Tales From the Trenches/ Récits des tranchées

*How can I hear your voice when someone else
is speaking for you?*

An Investigation of the Phenomenon of the Classroom Spokesperson in the ESL Classroom

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We can't become what we need to be by remaining what we are.
(Oprah Winfrey)

We all have *those* students in our classes, the ones who are always ready with an answer to whatever question is asked. Question of fact, question of opinion, question of experience, they are prepared to say something. Admittedly there are days when, without *those* students, hardly any words at all would be spoken in class and planned discussions or activities would fall flat. Having *those* students to do a lot of talking usually helps to get the ball rolling; then once some students are talking, others have something to add to object to. Quieter students feel encouraged or compelled to speak up and speak out. As long as *those* students are not dominating every discussion, they are playing a role that is important and often necessary in every classroom in which it is hoped that students will do some—or even most—of the talking.

Please do not misinterpret my use of italics. I am not using them to indicate any kind of derision. Rather, I am using emphasis to echo how teachers often speak about their students, about the trends and dynamics they notice in their classrooms. If as educators you know what I mean by *those* students, then we probably share some common experiences. And if we share some common experiences in our classrooms, then you may also have encountered still another kind of student, and that is one that I identify as the classroom spokesperson in the ESL classroom.

The classroom spokesperson, as I can conceive it, should not be confused with the kind of student who is always ready with a response, one of *those* students I described above. Rather, the classroom spokesperson (or persons, as the case may be) in the ESL classroom is the one who is forced or pushed or pulled into speaking for other students, usually because it is decided that

the spokesperson is better in English than the spoken-for students. These other students may feel they cannot speak as well as their chosen representative, or perhaps they do not wish to speak in English as long as there is someone to do it for them. The possible reasons for this phenomenon are explored in more detail below. First, I explore the process of how this phenomenon emerges and takes hold by reviewing the process through which I first came to perceive it.

I had been teaching for several years at the university level in the Midwest of the United States before I took a job at a Spanish-speaking university located in the Caribbean. I did not know one word of Spanish—well, other than *gringo*, *amigos*, and *hasta la vista*—so fortunately, I was employed to teach in English. I was hired by the Department of English to teach courses in human communication. Occasionally, I also taught courses in conversational English. But even when not teaching a course specifically for language acquisition, the dynamics of ESL teaching were still a part of my classroom because all my students are learning in a non-native language.

Being a professor of human communication, I made the effort from the first day of class to hear from every student and to develop an open classroom climate. Although uncertain, I have the feeling that the process of selecting the classroom spokesperson begins in the opening moments of my courses. As we hear from everyone in the introduction, the students get the opportunity to assess the skills of their classmates and determine who would be the best candidate for the classroom spokesperson. In our first few classes, the students who are afraid or reluctant to speak in English already have a voice picked out for themselves.

How does this spokesperson get put into play? Imagine that a student wants to say something in class, but perhaps doesn't want to or feels he or she can't do it in English. They turn to their spokesperson, say it in Spanish, and have the spokesperson say it for them, sometimes within seconds and sometimes after much discussion. If I knew Spanish, I imagine that the students would just want to say it in Spanish and get me to translate and interpret in English. In fact, a colleague who teaches in my department but is a native Spanish-speaker told me once about her worry that the students felt they could revert to Spanish with her whenever they ran into difficulty. In my classroom, denied this opportunity, the fall-back plan seems to be to nominate and employ the unofficial spokesperson.

With the naïveté of being new to ESL teaching, I thought perhaps there was nothing wrong with this practice. After all, if I don't know the word for something, I'm going to turn to a fellow student or colleague for help. This is natural. But it is the repeated practice that seems to be the problem, the fact that the students always have an out when it comes to having to speak in their second language. Furthermore, practically speaking, in terms of talk time in the classroom, the students who need the least practice in English are

those who get the most. Still another result of this practice is that I seldom hear from these students, which diminishes my ability to develop a learning relationship with them.

Pedagogically speaking, this last result is the most worrisome. I began to feel its effects by comparing my teaching experiences at this same university. I was teaching content and theory courses to students at the same time as I was teaching ESL to students who did not have the level of ability in English to enroll in my "regular" communication courses. I love teaching the students at this university more than I have enjoyed teaching any other group of students. But I gradually became aware that it was much more difficult to connect with the students in my ESL courses and to connect with the reluctant English-speakers in my communication courses. It was so much more difficult in fact that sometimes I failed to connect with those students. Logically, I know that they're the generally the same students in spirit, with only one difference: their English-language ability. Over time, I found that the relationships I established with my ESL students were less rich and less relational.

So I had cause to look at my own role in the development and perpetuation of this phenomenon. I like Kohl's (2002) idea of a "topsy-turvy," a means to gain more enlightenment as a teacher by attempting to turn my perspective upside-down, imagining instead what I must look like to my students. I tried to imagine why the ESL dynamics seemed to change my relationships and comfort level in the classroom from an upside-down, turned-around perspective.

Besides the inconvenience to them that I do not understand Spanish, I realized another possible effect of my being English-only: by speaking English and only English, I could be seen to represent the standardizing dominance of English. In my previous teaching experiences, this had never been an issue because we had all shared English-language fluency with the possible exception of the differences between "American English" and "Canadian English," as well as much teasing about my "Canadian accent." Now I found that I identified with Wynne's (2002) experience as an educator.

My schooling had not prepared me, as an English major, to understand the depth and breadth of language oppression. No one had taught me that the language I had grown up loving was used to bludgeon others into submission and feelings of inferiority. (p. 206)

My language had always been just a language, just the one I grew up speaking. I recognized at an early age that I was good at using language to communicate, to express myself, to create stories, but I saw these as abilities as innate rather than tied to a particular language. Through my schooling, I learned the power of words, the danger of words, the ability of language at times to limit, silence, do violence, depending on the politics of power and

oppression. So language could be a tool, an art, a weapon, a skill, a commodity, even an enemy. But now I sometimes felt as if I was suddenly the enemy by virtue of the language I spoke, the language I mastered. It was at times a subtle dynamic like a whispering wind rustling the palms, and at other times forceful like a tropical storm battering those same palms. Stated or unstated, the dynamic does not bode well for effective communication or learning.

So as much as I might like to imagine that I am merely an educator who happens to speak English, I am part of a language community that appears likely to mean many more things to my students than it has ever had cause to mean to me. What could English mean to them? It could be the language of the American dream, of historical colonial influences, of employment opportunities, of the future. Yet it is also a language not of their past, of non-choice, of erasure of identity, of violence to the preservation and process of their own native language, of elusiveness and exclusivity, of money and class. These are all themes that I detect when conversing with my students, colleagues, and friends in this new home of mine. Rather than conceiving of skill in a common language of English as primarily a necessary tool for our communication, I began to imagine how these students may have learned that their beautiful native language of Spanish was not, or was not going to be, the dominant language, and what that might mean to their learning of English.

My students are at the university level and have received instruction in English in some cases for more than 12 years. If by now they are not as fluent in English as their neighbor in class, have they, as I often do, given up on ever learning it, mastering it? Are they biding their time through required classes in English, using the resources available to them—those who will and can speak for them—just to get by and get out without ever having developed their abilities past the point when they entered my classroom?

Yet there is another possible explanation for why students choose to have others speak for them in the ESL classroom, and it is this that disturbs me the most: silencing. I have been interested in this idea since I wrote these words as part of an exploration of gender and education.

Silencing comes from another. But not always. There can be a lived silence, a silence by choice, because of the external threat of silencing. There can be a silence of the unknown, where a person lives quiet and noiseless within where potential and possibility could speak, but do not. Can that kind of silence be a choice too? A choice not to look within, not to call forth that voice. What is the responsibility of a teacher to speak of, to speak to such silences as they may dwell within [students], to critically explore and even to pry into the choices we make not only to speak, but also to be silent? (MacLennan, 1999, p. 47)

Why do some students silence themselves? How do they feel silenced? What are some sources of this silence? What is my responsibility to speak of and speak to such silences? If for some students it is a learned process of silencing that causes them to elect others as their spokesperson, then how can I address this problem and discourage this practice? I believe I do what I can in my classrooms to create an open environment, conducive to both learning and good communication. Yet to say that I do what I can does not mean that I do everything possible. I have my own weaknesses, fears, and limitations as an educator that do not—at least not yet—allow me to go beyond where I am now. I will continue to look within myself for possibilities to open, but for now I seem to have leveled off.

Ironically, I think it is my commitment to openness and communication in the classroom that has allowed this phenomenon of the classroom spokesperson in ESL to thrive. For example, I do not put students on the spot when soliciting a response to a question or a discussion point. I introduce assignments where every student must participate by speaking in class, but because these assignments are for evaluation, they are usually assignments for which the students can prepare ahead of time. This forced participation does not allow me to hear the voices of more reluctant students in spontaneous discussion, speaking more directly from mind to mouth. Group work does not eliminate this problem either, as groups usually elect a spokesperson and it is difficult to get students to continue to speak in English while working in groups once you are out of earshot.

Of course, I could always communicate directly with the students who do not speak English in my classrooms. Thinking about this option takes me back in time. One summer, when I was still an undergraduate student, I had a job helping students find jobs with one of the Canada Employment Centres for Students. With my communication background, I already knew how to deal with the phenomenon of the student brought in by his or her parents, where the parents do all of the talking and the student hangs back awkwardly. Instinctively I knew to try to make a connection with that student, to keep addressing the student to show my interest in and respect for him or her. If at all possible, I would try to work with the student apart from the parents. Yet today, armed with much more experience and education, I still have not discovered an instinctive way of responding to the similar challenges of the students who are not actively using their voices in my classroom, those whose voices come from the mouths of others.

If their written work speaks more in their voice, then I find I do not recognize that voice: the ideas, the style, the quality, the depth, the shared experiences. I cannot place that student with that writing. Perhaps if I were an English teacher, I could be satisfied to hear their voices in writing. But I am a teacher of human communication, and I want to see progress in their ability to communicate on a relational, voiced level. I want to see progress in

their ability to feel that they can communicate in English, in the moment, and aloud with anyone they choose.

I cannot help but think and worry about Kohl's (2002) words, "Teacher talk and student talk are essential components that determine the quality of learning in the classroom. When there is dissonance between them, other kinds of strife develop" (p. 147). From a human communication perspective, talk is not cheap; it is rich and revealing. When there is little talk taking place, when the voices of only a few are heard, or when silence reigns, then the learning is interrupted, stalled, discouraged, stilled. What kind of dissonance is created and lived in my classrooms with ESL students? How can I determine the quality of student talk when some students do not speak but are spoken for? This is a conversation with only a few instead of all, an exclusive kind of conversation where only some voices are heard.

Kohl also speaks of a time in his own pedagogical experience when students seemed reluctant to share themselves in his classroom. When he committed himself to finding out why, this is what he learned.

I felt that I had created an open and giving environment where questions and answers can be seen as acts of exploration. I even had a sign on the wall proclaiming MAKE MISTAKES and encouraged the students to make interesting guesses without worrying about being correct. [One student] had heard all of that but didn't believe me. School was about being right and if you weren't right then you'll be punished. And worse you could never know if you were right. It was up to what the teacher decided ... For [that student] it was not a question of being wrong but never being sure in the presence of a teacher and classmates how you will look and whether you will be humiliated. I told her and it took a while for her to accept it, that intelligent guessing was more important than avoidance of learning. (p. 148)

Although I cannot change the educational past of my students, I still worry about the present we are creating together. For this reason, I have identified this phenomenon of the classroom spokesperson in the ESL classroom and explored its scope and some of its possible causes and consequences. I have not, however, arrived at specific solutions for how to address or overcome this phenomenon. After this sustained investigation I hope that these ideas start a dialogue about this issue that brings some response, some relief. I admit that in my years of schooling I have often been one of *those* students, that is, the kind who likes to contribute in class. But now that I am on the other side of the classroom dynamic, I worry not about the students who speak in my classes, but about absence of voice and silences among ESL students in my classes.

The Author

Since graduating with her doctorate in human communication from Ohio University, Janet MacLennan has been teaching a variety of communication courses in the Department of English at the University of Puerto Rico. She enjoys both the challenges and rewards of a Canadian communicating, relating, teaching, and researching in a Caribbean context.

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