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# The spatial politics of gender in EAP classroom practice

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## Abstract

This paper explores some of the challenges faced by EAP teachers as they address gender issues that arise when teaching in a non-Western cultural context. It draws on interviews with four Australian teachers regarding their experiences in delivering EAP programs in East Timor as part of an international aid effort, and focuses on critical incidents in which gender was perceived as an issue in classroom practice. Through these incidents, we see the ways in which teachers navigated the competing claims of gender equity and cultural sensitivity in the pedagogic domain of the classroom. A spatial analysis is proposed as a means of exploring the teachers' accounts and as a means of countering the temporal narratives of progress that shape conventional discourses of development, EAP and gender equality. The paper concludes that the teachers' racial and economic position, and their status as cultural outsiders, affects the ways in which they can speak and act on issues of gender.
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## 1. Introduction

Pragmatic approaches to EAP have traditionally meant that political issues of students' and teachers' subjectivities and lived experiences have received little attention in mainstream EAP research and practice, where traditional notions of context and relevance have mostly been concerned with acculturation to institutional expectations and discipline-specific written 'products' (Belcher, 2006, p.149). More recently, critical scholars in EAP have taken up an educational agenda that aspires to social and political engagement, critique and even transformation. This agenda assumes a broader, dynamic notion of context for EAP, and moves beyond concerns with institutional acculturation, towards an interest in relations between language, knowledge and power (Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 1997; Singh & Doherty, 2004).

However, as Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) noted in the first issue of this journal, EAP has "yet to seriously confront" the challenges that arise in relation to issues of power, and "effective classroom responses [to such challenges] are often constrained by the institutional contexts in which we work" (p.10). It is one aspect of this complex relationship between language, power and context that I seek to explore, by focusing on the challenges, responses and constraints experienced by EAP teachers as they negotiate incidents in which gender arises as

a dynamic aspect of intercultural classroom life. Central to this discussion is an understanding of gender as constituted through discourses that produce and position subjects within contextually specific relations of power.

This paper draws on data from semi-structured interviews with four white, female EAP teachers, all L1 speakers of English, who were employed by Australian non-government organisations responsible for delivering development aid programs in East Timor. Elly[1] and Dana, in their late 20s, taught EAP to university students in Dili, the capital city; Kate and Jane, in their mid 50s, taught EAP to in-service school teachers in a regional town, as part of a program sponsored by the Catholic church in Australia. My discussion of their accounts is inflected by my own contemporaneous experiences of teaching EAP in East Timor. The interview data are drawn from a larger research study (see Appleby, forthcoming) of EAP teachers' experiences of living and working in contexts of international development[2] where gender, race, economic status and national origins were salient dimensions of the hierarchies that structured daily life.

The range of languages used by the students in these EAP programs reflected East Timor's complex colonial and linguistic heritage. The university students spoke one or more of the 19 national language varieties[3], and had been educated in Bahasa Indonesia as the language of instruction during the decades of Indonesian occupation (1975–1999). The Timorese teachers were accustomed to teaching in Bahasa Indonesia and, in addition to their national languages, some had knowledge of Portuguese, which remained as a legacy of an earlier era of Portuguese colonialism (early 1500s–1974). At the time of this study, the language policy for East Timor as a newly independent state was the subject of vigorous debate, with the 2002 constitution eventually declaring Portuguese and Tetum (a national lingua franca) as co-official languages, and English and Indonesian as working languages. Nevertheless, popular demand for English had grown as a result of the large international community working in East Timor and using English as a common language. Although some of the students in these programs aspired to studying in an English speaking country at some time in the future, most used English to further their studies or professional activities in East Timor.

In this paper, teachers' accounts of critical incidents are discussed in the light of several paradoxes that shape the negotiation of gender issues in the development classroom. The incidents are regarded as 'critical' in that they not only reveal something of the workings of gender relations in classroom life, but also point to certain contradictions that surface as a range of gendered discourses are played out in an intercultural EAP 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1992). As key sites in the global spread of English language and Western knowledge, EAP contact zones bear the legacy of ''neocolonial practices'', and the power relations produced in these sites are ''reconstituted and contested in day-to-day pedagogic interactions'' (Singh & Doherty, 2004, p.11–12). An aim of this study is to consider some questions arising from the teachers' pedagogic interactions, in regard to the conflation of English and 'civilised' notions of gender equality, the division between public life and private experience, and the role of the EAP teacher in pursuing emancipatory politics.

## 2. Temporal and spatial politics in international development, EAP, and gender

The context of international development is, in many respects, different from the usual 'First World' location of many gender and language teaching studies. Nevertheless, it bears similarities with other contemporary EAP sites where diverse cultures interact, and where identification of appropriate cultural norms is open to question (Singh & Doherty, 2004). In order to better understand the perceptions and difficulties faced by teachers in the present study, I will outline here some aspects of international development that are relevant to the context in which they worked.

### 2.1. Time-oriented discourses

The discursive framework of international development, realised in mainstream, neoliberal development policies, establishes what I have called elsewhere a *temporal narrative of progress* (Appleby, 2005) that sustains notions of Western cultural, academic and linguistic superiority. According to this linear, time-oriented framework, 'advanced' Western nations have set an agenda of social and economic progress that can serve as a template for producing similar

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[1] Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

[2] I have used the words 'development', 'Western', 'Third World' and 'First World' throughout this article, but acknowledge these are contested terms which have generated widespread disagreement and critique.

[3] The actual number of indigenous languages depends on the criteria adopted for defining a discrete language.