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Unravelling Power and Privilege in the Academy: A Personal Account

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Abstract
This article explores the author’s privileged identities as a White, male researcher and English language educator in the context of relevant critical literature. I aim to understand how my privileged identities granted by race, gender, societal placement, and language interact with my identity as an evangelical Christian and how these identities impact my research and practice in working with multilingual transnational youth in a Canadian university setting. Highlighting the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research and its potential impact on both researcher and student identities, I probe my acquired identities (unearned societal placement) and ascribed identities (spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, experiences, and personality). I emphasize the asymmetrical nature of relationships and how this asymmetry may potentially contribute to the perpetuation of social hierarchies and dominance in the EAL classroom. To counter this potential dominance, I suggest that educators practice obedience to truth (Palmer, 1993) and adopt an attitude of moral humility (Young, 1997). I conclude with spiritual, pedagogical, and research applications to English language teaching and the Christian faith, showing how these applications derive from my identity negotiations.

Key words: Christianity and scholarship, identity, privilege, reflexivity, reflection

Introduction
During my coursework days as Ph.D. student, I registered in “Critical and Sociocultural Approaches to Educational Research,” a course taught by a First Nations, feminist scholar, who had a profound impact on me as an emerging scholar. Eight of the students in the class were female. One was male – me. In the first class, the professor shared a quote from Chinese-American documentary filmmaker Lee Mun Wah (2003): “Notice when you are asleep and why.” It got my attention. As I engaged with course readings, classroom discussions, and worked on projects with my classmates, I began to see that indeed I had been asleep, unaware of the extent of my power and privilege as a White, English-speaking, male, scholar-in-the-making.

In fact, on one occasion my privileged position was publically pointed out to me by one of my classmates, who came to observe me facilitate an English conversation workshop for a field notes class assignment. In presenting the results to our cohort the following week, her
observations turned into a critical report on me and my power in that classroom. Her critique included, for example, my central position at the front of the classroom; how the all female attendees sat in a semi-circle directly in front of me; how I used my institutional authority to take and retain the initiative in how the session was taking shape; and how I regulated the interactional floor. By confining much of the interaction between each student and myself I had unknowingly created a potentially inhospitable space where opportunities for students to interact with each other were limited. Inspired and humbled by what for me was a critical turn in my Ph.D. journey, I decided to take action. The major paper required that we choose an artefact and relate it to the course content in order to demonstrate our growing capacity to critically engage with multiple forms of literacies. I chose me, represented below in a family portrait from the early sixties. I’m the little White kid in the middle, trying, it seems, to express something profound.

Fifty years later, here I am exploring something deeply personal and profound, namely, who I am or who I might become (Hall, 1996). I have chosen this artefact since it represents the cards that I have been dealt in life, the things I had no control over, but which God had “prepared before I’d even lived one day”¹ (Psalm 139:16) – that I would be a White lad of German/British heritage born in the 60’s to a Canadian, middle-class, English-speaking Lutheran family and raised and educated in Vancouver, British Columbia. I refer to this societal placement of mine as

¹ In this paper, I use The Message translation for all bible verses to match the overall style and tone of this article.
my acquired identities (my unearned societal placement). Not visible in the photograph are my ascribed identities – my spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, experiences, and personality.

In this article, I explore my privileged identities as a White, male researcher and English language educator in the context of relevant critical literature. My purpose is to understand how my privileged identities granted by race, gender, and language interact with my identity as an evangelical Christian and how these identities impact my research and practice in working with multilingual transnational youth in a Canadian university setting. I do this by borrowing from the literature on cultural studies to develop my position on identity, from postcolonial scholarship to address power implications, and from the Bible and theology to consider my spiritual side. In the first section, I describe the critical turn in my Ph.D. journey – the radical realization of my White privilege. Using the family portrait above as the starting point for this exploration, I probe my acquired and ascribed identities. I emphasize the asymmetrical nature of relationships and how this asymmetry may potentially contribute to the perpetuation of social hierarchies and dominance in the classroom. I then refer to the concepts obedience to truth (Palmer, 1993) and moral humility (Young, 1997), illustrating how these concepts offer educators a practical alternative from the domineering mentality of objectivism towards the communal and relational nature of learning. I conclude with spiritual, pedagogical, and research applications to English language teaching and the Christian faith, showing how these applications derive from my identity negotiations.

**Reflexivity in Qualitative Inquiry**

The qualitative researcher is the principal research instrument – there is “no escape from the self” (Roulston, 2010, p. 127). Finlay and Gough (2003) make the point that reflexivity involves “critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers’ social background, assumptions, positioning, and behaviour impact on the research process” (p. ix). Although reflecting on one’s subjectivities may be perceived by some as academic “navel-gazing” (Finlay, 2002, p. 215), I believe it is important to be transparent about my identities since they are the lens by which I not only see the world and my place in it, but how I engage in scholarship. I am the key instrument in my research. I make the decisions about what and who to study, what research questions to ask, the theoretical frameworks on which to hang my study, what methods I use to collect data, and how I will analyze, interpret, and publish that data. These decisions are
all filtered though *me*. However, I am also aware that reflexivity is not just about me. It also involves other people gazing at my navel. How my socially situated identities as a White male university employee and researcher (and their association with English language education, colonialism, Whiteness, privilege, and power) get read as, to borrow a term from Morgan (2004) via Simon (1995), “image text” potentially impacts my identities as an emerging scholar.

Like all scholars, I am influenced by certain beliefs that motivate me to teach, research, and engage in dialogue with other scholars. Influencing this construction of knowledge is my background beliefs and faith convictions. According to Christian scholar Edlin (2009), “All knowledge is based upon faith convictions. A person believes and therefore they know – not the other way around” (p. 217). My faith convictions are based on the transforming power of truth as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is, I seek to affirm a “transcendent center of truth, a center that lies beyond our contriving, that enters history through lives of those who profess it and brings us into community with each other and the world” (Palmer, 1993, p. 113). These convictions motivate me to embrace the virtues of humility and faith in my scholarship and practice and create spaces where *obedience to truth* – “careful listening and responding in a conversation of free selves” (Palmer, 1993, p. 65) – can be practiced as a way to challenge and overcome behaviours and attitudes that work against the ethical treatment of others. By adopting the practice of obedience to truth, I aim to create learning spaces where knowledge is not objectified, but communally constructed within a setting of respect, non-judgement, hospitality, and openness. Thus, I see myself as both an evangelical Christian English language educator and a critical practitioner. Having invoked these identities, I realize that I bear the inconvenient burden of having to deal with much historical “baggage” directed towards evangelical Christian English teachers that has made dialogue with critical practitioners difficult (see Canagarajah, 2009). But despite these obstacles, I am hopeful that through my faith, scholarship, and commitment to *obedience to truth* my research can dismantle these barriers to interchange and open up dialogue.

**Acquired Identities**

As I engage in this analysis of me, I am reminded that difference is a key determiner of identity, and that “identity can be understood in a meaningful way only by understanding others and by recognizing and highlighting one’s differences in relation to others” (Kumaravadivelu,
2008, p. 145). To put it another way, I am who I am because of who I am not: I am not an immigrant. I am from here. I am not ESL. I speak English. I am not homeless. I have a home and a job. I am not working class. I am middle-class. I am not a person of colour. I am White. I am an evangelical Christian. I am not gay. I am straight. I am not a single parent. I am married. I am not an aboriginal. I am of European descent. Thus, my privileged identities (in italics) come into focus when viewed through this type of binary lens. To put it another way, as a White middle-class male, my “societal placement, . . . experiences and . . . opportunities are fully understandable only in relation to the social conditions and oppressions of those located outside that locus of privilege” (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2007, p. 83).

(A)symmetrical Reciprocity

Yale professor Seyla Benhabib’s (1992) book argues that moral respect involves a symmetrical relation of reversibility. That is, Benhabib claims that in order to understand the perspective of others we must reverse positions with them, imagining ourselves in their place. Clearly, this attempt to imagine “walking a mile in another’s shoes” can sometimes be a useful way to foster understanding and respect. However, given my White, privileged identity, a symmetrical relation of reversibility is problematic. I don’t know what it’s like to be called ESL. Or what it feels like to be exoticized for being Eurasian and having to put up with people constantly comparing you to Keanu Reeves (i heard he was half asian. is that true or not?). Or how it feels to have people tell you that you never should have been born. Or how frustrated and angry it makes you feel when the bad guys in the cartoons on TV always speak in an accent like yours. Or to how it feels to be made fun of for having a “strange” (read: foreign and not from here) name. Or what it feels like to be called a credit to your race because you are an accomplished person of color. Or how it must feel when your rich linguistic repertoires are devalued by a well-intentioned (White) ESL teacher who asks you to write an essay on “my hometown” or “a holiday in your country,” even though you’ve spent more than half of your life in North America (Harklau, 1999).

I can’t relate to you when you tell me that you have no choice but to essentialize yourself as a cultural other when assigned an “inspirational” personal narrative in your college

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composition class in order to appease the teacher and get a good grade (Harklau, 1999). Or how it makes you constantly wonder if your classmates in your English class think you’re a jihadist because you wear a hijab. Or the shame and frustration of being followed around by sales people in a store or stopped by the police simply because of the color of your skin. Or how it feels to give up most of your feathers?4 (King, 2003). To have White people tell you that you have no value, that you don’t matter. Or how it feels to know that you and your people will no longer exist as “status Indians” in Canada in 50-70 years from now (King, 2003). I could go on. But I’ll stop. I will never be able to understand. I will never be able to know what it is like to be you.

What makes it impossible for me to see you through your eyes is that we have very different life histories and social positions, a notion feminist scholar Young (1997) refers to in her critique of Benhabib’s (1992) position as asymmetrical reciprocity. What this means is that I cannot adopt your point of view because I don’t share your history, your experiences, or your beliefs: we are “strange to one another” (Young, 1997, p. 45). This idea that good things might come of reversing positions with someone is made more complicated (read: impossible) when the relationship involves unequal relations of power. According to Young (1997),

…when people obey the injunction to put themselves in the position of others, they too often put themselves, with their own particular experiences and privileges, in the positions they see the others. When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other’s situation. (p. 48)

The potential for the imposition of social hierarchies and dominance on the less powerful – a notion Young (1997) refers to as “falsifying projection” (p. 45) – can be especially problematic in the schools, where linguistic practices are controlled and legitimatized (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001). English as an additional language (EAL) students tend to lack the economic and cultural capital that is controlled by (Western trained) teachers, as agents of the dominant culture. When English language teachers unconsciously make knowledge of the dominant culture a prerequisite for school success, they may inadvertently exercise symbolic violence (see Jones, 1991, for an in-depth ethnographic account of inequality in a New Zealand secondary school).

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4 King (2003) tells the First Nations story of Coyote and the Ducks. In it, the white colonizers (Coyote) force the native people (the Ducks) to give up their best feathers (their best land via treaties) in order to keep some of their feathers.
Harklau (1999) argues that eliminating such practices is impossible since they are grounded in “cultural discourses regarding immigration, collegiate socialization, and diversity and in the inevitable human tendency to construct world relational categories and representations in order to make sense of the world” (p. 276). Similarly, Glass (2004) states, “it is impossible for anyone born into and raised within our society not to in some degree inhabit, and be inhabited by, the dominant ideologies” (p. 21). As a result, like Harklau (1999), Glass argues that “each of us is inextricably implicated in both what we struggle against and what we struggle for” by virtue of the fact that we are born and raised in a society where “[R]acism, sexism, classism, linguicism, and ability-ism mark our habits of the mind and body” (p. 21). Further, deCastell (2004), in situating the argument both Harklau and Glass make in a historical context, argues that it is impossible for classrooms to be reorganized as places where education is conducted as a practice of freedom, since historically they are spaces of oppression:

How can we forget that the uniqueness of classrooms, historically, is that they have effectively accomplished and authorized social relations of hierarchy and subordination, that they have provided a public space for the exercise of power and the legitimatizing of racism and oppression in the name of truth, rationality and justice? (p. 53)

However, rather than accept the pessimistic position that schools are only about reproducing relations of power and teachers are somehow to blame, it’s important to remember that people “rarely act out of bad faith” and “do what makes sense to [them]” (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001, p. 11). We (myself included) were taught, supported, required – sometimes demanded – by the institutions we work for to do the kind of work we do. But rather than letting critical theories paralyze us, or playing it safe and accepting the status quo, our students would be better served if we looked for “gaps, interstices, to invent ‘new ways of doing things’” (Stroud & Wee, 2007, p. 34) using the power we have been institutionally invested with, which can potentially lead to change through the contestations of established conventions.

In terms of how a Christian educator might reorganize classrooms as places where education is conducted as a practice of freedom rather than oppression, I return to Palmer’s (1993) practice of obedience to truth and introduce a similar concept advanced by Young (1997) – moral humility. Palmer (1993) states that the spiritual practice of obedience to truth involves “careful listening and responding in a conversation of free selves” (p. 65). This practice requires an epistemological and ontological shift in how we view knowledge and our roles as researchers.
and practitioners in the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Rather than assuming the truth is “out there” to be objectified, categorized, codified, and generalized to provide explanations about the social world, *obedience to truth* treats learning as communal and co-constructed, taking place within a context of respect, non-judgement, hospitality, and openness. Young’s (1997) concept of *moral humility* closely resonates with the practice of *obedience to truth*. Moral humility involves adopting an attitude in which we lay aside of our judgements, prejudices, and egos and embrace compassion and openness in relating to others. Moral humility, Young argues, acknowledges that all of our relationships are best seen as *asymmetrical* because of the different ways we are historically and socially constructed. I would suggest that given the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in our classrooms, nurturing an attitude of moral humility, in which we wait to learn from others by listening, is compelling. According to Young (1997):

> In moral humility one starts with the assumption that one cannot see things from the other person’s perspective and waits to learn by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences. If I assume that there are aspects of where the other person is coming from that I do not understand, I will be more likely to be open to listening to the specific expression of their experience, interests, and claims. Indeed, one might say that this is what listening to a person means. (p. 49)

The practice of obedience to truth and moral humility offers educators alternatives to learning that emphasizes freedom. By taking up these practices, educators can build *communities of truth*, which “bridge[s] the gap between learning and living by attending to the living reality of the learning situation” (Palmer, 1993, pp. 88-89). This is certainly a hopeful proposition. In the following section, I return to my analysis of me with a focus on my acquired identities and illustrate how I attempt to create *communities of truth* in my workplace and research.

**Ascribed Identities**

“It’s not about you.” These words, which begin Chapter One of pastor Rick Warren’s (2002) *Purpose Driven Life*, profoundly sum up how we as believers ought to live – serving others. The bible has much to say about how to serve others. The Apostle Peter instructs us to be “generous with the different things God gave [us], passing them around so all get in on it” (1 Peter 4:10). Likewise, in his letter to the church at Ephesus the Apostle Paul commands us to
join “Christ Jesus . . . in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.” The Lord Himself commands us to invest His resources wisely to serve others (Matthew 25:14-30). God has given me many gifts. A few things that come to mind include: the gift of teaching. When I am in the classroom, I am in my element. I am university educated. I am fluent in Japanese. I lead worship at my Japanese-speaking church. I like to think I’m good at writing. I love to design and create new things. I enjoy mentoring students. I have a sense of humour. A critical mind. A passion to help those less fortunate. I have thirty-three (and counting) years of teaching experience. I am a verbal hygienist (Cameron, 1995). (Aren’t we all?). I am passionate about social justice.

**Spiritual, Pedagogical, and Research Applications**

Given what I have outlined thus far, I would now like to illustrate how my identity negotiations and faith convictions inform my research and teaching practices. My Ph.D. research focuses on multilingual transnational youth referred to in the literature as *Generation 1.5* (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). Although variously defined, Generation 1.5 typically refers to students whose education has been interrupted (in some cases more than once) during their formal K-12 schooling. Despite the fact that Generation 1.5 has become a permanent part of the professional lexicon of TESOL, an organization that claims “widespread sensitivity to cultural diversity” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 53), the term remains under-theorized and deployed in ways that mask the diversity of students it represents. This failure to recognize and appreciate the linguistic diversity transnational multilingual students bring to the classroom can have tangible consequences on students’ classroom behaviour and/or may limit their opportunities for English language learning (Harklau, 1999).

Much of the literature in College and Composition Studies, where Generation 1.5 found a home between 1999-2009, paid more attention to finding fault than appreciating their strengths as multilingual learners. Generation 1.5 have been discursively constructed as, for example, “stuck in a sort of interlanguage” (Blanton, 1999, p. 124); in need of special pedagogies to help them “sort[ing] out their languages as cultures . . .” (Johns, 1999, p. 159); “caught in the middle – between languages, cultures, and classrooms” (Oudenhoven, 2006, p. 243); having fossilized language errors” (Blumenthal, 2002, p. 49); “not even know[ing] the [English] language” (Hinkle, 2006, p. 40); and even compared to “a version of software, not quite version 2, but
almost there, still in the process of being upgraded, stuck awkwardly in the middle” (Ferris, Kennedy, & Senna, 2004, p. 2). The problem with these representations is that they are based on an institutionalized objectivist understanding of knowing that “assumes a sharp distinction between the knower and the known” (Palmer, 1993, p. 27). As such, these representations may contribute to the marginalization of Generation 1.5 students by silencing their voices:

The oppression of cultural minorities by a white, middle-class, male version of “truth” comes in part from the domineering mentality of objectivism. Once the objectivist has “the facts”, no listening is required, no other points of view are needed. The facts, after all, are the facts. All that remains is to bring others into conformity with objective “truth.” (Palmer, 1993, p. 68)

I aim to problematize this concept of in-between-ness in educational discourses around the term Generation 1.5 and illustrate how this deficit-type representation might be transformed. Unlike research carried out in the positivist tradition, which seeks to reveal or discover “truth” about the social world by remaining distant from its subjects, I wish to contribute new forms of knowledge that do not originate “in curiosity and control but in compassion, or love – a source celebrated not in our intellectual tradition but in our spiritual heritage” (Palmer, 1993, p. 8). One of the practical ways I attempt to create communities of truth in my research is by theorizing my research interviews through a social constructionist lens, adopting a research interview as social practice orientation (Talmy, 2010) that recognizes data as situated representations co-constructed through interaction with the interviewer (Holstein, & Gubrium, 2004). In contrast to the research interview as research instrument (Talmy, 2010), an approach motivated by curiosity and control common among neo-positivists, constructionists treat the interview as social practice, in which interviewer and interviewee draw on their “stock of knowledge” (Schutz, 1967) to orient to research topics and make sense of one another’s utterances and actions in the local and occasioned accomplishment of the interview. This mutually created knowledge is not simply a representation of the world “out there” but is “part of the world they describe” (Hammersly & Atkinson, 1998, p. 107). Data are treated not as reality reports but as accounts, which involve participants “in the generation of versions of social reality” and the “local production […] of versions of a moral order” (Baker, 2004, p. 163). Using the unique time and place God has appointed for me (Acts 17: 26), I wish to advocate for Generation 1.5 students and understand my own role as the key research instrument in the communal construction of this knowledge (see Mossman, 2012).
My desire to study multilingual transnational youth and advocate for the EAL students in my workplace is motivated in part by my own liminality in identity positioning in social life, which derives from the fact that I am married to a Japanese landed immigrant and a father of two interracial bilingual sons. I live in what could also be understood as a third space (Bhabha, 1994) somewhere between Japan and the West. At home, my wife and I use a mixture of Japanese and English, choosing the best word for the context from our bilingual repertoires. Our spiritual lives are also embedded in-between translations of English and Japanese. We have been members of a Japanese Baptist church for more than twenty years, where I have served as an English-Japanese interpreter and worship leader. Our children, who have bicultural names, are also a constant witness to the linguistic and cultural in-between-ness in my life. By giving our children binomial names (Japanese first, English second) our intention was to give our boys a bi-cultural grounding as a way “to carry our attitudes and desires regarding their languages, cultures, and identities” (Marshall & Mossman, 2010, p. 3). Thus, being/becoming in the middle is a constant but continually shifting reality in my life.

At the university where I work and study, the number of students for whom English is a second or an additional language has been steadily increasing, especially over the past decade. It has been estimated that more than 40% of students on campus grew up speaking a language other than English. This linguistic diversity has created opportunities and challenges. As coordinator of EAL Services in the Writing Centre, I have implemented several new services designed to help students connect with the university community and feel more confident in their spoken English. One of these services is the tremendously popular Conversation Partners Program. The program is designed to give students whose first language is not English an opportunity to practice their conversational English with other local English-speaking student volunteers in a friendly, supportive environment. The goals are to help students improve their command of English, strengthen discussion skills, broaden their level of verbal self-expression, and build friendships across the university community. In looking for ways to expand our services beyond writing and learning support to address the economic and social conditions of learning English, I initiated the Conversation Partners Program in 2010. I began with nine student volunteers. I now have 47 student volunteers meeting with 72 student clients every week. Each semester the demand for this service exceeds supply, as the spots fill up very quickly. When registering on-line, students are
asked why they would like to be involved in this program. I include one student’s response here, which highlights Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of legitimate versus grammatical competence:

Hello, This is my first year in Vancouver and also Canada, I feel very bad when I discuss with my classmates in the class due to my boring English, sometimes I have a lot of good ideas but I cannot speak them out. And I also face some kinds of social problem, nobody want to make friend with bad English. So, I really wanna practice my English as soon as possible, it’s so important to my study, living, or working in the future. Please help me ;-) 

This student’s predicament is not unusual at the university. Many EAL students struggle to be relevant, to fit in, and be listened to. In this student’s account, a lack of good ideas doesn’t seem to be the issue, but rather, the student highlights the social conditions he faces that seem to prevent him from speaking out and being taken seriously. Bourdieu’s (1991) comments below puts this student’s dilemma into perspective:

The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be listened to, likely to be recognized as acceptable in all situations in which there is occasion to speak. Here again, social acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality. Students lacking the legitimate competence are de facto excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence. (p. 57)

It appears that this student is denied the right to impose reception, not because he is grammatically deficient or because he lacks good ideas, but because his classmates do not consider him as what Bourdieu refers to as a “legitimate” speaker of English, something this student seems to have painfully realized: “nobody want to make friend with bad English.” The result is that he feels excluded from “social domains” (“I also face some kinds of social problem . . .”) because he lacks the competence “to produce sentences is that are likely to be listened to” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 57). That as many as 80 plus students are on the waitlist each semester for a Conversation Partner speaks powerfully to the role social conditions play in their ability, or lack thereof, to acquire linguistic competence at school, and most likely in the community.

I encourage the peers to create learning spaces with their clients characterized by openness, boundaries, and hospitality (Palmer, 1993). By committing to meet once a week for an hour of conversation, both peer and client are forced (in a good way) to unclutter, unpack, unwind, and talk openly and vulnerably without fear of judgement. Like any new relationship,
especially where a power imbalance exists (e.g., language, status, age) fear and anxiety of the unknown is not uncommon. Although some of the peers I recruit are linguistics majors and/or have their TESOL certification, the peers are from diverse linguistic, cultural, and discipline-specific backgrounds. Most do not have experience working with EAL students. Although they receive on-going training, many feel a sense of fear and anxiety (at least initially) when working with their clients, who may expect them to be experts in pronunciation or grammar. However, I encourage the peers to embrace this anxiety as “an adventure into the unknown” (Palmer, 1993, p. 72). Many peers have reported on awkward moments of silence during their meetings. I encourage them not to fill this silence with clutter – with more words – but help embrace the silence, allowing it to untie knots of confusion and provide new clarity (Palmer, 1993). In these ways, as a professor of the truth, I hope I am helping the peers and their clients understand the key role relationships play in unlocking the knowledge of reality.

In terms of the practical ways the student volunteers are helping their clients, some discuss local issues from local newspapers; others incorporate speaking tasks which highlight “global cultural consciousness” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008), a concept I teach the volunteers in our training sessions (see Kumaravadivelu’s, 2008, chapter 10 for some practical suggestions for raising EAL students’ global cultural awareness via reflective tasks and exploratory projects). Others use episodes from TV sitcoms to help their clients develop cultural literacy skills, such as learning about North American customs and expanding their repertoire of vocabulary, idioms, and slang. Other peers have taken their clients to the art gallery on campus to talk about art, or to the supermarket for a lesson on fruit and vegetables. Some clients just want to maximize their time to talk, and so the volunteers do a lot of “careful listening and responding in a conversation of free selves” (Palmer, 1993, p. 65). However, the clients are not the only ones who benefit from this service. The student volunteers also benefit immensely; they learn about, for example, their clients’ experiences, customs, and traditions in their countries of birth, their hobbies, and their research (many graduate students are in the program, whereas the student volunteers are mostly undergraduates). In this way, the Conversation Partners Program is like a community of truth, which “bridge[s] the gap between learning and living by attending to the living reality of the learning situation” (Palmer, 1993, pp. 88-89).
Conclusion

It is useful for Christian English language educators to understand how to negotiate their identities for effective teaching and scholarship. To this end, in this article I have turned the critical lens on me, examining who I am becoming as an evangelical Christian English language educator and researcher. Highlighting my faith conviction, acquired and ascribed identities, I have been bold and honest in arguing how my privileged identities can be negotiated effectively for constructive teaching and research work. Through this process, I realized how my Whiteness affords me membership in number of privileged social identity groups, while denying the same resources and privileges to those who are not like me. Having been born into White cultural discourses and dominant ideologies, and trained and supported by the Western institutions that came before me, I must be vigilant not to remain silent and comfortable with existing structures, but work to create spaces where obedience to truth is practiced to empower those whose voices are often silenced. Through my scholarship and practice, I wish to contribute to truthful knowing, that is, knowledge that is communal and relational, dynamically co-created between knower and known, “whose primary bond is not of logic, but of love” (Palmer, 1993, p. 32).

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References


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