



Teaching during times of change: On being a Georgian TESOL Educator in Cairo

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This reflective article describes ESL teacher training in Cairo, Egypt during the past five years. The author details her experiences with her MA students during the revolution and the military coup. She further explores how this journey has been influenced by her prior work in Tajikistan and Atlanta, Georgia and the parallels that exists across these contexts.

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Cairo, Egypt is an exciting and intense work environment for professionals in any field. For English language teachers and faculty in Applied Linguistics, Cairo is a dynamic capital that poses a wealth of opportunities and some interesting challenges. In a city with a metropolitan population of approximately 12,000,000 (UNdata, 2014) and an ever increasing number of English language institutions and programs, educators often comment that “everyone seems to want to learn English.” In fact, visitors are frequently

surprised to find that English is quite widely used in varying degrees by everyone from taxi drivers to doormen, from professors to journalists. Native-like English is more common amongst upper class students (for whom English can be a dominant or even first language), sometimes at the expense of their Arabic literacy (Benkharafa, 2013). Though the role of English in Egypt is historically and socially complex, most view English language education as a tool for advancement in a variety of fields. As an American educator in Cairo, I have also found that through English language instruction, teachers can encourage productive analytical discourse about the current political climate.

Within the last few years, major political shifts have prompted educators at every level to become more flexible and to find new ways of integrating discourses of social and political change into their English language curricula. Cairo is not only the largest city in the Middle East, in recent years, it has also been in the world's media spotlight for major political changes such as the 2011 revolution and the 2013 military coup. Now more than ever, students here have a heightened awareness of activism through social media (Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, for instance), the visual arts (often including performance art or graffiti murals in multiple languages), and face-to-face engagement with each other and visitors from abroad (Lennon 2014). In the midst of this excitement, university faculty have been fortunate to work

with adult learners who have been witnesses to and frequently agents of innovations and political change.

Since joining The American University in Cairo Department of Applied Linguistics faculty in 2009, I have had the pleasure of training ESL teachers from a range of backgrounds including graduate students from Egypt, Canada, Nigeria, Turkey, Hungary, and the United States. As an assistant professor for the TESOL MA program, I have found that our diverse backgrounds provide fruitful discussions on cross-cultural and political issues that are relevant to both the local context and working abroad. The MA courses I teach (Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, Second Language Acquisition, and Second Language Reading & Writing: Theory and Practice) integrate theoretical debates with practical concerns in our everyday teaching and learning contexts.

Many of my MA students are fellows, which means that they teach incoming students in the Intensive English Program. Others are teachers of adults, adolescents and children in public and private institutions in Cairo, Alexandria, Mansoura and elsewhere in Egypt. As currently employed educators, they can integrate concepts and activities from their MA courses in an immediate way and share the results with their peers. Like MA programs in the US, some are very experienced while others are novices, and some contend with a transition to the lifestyle and cultures of Egypt. The eclectic

nature of our community leads to beneficial discussions about differing cultural norms, values and ways of teaching and learning.

In our discussions, I try to dispel the common, ill-conceived view of an American utopian system of education that is far superior to and more equitable than any other while simultaneously sharing many of the merits of that system. We also discuss the challenges in Egyptian public schools, which are generally far removed from our privileged position at a private institution and that, as in the US, mark our place within the hierarchy of social classes. While my students themselves do not represent the most affluent communities (unlike our undergraduates), they also do not represent the poorest sectors of Cairo but have taught in a variety of settings that are the basis for interesting comparisons. My ultimate aim is for us to have fun and maintain a high level of respect for one another while exploring our commonalities and differences. It is my hope that my students and their students will see this process of stimulating debate and discussion as ongoing throughout their careers.

My prior work experience in the multicultural settings of Atlanta, Georgia and Dushanbe, Tajikistan had prepared me well for my current context. Earlier in my career, I had taught as an ESL teacher and teacher trainer at several institutions in Georgia including Georgia State University

(my alma mater), Georgia Tech, the Savannah College of Art and Design, and Georgia Perimeter College. Like in Dushanbe schools and colleges, students in Georgian ESL programs are often multilingual and represent a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. Through our discussions about writing, literature, cultural norms and so on, my students and I have been continuously reminded that there are multiple ways to view and respond to a problem and that listening to the views and experiences of others can enrich our own perspectives.

In each of these contexts; however, these rich discussions can be temporarily or perhaps even permanently obstructed by roadblocks like our own biases, particular political or religious alliances, or feelings of cultural, racial, or gender-based, superiority. During the revolution in Egypt, for example, my students were a mix of those who supported and were not in favor of the goals of the revolution, and some, understandably, changed their views over time. The subsequent elections and other major events that followed posed additional challenges including many incidents of violence and disagreements about the legitimacy of the outcomes of the elections. It was, and still is, not possible to ignore the events of the time –to attend classes adhering to preset curricula, and it became clear to us that this was also clearly not preferable. At the same time, I have been impressed by the

students' ability to maintain a high level of respect for one another. There were and are moments of tension but these are ultimately dealt with in a professional manner and are worth the effort it takes to talk through matters that are relevant and important to our world.

As an educator who has spent the past several years teaching in my home country and abroad, I have benefitted from an increased awareness of parallels between the contexts, meaning that we all struggle with these types of concerns but can grow from attempting to tackle them as a community. Experienced educators know that there will always be challenges. Some will be more material like a lack of updated materials or regular electricity. Some will be more philosophical, like handling a debate about the best system of government and how religion may or may not play a role in the realms of government or education. Yet in each of these contexts, from Atlanta to Cairo, the value of critical debate and facilitating critical thinking has always proved worth the effort.

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