001 Henrique was in his early twenties. Along with thousands of other young people, he had enrolled in the reopened university after the political and humanitarian crisis of 1999 in East Timor, which had led to the closure of all education institutions for a year. It was very likely that Henrique was suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. He was highly motivated judging by his regular attendance but he was virtually silent in class, speaking only when invited by the teacher. He was reticent with his classmates, too, and he had a dazed look on his face as if he were struggling to comprehend what was going on around him. Once, on his return from an unusual absence from class, in response to enquiries about his wellbeing, with obvious reluctance he muttered in Tetun to a friend who explained to the teacher in English that Henrique had been looking for his brother. Enormous numbers of people had been displaced and were either dead or still unaccounted for after the violence of 1999 so his answer was entirely believable. However, he would volunteer no further information.

One could interpret Henrique's behaviour in the vignette in a number of ways. His silence may have simply expressed confusion over an unfamiliar task and text type. The vignette highlights a glaring disconnection between Henrique's prior learning experiences and the teaching task – a common enough communicative task for the average Westernised language learner but for Henrique it was incomprehensible, not least because of another disconnection between his own everyday realities and those depicted in most standard ELT textbook scenarios. The genre, the concept and the format of the task were all culturally unfamiliar to him. In a more critical interpretation, one might suggest that Henrique's responses indicated a kind of "paralysing inhibition" at being asked to use English in an unexpected or unrehearsed way (Canagarajah, 1993, p. 616), although this interpretation does not satisfactorily explain his persistence with the text and task. Another explanation might lie in the gap between his personal literacy practices and the teacher's assumption that he would make use of a diary to record his future plans.

The teachers on this project were not naïve, incompetent or inexperienced; on the contrary, they were well qualified, enthusiastic and committed. Yet in the absence of local resources, under pressure of time and with no access to alternatives, there was a default to commercially produced, globally marketed, textbook-based materials and tasks that did not reflect the students' experience and made assumptions about literacies they did not necessarily practise, possess or desire. Naturally, communication might have been easier if the teacher had some ability to speak Henrique's first language, but on a three-month project and without prior language training, the chance of gaining even basic proficiency in Tetun was slim. The most poignant fact is that Henrique's responses were opaque to the teacher who had neither the linguistic resources to enable deeper communication with him nor the professional

support or cultural information that might facilitate an understanding or resolution of the incident. The teacher was unable to assist Henrique to find a voice, to claim the right both to speak and be heard in English (Peirce, 1995; Hornberger, 2006).

Although I have classified this article as a classroom narrative, the wider context in which Henrique was studying could neither be ignored nor left at the classroom door (Auerbach, 1995). Henrique and his compatriots were returning to study in a complex sociolinguistic ecology and a volatile post-conflict situation, both of which significantly affected the interactions in our classrooms. The following paragraphs situate the teaching project in this wider context, providing an illuminating case study of ELT as development aid and its interactions with the local socio-political environment (Hall & Eggington, 2000), the language policy context (Tollefson, 2002) and perceptions of aid and development (Appleby, Copley, Sitharajvongsa & Pennycook, 2002; Lo Bianco, 2002).

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

After over 400 years as a Portuguese colony, decolonisation was finally initiated in East Timor in 1974. Since 1951 all Portuguese colonies had been designated overseas provinces of Portugal and assimilated East Timorese were granted the status and rights of Portuguese citizens. Members of this small, Portuguese-speaking, indigenous elite formed the majority of the nationalist leadership in the early 1970s. The decolonisation process and preparations for independence were abruptly halted when the country was invaded by Indonesia in 1975. East Timor was subsumed into the Indonesian Republic and the East Timorese became citizens of its 27th province. In the closing years of the 1990s, following an agreement between Indonesia and Portugal on the question of East Timor, a United Nations (UN) supervised referendum invited the East Timorese people to choose between full independence and special autonomy within Indonesia. On 30th August 1999, some 78% of the population voted for independence from Indonesia. In a campaign of retaliation instigated by the Indonesian military, at least 1,200 people were killed at the hands of pro-integrationist militia gangs (Robinson, 2003, p. 1) who terrorised the population with violence, massacres, looting and burning. Some 60,000 people were displaced from their homes at gunpoint and 250,000 were forcibly relocated to camps in West Timor (CAVR, 2006, p. 85).

The conduct of the Indonesian military, the militias and the Indonesian authorities at the time of the referendum received worldwide media attention. In response to international pressure, the UN Security Council authorised a multinational peacekeeping force, the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) under Australian command to restore order. The UN established UNTAET, which was responsible for the administration of the country during its transition to independence.

The arrival of INTERFET and the UN had a dramatic effect on the East Timorese language ecology as large numbers of English-speaking aid organisations entered the country, creating employment opportunities for proficient users of English. Appleby rightly predicted that continuing socioeconomic influences and the global dominance of the English language would see a continued role for English in East Timor (Appleby *et al.*, 2002, p. 332). Currently there are 15 UN agencies and at least 122

international non-government organisations operating in the country (UNDP, 2006), the vast majority of which are English speaking.

ENGLISH IN THE LANGUAGE POLICY CONTEXT

With 32 local indigenous language varieties listed in the 2004 Population Census (Census Atlas, 2006), it is not unusual for an East Timorese to speak at least two or three languages. Portuguese, Indonesian and English are also spoken but knowledge of these three languages varies according to different generations. East Timorese language policy has been shaped by three successive periods of outside influence: the first under Portuguese colonisation, the second under Indonesian occupation and the third under the UN missions mentioned above (Hajek 2000; 2002; Taylor-Leech, 2008). The National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT¹ in its Portuguese acronym) draft language policy of 1998 proposed that at independence Portuguese would be adopted as the official language with Tetun as the national language (Walsh, 1999). English and Indonesian would be taught as subjects in secondary schools, the languages at the national university would be Portuguese and English (Hull, 2000) and Indonesian would be phased out of education and public administration (Hajek, 2000, p. 408). However, in the UNTAET years, the future language policy of the independent state was bitterly contested amongst both East Timorese and external actors. The Australian media and members of the academe joined the language debate, as did the Indonesian media, arguing fiercely that English and Indonesian were entitled to the status of official languages (Leach, 2003; Taylor-Leech, 2008).

The language debate became increasingly acrimonious as the handover to independence approached – a factor that contributed to the ambivalent positioning of English in the institution where we worked. For older nationalists, Portuguese was the obvious choice both as a unifying language and a language of wider communication; officialising Portuguese acknowledged the support of lusophone countries during the Indonesian occupation and strengthened ties with the community of Portuguese-speaking countries. In contrast, for the generations who had been educated in Indonesian with little exposure to Portuguese, its elevation to the status of official language aroused fears of exclusion from employment and opportunities in the new independent state (see, Leach, 2003; 2009).

ELT was a small but significant part of Australian emergency assistance to the education sector in East Timor. English was a political hot potato since it had become a focus of student demands prior to the reopening of the national university in November 2000. Tertiary students, who had been highly politicised by their experience of resistance to Indonesian occupation, had organised demonstrations and occupied the university, calling for its reinstatement and making strong demands for English language provision (Appleby *et al.*, 2002, p. 332). In response to the students' demands, an ELT project was established in late 2000. Its brief was to raise the students' English proficiency by one level on the International Second language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR) scale, an ambitious goal considering the students' generally low levels of proficiency (Appleby, 2002, 2004).

¹ *Conselho Nacional da Resistência Timorense*, the umbrella organisation of the resistance movement.

A second project, in which I was engaged, followed in 2001 and my experiences as a member of the teaching team form the basis of this article. Our brief was to teach in four different schemes: a bridging course for those students who had failed the university entrance test; an English language elective for students studying agriculture, social, economic and political sciences and engineering, English communication skills development for students in the faculty of education and the upgrading (the donor's preferred term) of teachers' English language skills to help them prepare for employment and scholarships. The timescale of both the 2000 and the 2001 projects was 12 weeks.

ENGLISH IN THE TEACHING CONTEXT

As a number of critical studies in international settings have shown, second language teaching and learning do not take place in a social or political vacuum (Pennycook, 1994; Tollefson, 1995). Educational institutions often become sites of struggle between competing discourses (see for example, Canagarajah, 1993; Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Chick, 2002), an arena where "ideological, discursive and social forces collide in an unfolding drama of dominance and resistance" (Kumaravadivelu, 1999, p. 475). It was in the physical, pedagogical and social dimensions of the teaching project that its discontinuities were most apparent and the following discussion is therefore structured accordingly. I aim to show how the parameters of the project worked against collaboration, gave rise to ambivalence towards our presence and placed significant limitations on our relationships with colleagues and students. These experiences raise important questions not only about the relationship between donors and the host community, but also about perceptions of ELT in development aid projects.

The physical challenges: Teaching in a post-conflict environment

One of the happier discontinuities for us as teachers was that despite unsafe, unhygienic and uncomfortable conditions that militated against learning, judging by their attendance, our students' motivation was very high. My research journal records my shock at coming face to face with the physical aftermath of war and provides a glimpse of the teaching conditions, the political sensitivities and the highs and lows of teaching in a post-conflict situation. The departing Indonesian troops had looted and set fire to the university building and all that remained was a burnt-out shell. Conditions had not been improved by the fact that INTERFET troops had used the campus as a forward base, encircling the grounds with several layers of vicious barbed wire. The battle commands and graffiti that adorned the blackened walls provided us with a powerful reminder of their presence. As educators we were particularly struck by the absence of teaching resources and the empty library. An early research journal entry exclaims: "Imagine a university without books! Everything was looted or burned. There is not one book in the place!" Another extract describes the shock of coming face to face with the chaotic post-war conditions, the absence of a functional timetable and adjusting to the local environment:

This week settled down into something like a routine if only for a few days. We teach in smoke-blackened rooms furnished only with donated plastic garden chairs. I have used a tin of blackboard paint brought from Australia to restore the surface to the

blackboards. My initial shock and anger at the near total destruction of the campus has shifted to an adrenalin high. Like most other foreign aid workers, I work myself to exhaustion in the atmosphere of crisis, exaggerated by the constant movement of international police, civilian and military personnel and their vehicles. My emotions have moved through several stages: First, I felt outrage – how could people do something so malicious and destructive? Next I felt fear – for my health. It seemed inevitable that I would come down with dengue with the number of mosquitoes around. I was also deeply perturbed by the dirt, squalor and grossly unsanitary facilities but in fact I find it a really happy place. The students come to classes in large numbers, willing to put up with the heat, the dust and the incredible noise. There is no glass in the windows to muffle the cacophony of helicopters clattering overhead, tanks and trucks thundering along the potholed streets and taxi drivers tooting their horns incessantly. Those students whose teachers haven't turned up for class (and this happens frequently) sit around in what is left of the courtyard chattering loudly and the whole place becomes an amphitheatre of sound. I have strained my voice and I have taken the day off work due to fatigue (mental and physical) and a throbbing sore throat. The anti-malarial medication makes me nauseous too, adding to my heightened emotional state.

While the vignette tells of Henrique's struggle to cope with language, text and teaching method, other parts of my research journal highlight the students' vivacity, their eagerness to learn and their engagement in the lessons. Most students enjoyed the contact with us as Australian native speakers, gleefully imitating our expressions (such as the classic greeting: "G'dday mate! How are ya?") and taking up oral activities with gusto. My research journal comments: "Teaching was again sheer fun and pleasure. It is easy to forget the awfulness of the conditions here." Although my journal records the physical demands and sheer exhaustion of working in that frenetic situation, it also makes note of the students' resilience and good humour in conditions that would be considered intolerable under normal circumstances:

The students have an infectious sense of gallows humour and one needs it in this situation! We sweat in the oppressive heat with no fans and the mosquitoes circling. As one student remarks wryly, "we are rich in mosquitoes!" I have started putting insect repellent on my nose and the students laugh and tell me I am crazy! For their part they simply ignore the mosquitoes buzzing around their faces. My hands are grey with chalk dust and by the end of the day my clothes are filthy and wringing with sweat. My shoes are ruined from stumbling over rubble and by 4.40 p.m. I am totally exhausted but they are the best students I have ever taught. They are so engaged, so willing to interact, so responsive and they see the fun in everything.

The pedagogic challenges: Competing discourses in the classroom

This article now turns to a discussion of the discontinuities between our pedagogical training and assumptions and things as they really were in the classroom and the institution. In the absence of resources, our employing organisation had provided us with money to purchase teaching equipment, audio materials and textbooks, a decision that proved to be a mixed blessing. The commercially produced materials we took with us turned out to be largely unusable since they were so distant from the students' everyday realities, life experience and limited world knowledge. At first I spent most of my evenings designing aids and adapting textbook materials for the next day's lessons but as time wore on and the physical demands of teaching began to

take their toll, like my colleagues I began to resort to published textbooks and recorded material.

Appleby (2002) describes in detail how English language professionals went to East Timor with expectations and practices that at times worked in direct opposition to the context in which we were teaching. Like Appleby I found that the textbooks we had purchased at considerable cost² and at very short notice represented “a materialistic, middle class lifestyle belonging to the English-speaking world (Brown, 1990) which contrasted markedly with the cultural and economic reality of East Timor” (Appleby *et al.*, 2002, p. 333) and the immediate needs and concerns of the students.

Even the materials that I adapted and designed myself were sometimes based on erroneous assumptions about where the students shopped, what and where they ate and how they spent their leisure time. Moreover, the choice of lesson topics was anything but simple. Discussions about family were far from safe since most students had lost at least one family member during the occupation of their country. Appleby and colleagues (2002, p. 334) also describes how supposedly safe, uncontroversial, language-focussed activities designed to relate to students’ daily lives, often gave way to their concerns with more controversial topics, particularly the UN presence in East Timor. For example, the standard social function of “talking about likes and dislikes” took on political overtones as students produced utterances that ranged from statements about the current situation such as: “I can’t stand the violence”, “I hate the noise”, “I don’t like the dirt” or “I like peace and security” to highly political statements of attitude such as “I like/don’t like CIVPOL³ ” or “I like/don’t like studying Portuguese”. These kinds of statement presented teachers with the dilemma of whether to accept them as affective statements to be taken up and freely discussed in class or to accept them without comment or discussion as value-free, reproduced utterances; a dilemma compounded by the fact that many of these topics were viewed by the donor agency as inappropriately political and extraneous to the language learning agenda (Appleby *et al.*, 2002, p. 334).

Appleby also explores the clash between ELT methods and on-the-ground actualities in East Timor. As she notes, common practices such as the use of English only in the classroom, prioritising oral over written communication and the use of culture-specific tasks, games and activities sometimes appeared inappropriate both culturally and educationally (Appleby *et al.*, p. 333). Appleby’s account of how her students accommodated the responses and patterns required by the methods resonates with my own experience. As she observes, while some students became enthusiastically involved in tasks and activities, others responded with silence and confusion; the student Henrique in the opening vignette falls into this latter category.

The classroom became the site of another struggle between the university administrators’ need to manage student numbers and the students’ collective sense of solidarity. East Timorese student organisations had played a leading role in resisting the Indonesian occupation and in the struggle for self-determination, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result of their experiences, the students were savvy, militant

² In yet another disconnection, such was the thirst for books in East Timor, that when I returned to the country a few years later, I found that every item that we had purchased and left behind for our colleagues to use as a resource base after our project ended had disappeared.

³ The United Nations Civilian Police Force.

and politically aware. Far from being the passive, grateful recipients of English for its own sake they were alert to its perceived benefits, which they saw in terms of opportunities to obtain scholarships in English-speaking universities abroad or to gain better employment with a dollar salary. The university administrators for their part were fully aware that it was politically expedient to appease the students and meet their demands. They had requested our assistance with placement testing and organising the students into groups according to their language levels. However, as we discovered, the students had very different perceptions of assessment, making it clear that they considered it to be humiliating and divisive as the following research journal entry clearly shows:

All pretence of grouping the students by levels of language proficiency has gone overboard and all groups are now mixed ability. This is actually what the students lobbied for in the first place! They had protested at the idea of being placed into levels because they felt that it was divisive and “shaming”, as they put it. They had made it abundantly clear that they wanted us to treat them equals with no distinctions between them.

In the event, testing such a large number of students stretched our small team resources to the limit and the placement exercise was only partially carried out. Student numbers meant that we could not provide enough teachers to meet the range of levels, so we had no choice but to fall back on mixed level, mixed ability teaching.

The social challenges: Ambivalent relationships and professional marginalisation

As Appleby observes, the discourses of development influence relationships between donor and recipient at all levels from the global to the classroom level, generating tensions around issues of ownership, control and expertise within language development aid programs (Appleby *et al.*, 2002, p. 334). The following extract from my research journal reveals the ambivalent relationship that existed between the local and the expatriate teaching staff. Despite having requested staffing assistance from English native speakers, the East Timorese faculty members were curiously reluctant to make contact with the newly arrived expatriate teachers:

... it seems that right now the faculty members are leaving us to get on with things for what is left of the academic year. They have been very reluctant to contact us and it has taken me quite a lot of persistence to initiate a relationship with any of them. I am not sure of the reasons. Perhaps, like us, when they are not teaching they spend as little time as possible on the burned-out campus. Perhaps they are intimidated by us or embarrassed by the lack of resources.

Hindsight permits a more holistic interpretation of our colleagues' diffidence. Notwithstanding its peacekeeping role, the presence of the UN at that time amounted to another occupation of their country for many East Timorese, including the university staff and students. They were afforded few decision-making powers and language barriers often made it difficult for East Timorese to make their views heard in UN agencies and international non-government organisations (Hunt, 2008, pp. 94-97). The intensity of the language debate at the time also made our role politically sensitive. The ambivalent attitude of university organisers and faculty members towards the English teaching project was symptomatic of wider tensions between the donor and the host community. Consequently, despite long hours of classroom

contact, intense emotional involvement and high levels of commitment, we were both professionally and culturally marginalised in the institution (Markee, 1993; 2002).

There was a further discontinuity in the large salary differential between expatriate and local teachers. Although by Australian standards our salaries were quite average, the disparity between our earning power and that of our colleagues was not conducive to collaboration. As Fox (1994, p. 43) notes, such inequities are not lost on aid recipients. Moreover, our separation from the local community in hotels, whilst providing a form of security, also cut us off from the local community. Although our accommodation was neither comfortable nor convenient, aid workers were perceived by local people to be living in luxurious expatriate enclaves, a perception which also served to isolate us.

Whilst the experience of teaching our students was inspirational, the vignette and journal data in this article speak to significant discontinuities in the project. In the following sections I discuss the wider implications of these discontinuities, arguing that English was offered by the donor and accepted by the recipients as a quick-fix solution that did not address wider language and educational issues in post-conflict East Timor.

ENGLISH AS A QUICK-FIX SOLUTION

It is considered axiomatic in second language teaching that in order to achieve consistent and measurable results in the target language, learners need adequate and consistent exposure to it (Nunan, 2003, p. 608). In addition, access to rich and meaningful input is vital for the development of high-level skills in the target language (Ellis, 1994). The ad hoc testing procedures that we managed to conduct placed most students between absolute beginner and pre-intermediate level. Given such indications, there was little that the project could have achieved in the designated time frame in view of the students' overall low levels of English. Besides, any measurable language gain was unlikely to be sustained by the majority of students (Hall, 1997, p. 266). In fact it was the abortive placement testing process that most sharply called into question the short-term nature of the ELT project. As Pennycook (see Appleby *et al.*, 2002, pp. 337-8) states, language programs in development contexts are often seen as ends in their own right and fail to engage with the situations in which they operate. In our project, English was perceived and presented as a product that paid lip service to the students' demands but in reality provided little in terms of long-term language development.

English carried high social capital for our students, who perceived it as a means of improving their material conditions by accessing wider opportunities. Yet despite their active role in demanding ELT, the students were denied any real input into the syllabus. For the host institution, the project offered a way to satisfy the students' demands and solve a pressing, short-term problem. For the donors, who held the purse strings, it was a way to be seen to offer a high-profile, popular, rapid aid response. For the teachers, who were the mediators of the project, it was an experience fraught with ethical and professional contradictions. As the story of Henrique shows, the students' individual needs and responses to course content were in many cases opaque to us and the project can only be said to have achieved unknown outcomes. The short-term,

product-oriented approach placed severe constraints on our ability to form productive, meaningful relationships with our students and colleagues (Canagarajah, 1993). This lack of professional collaboration and contact had serious consequences for the project: there was no dialogue or follow up, no sense of local ownership or shared understandings of what it could achieve and no agreed criteria by which it would be evaluated (Hall, 1997).

DISCURSIVE DISCONTINUITIES

As Kell (2004) notes, the most salient feature distinguishing English from other Asian and European global languages is the way it has been commodified as a marketable product (Habermas, 1990). In a post-industrial, post-colonial world, English is promoted as providing access to economic, educational and immigration opportunities (Singh, Kell & Pandian, 2002). Although English is widely perceived as offering this kind of opportunity in East Timor, the reality is that relatively few people are able to engage with formal English language learning, let alone attain the glittering prizes that it promises. In aid-dependent East Timor, the stark realities of poverty, low educational levels, widespread unemployment and limited access to opportunity preclude English from becoming a passport to a better life for the majority of students. Only a relatively small number of individuals would have been able to turn their limited English skills into opportunities for well-paid local employment or study abroad as a result of our project.

The decision at independence in 2002 to declare Portuguese and Tetun co-official languages and to grant special status to English and Indonesian as working languages aroused intense anger amongst English and Indonesian-speaking actors and agencies. As East Timorese public and educational institutions have come to terms with the introduction of Portuguese and Tetun as official languages, the role of English and Indonesian remains controversial and politically sensitive. Indeed, the revival of Portuguese, the expansion of Tetun into domains from which it has been hitherto excluded and the continued use of Indonesian in small businesses, the aid industry and many workplaces have placed English in a somewhat ambiguous position (see also Kell, 2004). Negotiations begun in 2001 between AusAID, national university and ministry of education representatives to open a national English language-teaching centre had petered out, ostensibly because an agreement over the possible location of a centre could not be reached. To my knowledge, there have been no further large-scale, AusAID-funded ELT projects in East Timor to date.

Currently, ELT provision in East Timor remains unplanned and piecemeal, delivered mainly by individual volunteer placements, friendship groups, religious organisations, private providers and goodwill agreements with Australian universities. The flagship provider of Australian English in South East Asia, IDP Education Pty, markets Australian university education and organises testing for scholarship applicants, but to date only some 170 East Timorese students have obtained the opportunity to study in tertiary courses in Australia (Australian Government, 2009). These students often arrive in Australia with minimal levels of English and need long periods of language preparation before commencing their courses.

Opportunities for East Timorese students to participate in ELT programs in Australia also tend to be offered on an ad hoc, short-term basis. One prestigious Melbourne university currently offers regular places on its ELT program. A recent article on its website proclaims: “Wide world of English brings Timorese to RMIT”. The three students featured in the article were attending a one-off, five-week intensive course, yet the article optimistically claimed “the English skills learned in Australia will have far-reaching benefits when the women return to East Timor later this month” (The Globalism Institute, 2007, p. 1). It is not my intention to decry such initiatives, but rather to use them to illustrate the short-term perspective that constrains many approaches to language development aid, even with the best of intentions.

THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS

In a special topic-issue of the *TESOL Quarterly* (Markee, 2002) dedicated to the theme of language in development, a range of authors discussed the various roles of English in development aid projects, proposing that language development is not synonymous with language in development. Markee defined language in development as “the resolution of practical language-related problems in the context of individual and societal development, where language is defined in terms of communicative competence (Halliday, 1979; Hymes, 1979) and development as a reduction in participants’ vulnerability to things they do not control” (p. 266). Of course, we could neither provide solutions to insoluble problems nor remedy deep structural inequalities in East Timorese society. However, if development also means positive change (Chambers, 2005, p. x), a process of becoming better and realising one’s true and full potential (Byomentara & Mace, 1997, p. 88), then local agency and participation are central to this process. Following Appleby *et al.* (2002, p. 338), I take the view that the first priority in a language in development approach should be to examine not only the ways in which second and foreign language learning (including but not exclusively English) contributes to development but also whose interests are served and whose needs are met by different types of language program.

A further challenge for language development aid projects is how to engage with the social, historical, political and economic concerns that constitute the recipients’ daily reality, thus remaining relevant to students’ needs, sociocultural realities (Appleby *et al.*, 2002) and achieving a closer fit with their desired goals and outcomes. It is also essential for local planners to assess the cost and benefits of English language provision and to monitor both its quality and potential impacts on the language ecology (Nunan, 2003; Taylor-Leech, 2007), as well as making a realistic assessment of its potential contributions to development and its capacity to improve access to opportunity. The discontinuities in our project add weight to Appleby’s assertion that for ELT to have a meaningful role in East Timor’s development, it needs to be carefully planned and delivered in close consultation with East Timorese planners and educators as part of a wider strategy of long-term language in development (Appleby *et al.*, 2002).

Much has been said and written in development circles about sustainability and yet, as Hall (1997, p. 267) notes, documentation about why projects fail is scarce. As Hall perceptively argues, the analysis of why projects fail can be as instructive as the analysis of why they succeed. As Woods (1988, p. 196) also warns, unless attention is

paid to long-term maintenance, failed language teaching projects will be analogous to the rusting relics of other failed development projects that litter the developing world. If language development aid is to be change-oriented, then it needs to be experiential, reflexive, willing to draw lessons from its mistakes and prepared to modify its assumptions. Projects planned according to these principles could work more effectively toward the sustained reduction of the vulnerability to which Markee refers by taking a long-term view and by applying principles of collaboration, local ownership and local management (Chambers, 2005; Savage, 1997, pp. 296-7). Chambers (2005), a prominent figure in the global movement towards participatory approaches to development, emphasises the necessity to always ask whose language, whose words, whose concepts, whose values, whose ideals, whose realities and whose power inform development aid initiatives. Language educators working in this paradigm could serve learners like Henrique better by building stronger relationships with local participants and by developing more participatory approaches to program design and delivery (Auerbach, 2000; Kerfoot, 1993). Such approaches can work towards overcoming the kinds of discontinuities discussed in this article and promoting sustainable learning models that outlive the aid projects themselves.

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