From the periphery to the center: Making a difference

An interview with Suresh Canagarajah

The Pennsylvania State University

Deryn Verity

Deryn Verity: *You are probably best known in Japan as a former Editor of the TESOL Quarterly, and as a scholar whose focus is on the global role of Englishes and questions of voice and agency in academia. In what ways would you say that you have "made a difference" to the field of TESOL and language education?*

Suresh Canagarajah: The changes I can think of cannot be attributed to me alone, but to all multilingual scholars from the periphery like me who have started making our presence felt in the profession. Firstly, we have broadened the profession's understanding of the English language. When I came to the US for graduate studies in 1985, I was asked by my university to do a test to prove that I can communicate in English. Yet I came from a community where English had been used for about 200 years.

Now, there is more appreciation of the different varieties of English spoken all over the world. The notion of World Englishes makes the point that English has become diversified to the point where it cannot be considered a single language anymore, but a package of diverse varieties, each having its own norms and functions for specific communities. The marks of local norms (such as unique accent or idioms) shouldn't be disparaged as evidence of ignorance. Scholars now argue that these varieties of English should be treated as having equal status as the traditional elite varieties such as American or British English.

DV: *Where is the line between varieties with status and what are essentially interlanguage varieties?*

SC: The distinction between interlanguage and new varieties is complex. When a community of speakers shares certain norms, even though they may appear distant from native speaker norms, they should be considered a variety in their own right. Also, the distinction between these terms is relational. That is, an item that may appear like a fossilized item of interlanguage can gain uptake by many others in the local community and become normative. At that point, scholars are prepared to acknowledge such usage as part of the local norm and not interlanguage. Multilinguals in those settings use their English varieties confidently for their own purposes without bothering about native speaker norms.

DV: *What are some other changes you've been a part of?*

SC: We have raised the awareness of our profession about diverse language teaching methods. When I came to the United States for teacher training, the methods we used in Sri Lanka, resembling grammar-translation and teacher-fronted methods, were considered inferior and ineffective. The fashionable methods in the profession, such as communicative language teaching or task-based method, were considered to be superior and backed by research. However, the fact that these methods kept changing periodically made some of us suspect their effectiveness. We wondered if these shifting fashions were motivated by commercial interests.

Gradually, we picked up the courage to analyze how our local teaching methods were motivated by our own cultural values, language needs, and learning traditions. The profession has now come to the realization that there is no "best method" in language teaching. We have all started developing our teaching methods ground up, in relation to the learning objectives, needs, and interests of our students and communities.

DV: *Should changes in pedagogy be driven more by tradition or by developments in global access and exchanges of ideas?*

SC: There are two kinds of tradition. In one sense, traditional methods are those that belong to the tradition of our profession. So, people would consider methods such as grammar-translation or direct method as part of the professional tradition. Tradition in the second sense relates to cultural and educational traditions that belong to the local community. I find these traditions useful to tap into. They often resonate better to the needs and interests of local teachers and students, although they don't relate to the professional orthodoxy.

Sometimes local communities lack the confidence to creatively borrow from their community traditions to develop suitable pedagogies. This grounding in one's own local cultural and educational traditions can also be a good standpoint from which to critically appropriate new global ideas and developments. In other words, I am thinking of a critical appropriation of the old and new according to the needs and objectives in the ground.

DV: *So local teachers of English are important participants in this process of critical appropriation?*

SC: Now the profession has an increased appreciation of the contributions and roles of nonnative teachers. At the 1996 TESOL convention in Chicago, some of my nonnative colleagues and I got together and organized a colloquium about the perspectives of nonnative teachers in the profession. The contributions later came out as a book *Non-native Educators in English Language Teaching* (Erlbaum, 1999). Soon a caucus was formed in the TESOL organization to represent our interests. The rest is history! Now, there are very few who think that nonnative speaker teachers are second class citizens in the profession.

But the inequalities and discrimination multilingual periphery scholars faced in the profession made us sensitive to the politics of English language teaching. We also became more sensitive to the role of English as a global language. We had to ask if English was a threat to our local languages and cultures in our own local communities. We realized that we can't teach English innocently. We had to ask uncomfortable questions about its implications in the lives of our students and our communities. We developed pedagogies for appropriating English according to our values and interests. My first ever academic article explored these connections in TESOL *Quarterly* in 1993, one of the earliest articles on critical pedagogy in our field.

For a variety of reasons, English speaking scholars from developed countries dominated publishing in our field. It appeared as if they were the custodians of superior and true knowledge! It seemed as if all others from other parts of the world didn't have anything useful to say. They were just expected to read the research and textbooks of these advanced scholars and apply them in their local communities. I myself grew up with this understanding for a long time. Later, when I tried to publish my own research from Sri Lanka after my doctoral degree, I experienced certain disadvantages that revealed the biases in academic publishing. Reviewers of the elite journals in the US treated my British English spelling as implying badly edited articles.

DV: *Is there a "one-principle-fits-all" guideline you could offer for publications that want to publish more articles from writers of different backgrounds?*

SC: I hold that editors and reviewers have to first acknowledge that the articles are coming from different parts of the world where there are different norms for writing and using English. What bothers me is editors or reviewers who can't look beyond their own norms. They end up insulting authors because they are so ethnocentric. However, after the review process, authors should be open to negotiating their usage with the dominant conventions of the journal. Some journals, such as TQ, are open to using either British or American spelling, as preferred by the

author. Others do insist on American spelling, and I don't have a problem changing it when they suggest it. The more difficult area for negotiation is styles of writing. Often journal editors impose a data-driven and inductive writing styles on all their authors, which some of them would consider mechanical and blunt. Here, there is more room for negotiation on both sides—with give and take on the extent to which dominant conventions can be more or less revised for purposes of author's voice.

Research approaches in all academic fields are now changing. There is now a realization that controlled experiments on a few chosen variables distort the wholeness and complexity of language learning and teaching. We are now interested in situating language learning in its natural ecology. There are many qualitative approaches that help us understand how learning takes place in situated contexts. Methods based on ethnography, case study, narrative research, and action research are providing new insights into language learning and teaching. Coming from a community that is open to knowledge and research that deviate from the positivistic enlightenment tradition, I have been sympathetic to research that adopts alternative approaches.

DV: *What changes or trends in research styles do you see in the next ten or twenty years?*

SC: Genres of academic communication have been changing. Gone are the days when scholars used to believe that using the "I" in research was not permitted. Now we have a frank expression of one's voice in research writing. We have many other ways of organizing the research article beyond the stereotypical IMRD (Introduction/Methodology/Results/Discussion) structure. I have published articles that are structured as a dialogue or a narrative, not to mention hybrid texts that shuttle between data, introspection, and stories. TESOL *Quarterly* has led the way in representing a range of research approaches and writing genres in its pages.

My effort to give voice to diverse researchers thus goes beyond publishing the work of international scholars. It has broadened to giving space to diverse approaches to knowledge and writing from scholars of different social backgrounds.

Reference

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Suresh Canagarajah is the Erle Sparks Professor at Pennsylvania State University. He teaches World Englishes, Second Language Writing, and Postcolonial Studies in the departments of English and Applied Linguistics. He has taught before in the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and the City University of New York. His book *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching* (OUP, 1999) won Modern Language Association's Mina Shaughnessy Award for the best research publication on the teaching of language and literacy. He is the former editor of TESOL *Quarterly* and the current President of the American Association of Applied Linguistics.