

## Chapter 4

# Coloniality and Whiteness in Evangelical ESL Classrooms

**Ruthanne Hughes**

*University of South Carolina, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter ethnographically investigates how ideologies of whiteness and missions interact in an evangelical English language school in South Carolina. Using discourse analysis of classroom observations and interviews with five teachers across eleven classes, the chapter explores how whiteness is central to but unmarked in the presentation of American culture that students are socialized into, and how legacies of colonialism and assimilationist strategies are upheld in the presentation of white evangelical culture as equivalent to American culture. The ideologies described here demonstrate how contemporary practices of evangelical ESL programs continue to reflect a lingering history of colonialism and white supremacy in which the field of English teaching has long been implicated (Han & Varghese, 2019; Kim, 2019; Kubota, 2001, 2021; Pennycook, 2002; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2021; Vandrick, 1999). It is important to note where the legacy of these movements remains so that biases and harmful practices can be confronted and ameliorated.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

An often underdiscussed component of hegemony present and transmitted in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is that of white<sup>1</sup> American evangelicalism. It is a poorly kept secret that the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has strong connections to missions work<sup>2</sup>. Religion has always been intimately tied to colonialism (de los Ríos et al., 2019; Gearon et al., 2020; Lachenicht et al., 2016; Veronelli, 2015; Winchcombe, 2021), as the motivations of European explorers and conquerors can be described by the motto “Gold, God, and Glory.” As the arm of colonialism reached out, so did the church, with missionaries quickly establishing posts and schools. In order to transmit the gospel, the missionaries and indigenous people needed to have a common language. While some missionaries elected to learn the language(s) of the indigenous people and translate the Bible into those languages, others instead focused on teaching the indigenous people English so as to teach them

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-9029-7.ch004

Christianity. Today, many ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers are missional evangelical Christians, and many missions-focused evangelical Christian universities offer TESOL degrees and certificates with the express intention of offering teaching English as a platform for missions work. Even in schools that are not explicitly Christian, the ideologies of missions work and evangelical theology often perpetuate colonialism and linguistic injustice in the ESL classroom. Students are socialized into “American culture”; however, white evangelical culture is often presented as representative of American culture in an effort to evangelize to and convert students.

This chapter investigates how ideologies of whiteness and missions interact in the ESL classroom through an ethnographic look at an English language school in South Carolina, marketed as a secular university-prep school, but with a Christian affiliation and missions-work orientation. The present study engages in discourse analysis in order to discuss how whiteness is central to but unmarked in the presentation of American culture that students are socialized into, and how legacies of colonialism and assimilationist strategies are upheld in the presentation of white evangelical culture as equivalent to American culture. The ideologies described in this chapter demonstrate how contemporary practices of evangelical ESL programs continue to reflect a lingering history of colonialism, Anglocentrism, and white supremacy in which the field of English teaching has long been implicated (Han & Varghese, 2019; Kim, 2019; Kubota, 2001, 2021; Pennycook, 2002; Vandrlick, 1999). It is important to note where the legacy of these movements is still present in ESL today so that biases and harmful practices can be confronted and ameliorated.

## **COLONIALISM AND THE CHURCH**

While the project of colonialism was largely an economic venture, the dominance that colonial powers maintained for centuries, and still maintain today, was not achieved by economic control alone. In conjunction with the competition for resources was the pursuit of cultural dominance and civilization of the colonized: colonial nations achieved and maintained economic dominance through cultural, religious, and linguistic promotion that was predicated on the erasure of indigenous cultures, religions, and languages. Religion was a critical vehicle for the imposition of the colonizer’s culture onto the colonized. At first, the religion being exported was Catholicism, but with the Protestant Reformation, Protestantism became more culturally relevant and ultimately replaced Catholicism as the primary source of missionaries. In particular, Protestant missionaries became intrinsically linked with British imperialism (Gearon et al., 2020). In this context, teaching literacy was highly valued, as the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (Gearon, 2013) stated that God’s written word is the only authority and only means of revelation from God, and thus reading God’s word was crucial to salvation. This value resulted in the teaching of English reading and writing being strongly promoted across the vast British empire. Oftentimes, missions work and the teaching of English were one and the same pursuit as the lines between the pursuit of colonial dominance, Christian proselytization, and civilization of the native<sup>3</sup> blurred.

The results of this intertwining between English education, religion, and colonialism are still being felt throughout the fields of ESL and EFL (Gearon et al., 2020; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005). Indeed, English’s status as the current lingua franca cannot be divorced from the history of colonialism and capitalism (O’Regan, 2021). The fact that many people consider English to be a necessary skill for economic advancement is rooted in the economic dominance of first the colonial British empire and then the neocolonial United States. While the global status of English is one result of colonialism, it

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