CHAPTER SIX

DO WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?
NEGOTIATING GENDER IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING
FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

In recent years, gender has become an “overarching principle” of Australia’s overseas development aid program (AusAID 2007a, 4) and yet there has been little critical exploration of how this principle is realised in the practices of English language teachers working in international development. Focusing on the intersection of these three fields, language, gender and development, this chapter considers some of the ways in which teachers address issues of gender in a context that is not widely discussed in applied linguistics literature, but exemplifies key issues of concern for language and feminist pedagogies in the postcolonial ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1992). The chapter represents part of a larger research study (Appleby 2005) that sought to extend understandings of how English language teaching (ELT) fits into the world of international development, and how English language teaching in development is experienced through gender and race.

I draw on data from semi-structured interviews with four white, Australian, female teachers, all of whom were employed by Australian non-government organisations responsible for delivering development aid programs in East Timor. My reading of their accounts is inflected by my

3 A full account of this research will be published in Appleby, R., (forthcoming) Experiencing Time, Space and Gender: English Language Teaching and International Development. Clevedon UK, Multilingual Matters.
own experiences of teaching in East Timor in the period following the vote for independence. Elly\textsuperscript{4} and Carol taught English language to university students in Dili, the capital city; Kate and Jane taught English language and teaching methodology to in-service school teachers in a major regional town. Carol, Kate and Jane were in their mid 50s, Elly was in her late 20s. All were first language speakers of English, but only Carol spoke Bahasa Indonesia, the language of instruction in the Timorese education system during the preceding decades of Indonesian occupation. All were experienced English language teachers, and all but Jane had experience in teaching English outside Australia in countries where English was not the first language. Few of the adult students in their classes aspired to studying in an English speaking country at some time in the future, and most were learning English to further their studies or professional careers in East Timor.

To begin, I locate both English language teaching and gender relations within the context of international development, before discussing teachers’ observations of gender in the general context of East Timor’s transitional development program. I then explore four narrative accounts drawn from interview data in which teachers talk about gender relations or incidents in their classroom, and discuss these in the light of competing discourses that teachers in development classroom contexts need to negotiate.

**Situating English language teaching and gender in development**

The dominant paradigm of international development depicts ‘developing’ nations following a path of economic, political and social modernisation towards the standards set by ‘First World’ nations, with input provided by wealthy donor nations in the form of economic assistance and the transfer of modern scientific and technical knowledge (Kingdon 1999). Educational assistance in Australia’s overseas aid program supports these goals by “spreading new ideas and technologies”, and “augment[ing] cognitive and other skills, which in turn increase labour productivity” (AusAID 2007b, 23). However, the concept of education as a form of knowledge transfer has been critiqued as a means of perpetuating global hierarchies and justifying the need for the First World’s ongoing intervention in ‘less advanced’ nations (Escobar 2004). The alignment of English language teaching with the mainstream goals of

\textsuperscript{4} All teachers are referred to by pseudonym.
development has led to similar critiques of ELT as an industry that dispatches ‘experts’ from the Centre to teach in the Periphery with little attention to social, political and economic contextualisation (Phillipson 1992). Despite these critical analyses, all too often ELT goals of transferring knowledge from a TESOL Centre to less developed Periphery nations appear to persist (Toh 2003).

As a key theme for Australia’s international development program, gender equity has been incorporated as a goal in mainstream projects, which means that each project needs to consider ways that gender equity can be advanced in the recipient community (AusAID 2007a). However, a consensus has emerged that ‘mainstreaming’ has largely failed in achieving greater gender equality and transforming gender power structures (Thomas 2004), since the significant gender implications of development as a masculinist processes continue to be largely neglected (Hunt 2004). Feminist critiques claim that development policies have tended to erroneously identify gender as a problem located solely in recipient communities, and to produce institutionalised, administrative interventions that have depoliticised what is at base a political struggle (Baden and Goetz 1998; Mitchell 2004).

Although official discourses tend to construct gender relations as a problem to be ameliorated by intervention in the host community, teachers in my study also perceived gender as a problem produced within the ‘hypermasculine’ expatriate donor communities. Primarily because of the unstable political situation, the aid program in East Timor during the transition to independence was underpinned by a military presence in the form of an international peacekeeping force, and the aid community was staffed by a greater proportion of male aid workers capable of working in what could be seen as danger hot spots. The resultant masculine culture has been recognised as a characteristic of certain contemporary development contexts, and is particularly marked in those sites, such as East Timor, where military or peace-keeping forces are present (Bowcott 2005; Wells and McEwan 2004; Wax 2005).

Noting the imbalance in the gender ratio amongst the expatriate community in Dili, teachers in my study observed that the degree of active military presence seemed to establish a patriarchal mood, which was even apparent in the adoption of faux military attire by many aid workers and journalists. Neither expatriate nor local women were obviously visible in the public domain, and the gendered construction of this militarised phase of development contained a particular message of hostility towards white women. As in earlier colonial contexts, white females were an anomaly. If we consider their membership of a white race, and their relative wealth,
they were in a privileged position in relation to the host community; yet in relation to the international aid community, they were seen as subservient to a patriarchal and sexist regime. This situation had significant effects on some female teachers’ sense of being ‘read’ as a sexed body, in a way that was reminiscent of Australia in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the harassment teachers experienced in the streets never occurred in the grounds of the university, where the women appeared to be read not as sexed bodies, but in terms of a professional identity tied to a specific place.

In contrast to their experiences outside the classroom, gender was seen to be relatively insignificant for teachers once they were inside their respective educational institutions. Being invested with institutional authority, most teachers expressed a relative sense of control and comfort in the classroom that they had not experienced in the streets outside. Gender was not perceived, on the whole, to be a problem for the students inside the classroom, despite the low number of female compared to male students; nor was gender was an explicit focus within any of the teaching programs, confirming observations that gender as a category remains of little importance in teacher perceptions of classroom practice (Sunderland 2000, 207). However, as Gallop (1995, 81) reminds us, “all teaching takes place between gendered subjects”, and theories of feminist pedagogy suggest that gender, rather than ‘disappearing’, is merely performed differently in different locations.

I turn now to four stories of how teachers responded to gender issues in their classrooms, and in doing so keep in mind the question, ‘do we make a difference?’ The first three stories are presented here in summary form, and illustrate some of the challenges faced by teachers when gender is approached as a ‘problem’ that resides solely within the host community. The final story, which forms the focus for this chapter, is examined in greater detail and demonstrates an approach that takes the contact zone between different cultures as a potentially fruitful site for interrogating gender representation, lived experience and possibilities for transformation.
Negotiating Gender in English Language Teaching for International Development

Enacting gender equality in the language classroom

Although, in general, gender was not an issue that concerned teachers, there were instances where gender disparities became a focus for intervention. Elly recalled certain situations in her classroom where male students lingered in front of the limited number of classroom computers, while female students waited their turn. To ensure that male students relinquished their seats in order to allow equal access time for female students, Elly introduced “a ‘half-half’ rule”, using her institutional authority to “chuck ’em off their chairs”, insisting that computer time be evenly shared (E:13). Drawing on liberal discourses of equal opportunity, Elly’s actions in this regard reflected one of the most common ways of assessing gender in the classroom, that is, by comparing the participation rates of male and female students. Where Elly noticed a gender disparity in allocated time, she used the authority vested in her as the one in control of the classroom to ‘even up’ the situation.

However, on reflection, Elly expressed uncertainty about whether this sort of intervention was an imposition of external cultural values which, therefore, represented a form of cultural imperialism. On the one hand, she felt strongly that exercising a teacherly control by insisting on gender equality in the classroom was an important aspect of her teaching role. She also expressed a desire to maintain a respectful, professional distance in her classroom practice, particularly in relation to difficult areas of personal trauma, so as not to trample on cultural sensitivities. Yet, at the same time, she sought in her teaching practices to break down the hierarchies that positioned her above her students, since she saw this position as reproducing the hierarchies she had observed and despised in the contact zone of development outside the classroom. So for Elly, the possibility that the imposition of gender equality practices may have contradicted Timorese cultural norms gave rise to conflicted feelings: “This is like a cultural relativism versus human rights argument, and I never know what to think” (E:13).

Elly’s solution was to see gender relations as part of an inevitable process of cultural progress, rather than cultural imposition. In line with her Marxist ideology, she believed that eventually gender equality would come about in East Timor as the economic system evolved, and women entered the public arena. She acknowledged that despite foreign teachers’ introduction of gender-affirmative, equal opportunity practices, these may well have achieved little in terms of addressing the underlying economic, cultural and political structures that hold women in a particular position within a particular society.
Enacting gender equality in the kitchen

Whereas Elly’s authority to organise the space of the classroom according to liberal ideals of gender equity was apparently received with little resistance, greater difficulties arose where the gendered meanings of the educational domain interacted with locations outside the classroom, where issues of gender equality confronted issues of supposed cultural difference in the domestic domain. In this second story, we see the teacher moving outside the campus with her students, but retaining the privilege of teachers’ institutional authority. On Shrove Tuesday, an important day in the Christian calendar, Kate took her class to the house that she shared with other expatriate teachers, for a genre-based language lesson around the experience of making pancakes. At the conclusion of the lesson, Kate recalled “I made a little bit of a cross-cultural faux pas, with insisting that everybody had to participate at all levels, and that included the men washing up”. One of the male in-service teachers in her class responded with “eyes [...] as big as saucers, ‘You want me to do the washing up?!’” (K:11)

Here we have the domestic politics of gender coming into the language classroom. The teacher still held authority, but Kate’s perception was that at least one of the students had different ideas about the gendered allocation of domestic duties. At this point, it seemed that the English lesson could have taken a variety of possible directions, and different participants could have been invited to speak or explain their views. Potential questions arise as to whose expertise, experience and opinions would be called on to ‘fill’ the space opened up by this slip in the progress of the lesson, and whose gender norms were to be imposed or interrogated. So how did the lesson proceed from here?

In the event, Kate took up the authority of the teacher to introduce her ideas about domestic duties in the context provided by an English language lesson. Assuming that Timorese men had a “deeply ingrained” aversion to doing the washing up, she nevertheless insisted on an “across the board rule” that everyone should participate in every stage of the process: “I said this is an English lesson, so although maybe it’s culturally inappropriate in Timorese society, if we’re exploring English and Australian styles of education it’s something to explore” (K:11). In this way, English language and gender equality were conflated with Western cultural norms, with the implication that whereas Timorese society is lacking (in gender equality), English-speaking societies have progressed and resolved issues of gender equality. So while Kate’s story, like Elly’s, illustrates a pedagogical move towards gender equality in the language
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classroom, it may also evoke some of the ‘civilising legacies’ that cling to ELT (Schenke 1991), and suggest an imposition of Western assumptions and generalisations about language and gendered cultural relations made only through ‘Western eyes’ (Mohanty 1988).

If we think about the notion of language teaching being appropriate to context, we might also ask what was the specific context of this English language use? In the development aid context of East Timor, amongst the international community, my own experience was that domestic duties were defined by race and class, rather than gender: the people who never did the washing up were the white expatriate development workers; washing up was the duty of Timorese household help, both female and male. In this language classroom event, although gender was entangled in broader issues of race and class, it was singled out as an object for ‘improvement’. Thus, it seems despite the liberal discourse of equality implied in the teacher’s actions, the neglect of specificities of context and the traces of cultural superiority that linger in the tenets of ELT, risked producing an authoritative speaking position for the teacher “that sees the ‘other’ as the problem for which they are the solution” (Lather 1992, 132).

Resisting gender intervention in domestic violence

In the previous two stories we saw teachers exercising a degree of authority in their interventions in gender relations in the language classroom, and at times meeting some relatively mild resistance. The following story demonstrates more clearly how teachers’ authority might be constrained by their status as cultural outsiders. For Jane, teaching in a professional development program for Timorese teachers, the possibility of exercising authority was confounded by doubts about her own positioning in regard to gender in the Timorese domestic sphere. In her classroom experience, Jane felt her adult students actively avoided issues she assumed were related to on-going gender relations in their personal lives. Her account of one event suggested how the students kept secluded from the classroom gaze those issues arising in the domestic domain: “I had a woman [in class] who- she came in one day with a black eye and word had it that her husband had bashed her, but it was very much, ‘Don’t talk about it, don’t mention it’ ” (J:13). The student, who normally sat at the front of the class, chose a position near the back, where she could hide behind her friend: “I guess from body language, I knew she had been abused” (J:13).

Jane’s awareness that she was unable to make a physical or emotional connection with her student created a deal of uncertainty what she should
do. She felt compelled to offer help, yet as an outsider “you don’t know culturally what you’re doing” (J:13). Despite seeking guidance from colleagues, Jane felt unable to offer her student any solutions or any way out of the perceived problem situation. The frustration she felt with her own inadequate response points to the limitations of teacher authority, and draws attention to the corresponding limits of contextual relevance for English language teaching. The students’ authority over their own cultural domain and their demands for privacy confounded the teacher’s desire to intervene and ‘make a difference’. In this situation, where once again gender, culture and context were intricately entangled, the Western teacher was kept firmly in the outsiders’ place, her authority exposed as tenuous, relational, and dependent on the consent of the students.

Collaborating on gender in the contact zone

While Jane’s story demonstrates some of the constraints on the outsiders’ potential to make a difference across cultural boundaries, the next story illustrates an approach that addresses gender explicitly at the site of cultural difference in the ‘contact zone’ between communities (Pratt 1992). Rather than seeing the students’ community as the location of a gender problem, this last story explores gender as a complex interplay of discursive representation and lived experience between two cultures that have come into contact both inside and outside the language classroom.

Carol’s class comprised a group of students at the university with a higher level of English language proficiency. Although the number of women in this class was still relatively small, they tended to be more outspoken, and particularly vocal on matters of gender politics. Some of the difficult gender issues that the students in this class raised were to do with Timorese women’s particular experiences during the decades of Indonesian occupation, and their present subordinate position in Timorese society. The critical point here is that the women students themselves raised these issues and, in doing so, voiced an observation made by female Timorese scholars that a “strong culture of patriarchy has developed over a long time in Timor-Leste”, however, it can change” (de Araujo 2007, 16). These students introduced ‘private’ experiences into the public domain in a way that the teacher perceived as indications of the women’s strength and solidarity.

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5 ‘Timor-Leste’ is the official national title for the anglicised ‘East Timor’.
I had a fair few really strong women in the afternoon group and they used to often clap, spontaneously, when it came to an issue talking about women playing a strong role, there were very strong feelings about things (C:7).

Acknowledging that these issues were brought into the public arena of the classroom by students’ agency and ownership, Carol initially took the role of a bystander and listener, rather than the author and centre of classroom action:

Ros: And how did you feel when some of those really strong topics came up?

I tried not to give an opinion actually. [...] I didn't want them to think the Western way, ’cause I was still trying to understand what- how the men and women's roles were in East Timor, I didn't feel I could impose our ideas until I knew what was happening there really (C:7-8).

Although Carol recognised that there were serious issues relating to reconciliation and the perception and treatment of women being discussed within the local community at that time, she was reluctant to initiate a classroom discussion focusing directly on these topics. Once again the teacher’s awareness of her status as a cultural and territorial outsider acted as a restraint to pedagogical authority, and prompted her to take up a listening position that suggested a contingent reversal of the hierarchies she perceived as inherent in the development context. Rather than directly expressing her opinion on the issues of gender and reconciliation, she chose instead to discuss her own memories and embodied experiences as a Western woman, and the way she felt she was perceived as a teacher in Indonesia:

[The Indonesians] looked on Western women as prostitutes really, and so I talked about that, and I talked about some of my experiences in Bali, how it was supposed that I was a prostitute by some of the Muslim teachers, and I told them about- I told them of a couple of experiences I had [...] to add fuel for their own debates, to get them going, to motivate discussion, to get them all going on it really (C:9).

Drawing connections between her own experiences and the Timorese context, Carol felt that “open displays” of sexual behaviour by some Western women aid workers had led Timorese men to draw similar conclusions about all Western women: “they thought all Western women were going to do it” (C:9). She believed that these readings influenced her students’ perceptions of Westerners’ sexual relations, in particular how they were played out at the Hotel Olympia, a floating hotel which had been
requisitioned and docked in Dili harbour to provide accommodation for UN personnel. The *Olympia* became the site for the students’ and teacher’s engagement and exploration of difficult gender issues:

Amongst the students, yes they did talk about that, they talked about not wanting their women to be like Western women, and that the boat, *Olympia*, was being used for prostitution. So that’s when I thought, well we’d better go down and see for ourselves (C:10).

Carol decided that the class should visit the *Olympia* equipped with questions practiced in the English classroom. Working collaboratively with her students, Carol used her teaching authority not to impose Western ideals, but as a means of gaining access to a place normally off-limits to Timorese students, and to leverage a practical interrogation of gendered effects in a specific intercultural context.

In Carol’s language lessons, gender was not perceived or presented as a problem solely confined to the Timorese community, to be judged through a normative liberal vision of equality. Rather, gender was discussed as a series of discursive constructions, and approached through an engagement with the lived experiences of both teacher and students in the cultural contact zones between communities. In this sense, a focus on the multiple contact zones where diverse cultures interact, opened up inquiry about the way in which the very presence of a hypermasculine expatriate community could impact on the construction of gender relations between communities in a specific context. In the case of the *Olympia*, gender problems were generated not by presumed paternalistic relations within the host community, but by the dominating presence of a wealthy, masculine, international community.

Threaded through this teacher’s accounts was a pedagogical practice that focused on how women’s bodies were read in a range of conflicting discourses, from different points of view, and in different cultural locations. As well as making space for the students’ experiences of gender, the teacher incorporated her own lived experience into the classroom discussion, forming a counterpoint to the usual image of the teacher as a disembodied, sexless professional (Gallop 1995). However, this not only raised challenging topics in the classroom (prostitution and sexual behaviour) but also, for a time, placed the teacher’s body at the centre of attention, a move that could prove uncomfortable and confronting for some classroom teachers. For this particular teacher with a particular group of forthright students, an approach of reading gender in different contact zones enabled a negotiation of gender issues that addressed slippery questions of cultural assumptions and representations as they
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intersected with highly contextualised questions of territorial occupation, cultural juxtapositions and societal change.

The outcome of the class’s investigation was far from clear or resolved, in that we have no firm knowledge that practices of prostitution on the *Olympia*, if they did exist, were abolished. Indeed, reports of sexual exploitation by militarised donor organisations continue to surface not only in relation to Timor (Joshi 2007), but also on a global scale (Mazurana et al. 2005). Nevertheless, in Carol’s story we can see an alternative, more exploratory way of addressing issues of gender in the context of language teaching and learning, one that avoids an easy rhetoric of solutions imposed from a position of supposed Western superiority, and begins to work collaboratively with the various interests, values and agency of both students and teacher.

**Conclusion**

In my discussion of teachers’ narratives, I have sought to show some of the different ways in which issues of gender are negotiated in the course of language teaching in development contexts. When the classroom was seen as a relatively autonomous educational domain, detached from the outside world, the teacher exercised a certain control over gender equity inside the classroom, using her authority to improve what she saw as inequitable access to educational resources. However, the imposition of teachers’ authority was seen as more problematic when attempts were made to impose ‘outsider’ values or ideals in matters to do with gender relations of the host culture outside the institutional domain of the classroom. These pedagogical practices risked presenting a relatively simplistic view of gender relations while, at the same time, potentially reproducing colonial hierarchies between ‘enlightened’ Western and ‘unenlightened’ non-Western communities. In these circumstances, students’ resistance to the teachers’ intervention was palpable, and often expressed in bodily performance: with eyes like saucers, or with bodies used as shields. Rather than seeing gender inequity as a problem confined to the host culture, the last example showed a more complex two-way exploration of gender as, first, a set of discursive representations with material effects and, second, a function of the intercultural contact zone, a context in which not only the students, but also the teacher had a personal investment. It seems to me that in the context of language teaching in international development, the specific sites of intercultural contact offer the greatest potential for making a difference in the way we see and
interact with the world, while refusing the unhelpful, dichotomising discourses of Western superiority.

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Appendix

Attribution of quotations and transcription codes:

C, E, J, K = refer to the initial letter of teachers’ pseudonyms, and numbers refer to the interview transcript page. For example: J:7 = Jane, interview transcript, page 7.

Codes used in interview transcriptions:

[...] some original text omitted
[text] not stated by interviewee, but inserted by researcher to ensure clarity of grammatical or referential meaning
text- speaker self-interrupts
text indicates emphasis by speaker
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