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Social justice in English language learning in Ecuador: beliefs of indigenous higher education teachers and indigenous and mestizo student teachers

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore indigenous teachers' and indigenous and mestizo student teachers' beliefs about social justice and English language learning in the Ecuadorian context. Based on data collected through interviews and one focus group session, it was found that many indigenous believe English might be a convenient tool for personal and professional development as well as intercultural communication. On the other hand, even though some laws have been passed and awareness has been raised in Ecuador regarding the need for social justice pertaining to indigenous people, the participants indicated that this community is still an underprivileged group.

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Introduction

Schooling is often seen as a system that can contribute to creating equal opportunities for all, particularly for those who are systemically marginalised or erased from dominant discourses. Thus, schooling can contribute to social justice (Bell, 2016), so that everyone can receive 'an impartial share of the benefits of membership of society' (Ife, 2010, p. 148). Within schooling, the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) no longer constitutes a privilege of elites as it is embedded in school curricula across settings (British Council, 2018; Cha & Ham, 2011).

In Ecuador, research into EFL has examined policy, perceptions and influencing factors (British Council, 2015); the use of action research in the classroom (Burgin & Daniel, 2021); and teacher development and their perceptions (Calle et al., 2019); among other issues. In the area of indigenous rights, discrimination against these peoples has been studied (Larrea et al., 2007) as well as their access to education (Castellano et al., 2017). However, little attention has been paid to the teaching of English and its relation to social justice among indigenous peoples of Ecuador.

Informed by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1976; Pennycook, 2001), this paper interrogates social justice and English learning in Ecuador drawing on data from in-depth interviews and a focus group with a group of indigenous teachers and indigenous and mestizo teacher educators. With the aim of contributing to our understanding of the

relationship between enforcing indigenous rights and learning English in Ecuador, the following research question guided this investigation: What are the participants' beliefs about the learning of English as a way to enhance social justice among indigenous people?

Below, we first expand upon the literature review and conceptualise social justice and teacher beliefs. We then describe the method of the study, which includes contextual and participant information. Last, we present the findings, which we discuss under the light of our conceptual framework. Among the most important discoveries we have the participants' view of English as an important language, especially for communication among different cultures, and the fact that most of them believe there still exists discrimination against indigenous peoples in Ecuador. The paper includes concluding remarks and limitations.

Literature review

The area of social justice in ELT has received scant attention in Ecuador. Only two studies have examined this issue. First, Heredia (2017) found that some indigenous people viewed English as an important tool for communication. In the second study, Burgin and Daniel (2017) found that teachers of English exhibit a tendency not to change their methodology when they have students who speak languages other than Spanish, such as Kichwa, as their mother tongue. In general, ELT in Ecuador is informed by critical pedagogy, given that 'it is a pedagogy of inclusion' (Pennycook, 2001, p. 130). In relation to critical pedagogy, Chang and Salas (2020) claim that 'critical pedagogy has become one of the most significant areas of scholarship to address issues of power and social injustice in education' (p. 16), taking into consideration everyone who needs to be taught English.

The concept of social justice might encompass moral psychology (Haidt, 2001) or issues of what is right or wrong (Van den Bos, 2003). Nevertheless, in the context of the present study, social justice is viewed as the goal and process of creating a "world in which the distribution of resources is equitable . . . , and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure, recognised, and treated with respect" (Bell, 2016, p. 26). Thus, social justice addresses issues of inequity in terms of the benefits each member of a society should enjoy.

Social justice in ELT is a broad field that studies class, gender, immigration, race, among others (Chang & Salas, 2020). In this study, we analyse one specific area which concerns social justice: the rights of indigenous peoples from Ecuador in relation with ELT. We concur with Martínez's (1987) definition of indigenous:

Those which having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies. . . They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity . . . (p. 29).

In a society that strives for the fair distribution of resources, access to education should be assured. Nonetheless, this is not the case for most Ecuadorian indigenous peoples (Ayala, 2013; Castellano et al., 2017; Larrea et al., 2007; Pinos-Montenegro, 2019) even though the Constitution of Ecuador (2008) stresses that education must be human-centred and

intercultural and that it must promote democracy, inclusiveness, diversity, and justice (Art. 27).

In Ecuador, the process of institutionalising education for indigenous peoples has evolved since the 1940s (Ministerio de Educación, 2013), and indigenous rights have been acknowledged in the constitutions of 1998 and 2008 (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). However, Castellano et al. (2017) report the following data regarding indigenous peoples and access to school in Ecuador. Forty per cent have attended primary education and 22% have enrolled in secondary education; however, only 2.8% have a university degree, and 0.12% have had access to postgraduate studies. This social injustice could be the result of racial discrimination against indigenous people (De la Torre, 1996), understood as the unfair treatment that people receive due to their race, even in schools (Novo & de la Torre, 2010).

Conceptualising beliefs

Rokeach (1968) offers the following definition of belief: ‘any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase I believe that . . .’ (p.113). This definition is in line with the way most participants answered, which, translated to English, would be ‘I believe.’ In the words of Borg (2003), beliefs are part of what is known as teacher cognition. This last element involves ‘what teachers think, know, and believe’ and how these are related to what teachers actually do in their classrooms (Borg, 2003, p. 81). We have adopted this definition because through the interviews and the focus group session, we also examined their thoughts and knowledge regarding social justice in ELT.

The field of teacher beliefs has gained traction given their role in teachers’ practices in the classroom (Borg, 2006; Pajares, 1992; Sang et al., 2009). Teacher beliefs refer to the opinions they have regarding issues such as the curriculum, teaching contexts, self-identity and self-esteem (Pajares, 1992). Teacher beliefs in ELT have been extensively researched (Kern, 2008; Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock, 2001; Tercanlioglu, 2005) in connection to situated teaching practices (Borg, 1999; Johnson, 1994; Tercanlioglu, 2005), and personal and professional development (Borg, 1998; Farrell, 1999; Flores & Day, 2006). Borg (2003) states that “there is ample evidence that teachers’ experiences as learners can inform cognitions about teaching and learning which continue to exert an influence on teachers throughout their career” (p. 81). This last finding is significant to the present study as it refers to the fact that the belief systems teachers have or develop as learners greatly influence their beliefs as in-service teachers. In our study, attention is given to both pre and in-service teachers.

Method

Framed in a qualitative paradigm, this research constitutes an initial, exploratory, naturalistic, descriptive, small-scale study of a group of Ecuadorian teachers’ and students’ beliefs about ELT and social justice. Their beliefs are reported and divided into themes in a deductive manner, on the one hand, in the light of some well-known categories (e.g. social justice, ELT, beliefs) presented in the literature review and inductively, on the other hand, in the light of some other categories (also familiar) emerging

from the data. It should be noted that we recognise our own positionality and subjectivity by disclosing that some of the participants were former students and colleagues.

Participants

This project involved 20 participants. Two indigenous EFL teachers from the Cañari community (one male and one female), who work at a higher education institute (not a university or college); one indigenous male university teacher of pedagogy from the Saraguro community, who is not involved in the teaching of English; one indigenous female EFL student teacher from the Saraguro community, who attends a state university; and 16 student teachers (4 indigenous and 12 mestizo) of primary education who were part of the focus group. The average age of the three teachers was 34.6. Their average teaching experience was 9.3 years. The EFL student teacher was 21 years old, and the average age of the focus group participants was 28.3. It should be noted that all the participants were asked to identify themselves as belonging to an ethnic group. Thus, 12 identified themselves as mestizo and the rest (8) as indigenous.

Procedures for data collection and analysis

One in-depth, semi-structured, interview was conducted online with each of the teachers individually as well as the EFL student teacher; and one focus group interview was held with the 16 student teachers. Interviews were used because we wanted to get in depth answers from the participants (Creswell, 2009). Each interview lasted about one hour. The focus group interview session took about an hour and a half to carry out. Both the interview and the focus group session were carried out in Spanish as we thought it more convenient. We had a total of 10 questions for each session, but asked follow-up questions, as well. Some of the questions included:

- To what ethnic group do you belong?
- Have you experienced any type of discrimination for belonging to an indigenous community? Explain.
- Do you think learning English is important? Why? Why not?
- According to you, what constitutes social justice?
- Can the learning of English contribute to having a more just society? Why? Why not?

Due to lockdown restrictions, a videoconferencing platform was used to carry out and record the interviews and the focus-group meeting. We decided to have the focus group session with the group of the 16 student teachers mentioned above because they already knew each other, which was less intimidating. With the rest of participants, we conducted an interview because it allowed the gathering of more information without participants' fear of disclosing private information in a group. Before the interviews and the focus group session were conducted, the participants signed an informed consent form guaranteeing data confidentiality and individual anonymity. In the first part of the interviews and focus group session, the participants were asked about their thoughts regarding the teaching and learning of

English in indigenous communities as a means to promote growth and better opportunities (social justice). Questions regarding discrimination in Ecuador were asked next. The interviews and focus group session were orthographically transcribed for data analysis.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis as it allows researchers to examine data both deductively and inductively (Nowell et al., 2017) in an iterative process which included data familiarisation, generation of initial codes, and arranging codes into themes, which were reviewed and refined (Nowell et al., 2017).

The numbered identifications used to recognise the participants were the following. For the EFL teachers we used ET1 and ET2; for the EFL student teacher, EST; for the university teacher, UT; and for the focus group student teachers, from ST1 to ST16.

Findings

The following were the themes that emerged in the present study: importance of English, reasons for learning English, English for communication and travel, reasons for choosing ELT as a course of study, social justice, and social justice and equity in education. All the participants considered the learning of English as a necessity in today's globalised world. According to them, the main reasons to learn the language were communication with foreigners, better job opportunities, travel abroad, and education. Most of them stressed the need for further work in order for social justice, especially in the area of access to education, to reach an acceptable level of equity in Ecuador. Some participants' view was that access to English language learning does contribute to social justice, while another participant disagreed, and that even though in the past decades laws were passed to protect indigenous peoples' rights, reality has not caught up with those laws. One final major idea was that education is key to changing people's minds and ideas regarding discrimination against indigenous peoples, but, one participant mentioned that 'we are still light-years away from that'. In the next section we make an attempt to summarise and interpret the participants' beliefs about the importance of English language learning and social justice.

Importance of English

All of the participants emphasised the importance of English as a global language. They provided diverse reasons to highlight its significance. The following subcategories describe the beliefs of the participants about English language learning.

Reasons for learning English

All the interviewees agreed upon considering English as an important language to learn. Some of the reasons for mestizo student teachers are travel and job opportunities. Somewhat differently, the indigenous participants (both teachers and student teachers) focussed on interculturality, seeing this language as a tool for them to learn about other people's cultures. The beliefs of the indigenous participants about learning English are predicated on understanding others, in other words, on developing interculturality. For example, the indigenous EFL student teacher commented:

It is very important to learn English because one can communicate better with people from different cultures and parts of the world. Besides, one can learn about the different customs and traditions.

In addition, the university teacher thought that learning English is important because of the benefits it offers. He said:

I believe that learning English . . . is very important. I think that English further enhances the abilities of any of us; that is, it opens up a much broader field in terms of research, reading, work and equal opportunities . . .

The relevance of this language as a lingua franca is stated in the following terms by the same participant:

I was in Brussels and in Germany and the only common language is English. As can be evidenced, the participants believe English is important for different reasons, especially for communication.

English for communication and travel

The student teachers of the focus group stated that there are many opportunities involved with the learning of English. ST7, who is a mestizo, mentioned this idea in the following excerpt:

English is the official language of international communication . . . it is used in all corners of the world . . . it is the official language of many international organisations . . . when one starts to travel, it is very important [to be able to communicate in English].

A female indigenous student teacher stated that the learning of English could help her teach other people about her culture. Nevertheless, she added that Kichwa should also be taught in schools when she stated that:

It is important to learn English because, well, I'm indigenous . . . thus if I learn three languages, English, Spanish, Kichwa, maybe I could travel to other places, learn from other people . . . and also teach them about my culture, Kichwa . . .

In the last section, we can observe that the participants emphasise the significance of English for communication, but also for travel.

Reasons for choosing ELT as a course of study

When asked about the reasons why they chose this course of study, one of the EFL teachers mentioned the following:

One of the main motivations for me was the story that I lived, for being indigenous and for being in an intercultural bilingual school, Spanish and Kichwa were the only two languages I had access to even though I wanted to learn English, as well.

This lack of access to English learning in intercultural bilingual schools in Ecuador is an indication of the fact that indigenous peoples do not normally enjoy the same benefits (as members of this society) as the rest of the population, although this situation is improving nowadays as more schools of this kind are incorporating English on their curriculum (Ministerio de Educación, 2013). It seems that when ET2 was a student, she did not have

the opportunity to learn this language. This frustration was compensated later when she became an English teacher.

In the same vein, the ET1 recounted a similar story:

English was not common in our cultural context, so I wanted to learn English more than anything to try to communicate with people from different cultures.

Likewise, the indigenous EFL student teacher added that

The main motivation was that I liked English ... experiences lived with foreigners have made me focus more on English. I decided to get to know people from other countries and learn more about the language ...

Thus, curiosity and the opportunity to communicate with people from other cultures were among the main reasons for them choosing to become English teachers. What is more, the EFL teachers claimed that the fact they are indigenous instructors of this language has helped them to get attention from international institutions. For instance, ET1 mentioned that he was offered a job at an important organisation in the United States, where they needed an indigenous person from Ecuador who can communicate in English.

Social justice

According to the participants, social justice encompasses genuine equality, which involves similar social conditions, embracing horizontal human relationships and rights. In the same vein, the respondents looked on interculturality as horizontal and harmonious coexistence between mestizos and indigenous peoples, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

Social justice for me is that everything should be fair ... there should be equality, equal opportunities for the Western culture, the indigenous sector, and for all.

Social justice is necessary; it is necessary not only for peoples and nationalities.¹ I believe that, for all, for indigenous peoples, for blacks, for women, for all.

In my community, inviting means sharing and we share with any people because we look at them as our own; we share with them what we value.

The participants acknowledged that both domains, social justice and interculturality, intertwine and to some degree are equivalent concepts that embrace every single sector not only the indigenous one. Nevertheless, one of the participants underscored the complexity of social justice. She explained that it involves many aspects. One of these is being aware that all of us are equal but with our own individualities at the same time, and that educated people tend to hold this belief more strongly. Moreover, according to her, another aspect of a just society involves having the same opportunities for all. The following ideas illustrate these interpretations:

Social justice, it encompasses, let's say, different points or many points. One of the criteria [...] is that ... the person himself has to be aware that we are not all the same; it would also

depend a lot on the preparation [education] of each person . . . ; [social justice implies] that we all have the same opportunities and rights.

The participants mentioned that minorities are still discriminated against. This situation has been evident in Ecuadorian indigenous communities regarding working conditions, education, and social encounters (Larrea et al., 2007). The views of the participants echo this state of affairs regarding the various instances of discrimination that they may have experienced.

For example, the EFL student teacher expressed this notion in the following extract:

Unfortunately, we live in a country where there is a lot of discrimination against our indigenous nationality . . . they think that just because we wear different clothing, we don't have the right to dream . . . to be successful.

This participant claimed that all human beings are equal and that even though we do have external differences and identities, on the inside we are all the same.

In a similar vein, a mestizo student teacher (ST1) remarked that there are no races among humans, but the human race is one and unique. In fact, he seemed a little upset when asked about racism in Ecuador, when he said, 'Races? What are races anyway?'

Although for the indigenous communities in Ecuador there is little social justice, some of the participants stated that the situation has improved, especially in the last two decades. The university teacher expressed that discrimination against indigenous peoples has decreased to a certain degree, but that there are still situations and conditions which need to be changed. For instance, he points out the differences that exist between the rural and urban areas, as shown in the following excerpt:

If equality is really sought, then the districts, the ministries, have to focus on the rural area, [that is] in the most forgotten places, because they need support, and they also need the internet, for example, in this pandemic. That is also fighting for this equality.

Some student teachers felt that nowadays there is less discrimination as we can see indigenous peoples getting better jobs. Nonetheless, ST1 reported that a small section of Ecuadorian society still thinks they are better than the indigenous population.

All that being said, not all student teachers felt that discrimination has diminished in Ecuador. The following excerpt, from an indigenous student teacher, pinpoints this idea:

I don't think things have changed too much because what good is it . . . to have laws . . . if the authorities themselves don't obey them? . . . They themselves treat us with disrespect . . . they [should] know that we are human beings, that we all have feelings.

As evidenced in the last section, the participants believe that social justice encompasses equity. However, some of them believe that there is still some type of discrimination against minorities such as indigenous people in Ecuador.

Social justice and equity in education

The informants were in agreement that there is evident discrimination in Ecuador, often with indigenous peoples at the receiving end. Notwithstanding, they are hopeful that discrimination will be eliminated and they will enjoy social justice and equality one day.

One of the crucial instruments for this change, they mentioned, is education, as one of them claimed:

Discrimination could be eradicated more than anything else if people have an education . . . as a right, so I do believe that education contributes to eradicate discrimination.

According to some of the participants, the state should be in charge of providing the means for lessening inequalities. In fact, one of the respondents mentioned that the state of Ecuador has done something in order to improve the conditions of the less privileged groups; however, he thought that there is still a long way to go. For instance, higher education is not an option for many of them. Also, some claimed that norms of everyday behaviour should change with due consideration to others. The following extracts serve as evidence of these beliefs:

Let's look at what is happening with the students who graduated from high school. They cannot enter the universities because the parents do not have the financial resources to help their children, so this is a social problem; once the government realises about the current indigenous reality, then only by seeing that reality, this could be changed.

There is a public policy that has made it possible for us to think about interculturality, and try to think about diversity, . . . but it is not possible that by decree that we learn to live together; that is . . . not achieved by decree or by law, it is reached by doing, in everyday life.

Let's hope that our grandchildren can be part of that society where we can live with each other and where we can offer what we know and have learnt.

Although some participants also stated that learning English does not, in itself, imply more social justice for them, and that it will take a lot more for them to feel they have achieved equity, it seems that learning this language has helped them have more opportunities when communicating with foreigners or in finding a job; it has also contributed to personal and professional development in general; all of which could be viewed as progress towards acquiring social justice.

In the same vein, since English is nowadays included on school curricula, two respondents claimed that this situation represents an achievement not only for the indigenous community, but also for Ecuadorian education itself as it contributes to the integration of these people into the Hispanic education system, as evidenced by the following extract:

Many times we have talked about the necessity of having English in the intercultural bilingual schools in the rural areas. This helps students to be part of the Hispanic educational institutions and reach its standards and position.

Therefore, English has helped us; otherwise, we would have been in the same situation with no English at all. Our indigenous brothers would have suffered the same difficulties when entering Hispanic schools.

In summary, the participants stated that English is important in many ways; the indigenous interviewees mentioned interculturality more often. Regarding the subject of social justice, they affirmed that there is still ample discrimination in Ecuador, and that education could contribute to having a society where all members have equal opportunities for developing as human beings. They thought

that social justice is made up of different elements, such as access to similar conditions, opportunities, and equal rights, along with a genuine promotion of interculturality.

Discussion

The study sought to examine the participants' beliefs about the learning of English as a way to enhance social justice among indigenous people. According to the data gathered, the participants thought English is important for many areas of personal and professional development and that everyone should be given the opportunity to learn this language. In addition, some of them believed that indigenous peoples still constitute a discriminated group in Ecuador.

English learning is something everyone considered important. The participants expressed that this language is useful for several purposes such as international communication and travel, studies, and better work opportunities. This is also suggested by Rojas and Hernández-Fernández (2018) since they claim that learning English could bring better opportunities for some people in areas such as Latin America. In addition, some participants thought that this language should be included on the curriculum of all schools. This reflects the fact in most education institutions around the world English is considered an important subject (Cha & Ham, 2011). In addition, in line with British Council (2015) and Heredia (2017), the participants viewed English as a way of enhancing career prospects and interculturality, as explained by Rodríguez-Cruz (2018). It is important to note that the indigenous respondents considered the learning of English as an opportunity, especially, for intercultural communication, giving them the opportunity to talk about their culture with foreigners and also to learn about other cultures.

Furthermore, as noted by Castellano et al. (2017), Granda (2016), Larrea et al. (2007) and RIMISP (2017), indigenous peoples in Ecuador still do not seem to have the same rights and opportunities as the rest of the population. A big segment of this minority group do not have access to education and feel that in reality racism and discrimination are still practiced by members of the more privileged sections of the population. However, some participants mentioned that several things have started to improve and the discrimination they face now is not as bad as it was until twenty or so years ago. These are the views of the participants of this study. It might be interesting to carry out further research and include a bigger sample with members of other indigenous communities, apart from the ones included here, and analyse their ideas on the topics covered in this project.

Conclusion

This study aimed to deepen our understanding of EFL learning and social justice in Ecuador. The power of English as an aid in developing as human beings and professionals is hard to deny. In addition, the authors feel there is a necessity to look at issues of social justice in more detail. While discrimination seems to have decreased and laws have been passed in order to guarantee indigenous peoples' rights, in practice not much has improved. Borrowing Bell's (2016) ideas on social justice, it appears that, for some indigenous people of Ecuador, there is a lot more to be done; they do not think they are the beneficiaries of social justice. This is

supported by Larrea et al. (2007) who stated that there has been no considerable change for these people since 1990, which is the period they started to have laws passed and organisations created to protect their rights. There are still big gaps in terms of employment, equality, and education. It seems that in Ecuador social justice education needs to be encouraged so people can further understand and take action on the unjust interactions between certain minority groups and the dominant and more privileged groups (Adams & Zúñiga, 2016).

Note

1. The informant refers to the indigenous sector which is made up of different ethnic groups.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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