International Journal of Christianity & English Language Teaching

A refereed, online journal on Christianity and ELT

Volume 9 Article 5

10-2022

Collaboration and Reconciliation in English Language Teaching? Personal Reflections on Critical Incidents

Michael Lessard-Clouston

International Journal of Christianity and English Language Teaching, Volume 9 (2022), pp. 35–53.
ISSN 2334-1866 (online)

Collaboration and Reconciliation in English Language Teaching? Personal Reflections on Critical Incidents

Michael Lessard-Clouston
Biola University
La Mirada, California, U.S.A.

Abstract
Collaboration is largely assumed in English language teaching, while reconciliation is often a goal in this discipline. This article briefly introduces frameworks to help us think about collaboration and to understand reconciliation. Next it discusses three critical incidents in EFL teaching and ESL teacher education from personal experience in China, Indonesia, and the United States. Using the literature and frameworks outlined, the article reflects on cultural and other challenges, notes helps and hindrances to collaboration, and possible ways such issues were or might have been reconciled in the three incidents.

Key words: collaboration, cooperative principle, critical incidents, EFL, intercultural communication, politeness theory, reconciliation

Introduction

English as a second and foreign language (ESL/EFL) teachers and teacher educators are not only focused on English language teaching (ELT). *People* are central to teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). At the heart of our work in classrooms and in our relationships with those 'speakers' is communication – helping others learn to use English to communicate both information and their personal and professional aspirations, insights, questions, and thoughts in spoken and written exchanges. As such, ELT essentially assumes collaboration. Yet both students and teachers often aim for reconciliation, too: we hope for friendly relations as we collaborate and communicate, and where there is or has been tension, we hope for restoration in relationships, particularly as Christian teachers and teacher educators.

Since relationships, and both collaboration and reconciliation, are very personal, this article is the product of some personal reflections on more than 35 years of experience teaching ESL/EFL and being involved in teacher education in a variety of contexts and schools in my native Canada, as well as in China, Indonesia, Japan, and the United States. Collaboration and reconciliation can and do take place on various levels, but for this essay my focus is primarily on the personal and interpersonal, between teachers or teacher educators and their students,

colleagues, administrators, and others. Accordingly, while relevant work at institutional, policy, and national or international levels is also valuable, that is not my emphasis here.

Like Dormer and Woelk (2018), I believe that ELT can be used to pursue peace and to transform relationships, and thus enhance collaboration and reconciliation. In his influential applied theology for Christians in ELT, Snow (2001) states, "As ambassadors of the church, one important task of [Christian English teachers] is to live among the people they serve in a way that will build toward reconciliation between Western Christians and people of different cultures, and also between humankind and God" (p. 63). I agree with Snow that Christians in TESOL have an important role in building relationships and toward reconciliation between different types of people from different cultures, and that our lives and how we live them can and should serve to point people to the God we love and serve. However, it seems that like most people Christians may be better at describing ideals than in dealing with the complexities and often messy realities of actual cross-cultural relationships. So I do not offer easy explanations but instead hope that reflections on some of my experiences will help others in their ELT work.

This article first outlines some ways for teachers and teacher educators to think about collaboration and reconciliation. Next it discusses three critical incidents in EFL teaching and ESL teacher education, in order to consider cultural and other challenges, helps and potential hindrances to collaboration, conflict, and reconciliation, and possible ways that things were or might have been reconciled in each of the three situations. Critical incidents are used because they allow us to consider specific examples in some detail, and in intercultural communication such incidents often help shed light on how different norms in communication and interaction seem to be at the root of particular problems (see, e.g., DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2016).

The goal of this article is to assist readers in reflecting on collaboration and reconciliation in ELT. Accordingly, this is <u>not</u> a "how to" or "how I have it all together" essay. Instead, as a firm believer in collaboration and working together, as well as in the importance and power of reconciliation, I hope sharing some of my personal experience and reflections will assist others in continuing the valuable work of collaborating and working for reconciliation, while also recognizing that at times there may be limitations to such collaboration and reconciliation.

Collaboration and Communication

While ESL and EFL education often centres on English grammar and vocabulary, much

of English language teaching revolves around communication, and helping others learn to communicate their messages in and through English. Such communication may be oral – in person, face-to-face, over the phone, virtual, or even in recorded video via TikTok or YouTube. Or such collaboration and communication may be carried out through writing – in print articles or books, or through technology, including via texts, emails, blogs, letters, and even tweets. Yet often spoken and written communication connect. For example, someone might post an oral explanation on YouTube, and those who watch and listen to it may respond by writing in the Comments section. Communication today, in speech or writing, is often multimodal. Both speakers and writers assume collaboration – that people they speak with or listen to, and others whose work they read or who will read what they write, will actually work with them in order to communicate and understand different oral or written messages. Two approaches to analyzing communication may be helpful as we think about collaboration and reconciliation.

First, in linguistics and pragmatics, one useful framework for thinking about communication is the cooperative principle introduced by Grice (1989). I will consider this principle in regards to communication in general, but Grice's points relate to a current, specific conversation (or communication) at hand. In short, Grice (1989) explained that the cooperative principle builds upon four underlying categories which he believed reflect generally agreed upon rules of conduct concerning quantity, quality, relation, and manner.

The first category addressing *quantity* summarizes two related points, that one's contribution should be as informative as required, while not providing more information than necessary (Grice, 1989, p. 26). So too little information in interaction may cause one to come across as too direct or even abrupt, while too much detail can appear lengthy or verbose. The second category concerns *quality*, focusing on truthfulness. Accordingly, you should not say what you believe to be false, or something for which there is inadequate evidence, since you might then be labelled untrustworthy if a conversation partner learns you shared something untrue (Grice, 1989, p. 26). The third underlying category deals with *relation* and is concisely, "Be relevant" (Grice, 1989, p. 27). Thus what we say should be related to what has previously been shared and be relevant to the conversation at hand. If your contribution is not on topic, an interlocutor might lose interest or believe you are wasting time. The fourth and final category focuses less on content, the 'what' that is shared, and turns to *manner*, or 'how' something is said. Four sub-points for manner relate to avoiding obscurity and ambiguity while being brief

and orderly (Grice, 1989, p. 27). Siegel, Broadbridge, and Firth (2019) summarize the fourth maxim: "be brief, orderly, and as clear as possible" to experience communicative success (p. 34).

A second framework in pragmatics to consider comes from Brown and Levinson (1987) and addresses politeness theory. Expanding on previous research, Brown and Levinson (1987) assumed that all people have "face," and that in interactions with others they have face wants and needs. In particular, people want to experience positive face, where they are appreciated in social contexts, experience approval, and are able to maintain a positive image. Yet at the same time people also require negative face, which offers them the freedom to make their own decisions and to avoid impositions on them by others. Common examples of positive face in interactions include when we give someone a compliment, or when someone at a lecture or conference introduces a speaker by appreciating and outlining their individual achievements. Examples of negative face in interactions include not interrupting someone (letting them speak freely without being interrupted by others) or in being clear that we are not imposing on or taking advantage of someone with whom we are communicating. Experiencing and offering others both positive and negative face in our communications appear to assist in collaboration and reconciliation.

While both the cooperative principle and politeness theory are concerned with spoken conversations, I believe there may be similar dynamics at play in written communication. For example, in a recent study by Usó-Juan (2022) students were taught about writing emails to faculty, who noted that before the instruction the students had a "lack of awareness of the need to respect the principle of negative politeness" (p. 234). Yet afterwards, "post-instructional data revealed a move from preference of directness to conventionally indirectness which involves less potentially face-threatening effects (Brown & Levinson, 1987)" (Usó-Juan, 2022, p. 234). So awareness of politeness theory may help people communicate in speech and in writing.

Another point, for my purposes, is to note that some authors critique the cooperative principle and politeness theory as too Western. In referring to these two frameworks, Wierzbicka (2003) states, for example, that "the very choice of these particular parameters reflects clearly the authors' culture-specific (anglocentric) perspective" (p. 68). Yet despite such criticisms, other authors such as Kiyama, Tamaoka, and Takiura (2012) determined that Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory did in fact apply in the non-Western context of Japan. Perhaps, as with all communication, we should be conscious of the context and the people involved[1].

[1] Two of the incidents below took place in non-Western Asian contexts, not dissimilar to the Japanese

Collaboration and Reconciliation

Using Dormer and Woelk's (2018) definition of reconciliation as the "restoration of relationships, particularly where there has been a history of harm, conflict, or misunderstanding" (p. 3), there are many possible ways that teachers and students, as well as others in various educational contexts, may harm others, verbally or otherwise. We might also create conflict of different types, even unknowingly, or we might generate misunderstandings, even for ourselves. In an article on reconciliation in ESL/EFL classes, Westwood (2014) states, for example,

> Particularly in the English as a second language . . . classroom, it is highly unrealistic to expect perfect peace and harmony among diverse peoples bringing unique perspectives, especially considering misunderstandings that can occur simply as a result of the unfamiliarity with the target language. Offenses are inevitable. (p. 83)

Westwood refers to an example that Smith (2007) mentions of one student intentionally insulting another student in class, yet Westwood (2014) notes that teachers and students can also offend one another. As teachers we should be aware that we might not only take offense, but we can also offend our students, their families, or others we work with closely.

In introducing their 40 dilemmas in TESOL through critical incidents, Messerschmitt and Hafernik (2009) declare, "Increased cultural understanding can help prevent or resolve negative conflicts or turn them into constructive ones" (p. xvi). They go on to note that, "Tensions and conflicts – whether they be interpersonal, intercultural, or cross-cultural – are daily occurrences" in ELT (p. xvi). Messerschmitt and Hafernik (2009) suggest that an "overarching principle is to strive to be professional and humane in all our interactions with others" (p. xvi), and they offer several suggestions for dealing with difficult situations, from annoyance to extreme conflict:

> • recognize that conflict (i.e., tensions and problems) is inevitable and simply part of life.
> • recognize that conflict can be constructive and is not always negative.
> • recognize that individuals have different strategies for dealing with conflict, with some of these strategies influenced by culture, personality, and upbringing . . .
> • recognize that communication choices (i.e., verbal and non-verbal) are important. For example, in some cultures, refusing a request with a No threatens the face of others . . .
> • help others save face . . .
> • recognize that with conflicts, people generally have strong feelings (such as anger,

context addressed by Kiyama, Tamaoka, and Takiura (2012). Despite Wierzbicka's (2003) criticism of the cooperative principle and politeness theory as too "anglocentric," the EFL students in China and Indonesia were studying English in cultures where face is a recognized cultural value. Accordingly, I believe it may be helpful to consider these frameworks as we reflect on those critical incidents. Readers interested in considering Grice's work in relation to data analysis in research will find Chenail and Chenail's (2009) article of interest.

> depression, and despair) . . .
> • recognize that an individual does not operate in a vacuum, but within a broader social context. (adapted from Messerschmitt & Hafernik, 2009, p. xvii)

Messerschmitt and Hafernik (2009) recognize our human interconnectedness, but suggest that "within the broader community, the individual is crucial to dealing with conflicts and in effecting change" (p. xviii). For teachers working with classes and students, these are key reminders.

In their Christian perspective on intercultural communication, Moreau, Campbell, and Greener (2014) observe that "people act out their values of honor and face through the communication means that they value" (p. 200). Honour-oriented cultures, they suggest, tend to emphasize "collectivism, large power distance, and high-context communication" (p. 200), which are clearly at odds with much of Western culture (which is more justice-oriented), where individualism, egalitarianism, and direct or low-context communication are more common. Moreau, Campbell, and Greener (2014) also include a useful chapter on conflict and culture. They rightly state, "Assuming that conflict arises from the sin of another person rather than from differences in cultural values and resolution style may sabotage the conflict-resolution process from the beginning" (p. 332). These authors note the importance of cultural values, and they introduce key differences in communication and conflict styles between individualism versus collectivism, large versus small power distance cultures, high verses low context communication, and "the importance of saving face" (p. 338). Turning to conflict resolution, Moreau, Campbell, and Greer (2014) offer an important insight, stating, "Westerners believe that people and problems can be separated, whereas people from Majority World cultures do not believe this is possible or desirable" (p. 341). Accordingly, Moreau, Campbell, and Greer (2014) argue that preserving relationships is key to long-term goals.

In her recent work, Abrams (2020) devotes a chapter to miscommunication, conflict, and intercultural communication and language pedagogy. Abrams notes that there are many different sources of conflict, which may be intrapersonal (within oneself) or interpersonal (with one or more other individuals), and intracultural (within one culture) or intercultural (between two or more cultural groups) (p. 295). Abrams helpfully outlines different characteristics of conflict styles, which may be more or less direct in communication and emotionally restrained or expressive (p. 299). In terms of conflict management, Abrams (2020) declares, "Conflict resolution is a complex process, but it can be an excellent opportunity for improving

communication skills and understanding, and strengthening relationships (Dai & Chen, 2017)" (p. 300). Collaboration and reconciliation are indeed opportunities for growth. Like Moreau, Campbell, and Greener (2014), Abrams (2020) states, "conflict does not have to end relationships" (p. 302). Perhaps most surprising for a secular book, Abrams advocates forgiveness: "Be willing to forgive; anger and grudges take up exorbitant amounts of energy, whereas forgiveness promotes cooperation and peaceful relationships" (p. 302).

With this background from relevant literature and research, we turn now to three critical incidents, where collaboration, conflict, and reconciliation (or a lack of it) might be considered.

Three Critical Incidents for Reflection

This section will outline three critical incidents, which Snow (2015) defines as an event that is "seen as important by one or more of its participants" (p. 287). As I hope to show, the critical incidents I will sketch briefly were important to me and to other people, and they are from my personal experiences in EFL teaching and in ESL teacher training in China, Indonesia, and the United States. While unique to me and only reflecting my experience, and therefore certainly not representative, I believe these types of critical incidents are not unusual in TESOL. Each critical incident involves either relationships common in ELT between students and teachers or between teacher educators and their colleagues and administrators. Following my description of and comments on each of the incidents, I will reflect on some helps and hindrances to collaboration and reconciliation for teachers of faith in ELT.

1) The Chair Incident

First is what I will call *the chair incident* from my first year teaching EFL at an educational college in northwest China. It was fall 1985, and I was teaching an oral skills EFL course for 40 experienced English teachers. Our class met twice a week, and my job was to help them improve their English listening and speaking skills. I was not given a textbook, but instead created thematic mimeographed materials for units on various topics that included some readings and dialogues, vocabulary lists, and various types of exercises, cultural notes, etc. I tried to use something of a communicative language teaching approach, where I often put students into pairs or small groups to discuss certain questions or to practise model dialogues, and so on.

On the day of this incident, my class was divided into pairs or small groups and was very loudly doing what I had asked them to do, but time was running out and I could not get students to stop talking and to return their attention to me, the teacher. I wanted to quickly debrief and remind students of their homework. I tried asking people to return their focus to me at the front of the classroom, but with no success. In perhaps a bit of exasperation I stood on a chair and clearly asked students to give me their attention. Immediately, the room went silent. A bit surprised at how quickly things went from very loud talking to absolute silence, I stepped down from the chair and pressed on, asking if any groups would like to comment on their small group discussions or make any observations about the task they had just been so actively engaged in. But there was absolute silence. Even my normally talkative and vocal students seemed to avoid my gaze when I looked toward them to see if they might share any insights with the class. My students were quiet, as I had hoped, but they no longer responded. That was quite different from usual. I do not know how long this went on, but it felt like forever. I briefly reminded the class of the homework for later that week and, mercifully, the bell rang to end that class period. Students quickly packed up and exited the classroom without talking or making eye contact, which was unusual, since often students lingered to ask questions. I saw the class monitor also avoided me. I said that I wanted to talk with him about that day's class, and he agreed but quickly left.

As Westwood (2014) declared, "Despite their best intentions, teachers will occasionally offend students, and students will inadvertently offend teachers" (p. 84). This incident clearly reflects the former situation, for I had apparently not only offended my students, I had insulted them. The problem was apparently that by standing on a chair in class I had displayed very unteacherlike behaviour. When the class monitor later came to see me with a couple of other students from the class, I was informed that the whole class was very upset by my class that day, and how I had stood above them on a chair rather than asking the monitor or someone else in the class to help get the students' attention.

When I learned this important information I felt terrible. In fact, I was horrified that I had upset the class. It simply never occurred to me that my students would be insulted by me trying to get their attention in that manner. In the meeting with the monitor and the others who had come to back him up and communicate the seriousness of my inappropriate behaviour, I was thankfully able to apologize and to ask them to forgive me. I think that my surprise at what they told me must have helped them see that it was perhaps something of an honest mistake. I shared

with the group that I realized something was wrong in class, but I did not understand what, so I really appreciated their bravery in coming to help me understand and set things right. But I also asked them what I should do in order to make things right again with the whole class. I did not want this situation to hinder everyone's learning and participation in class from now on, or to colour everyone's perspective on me as their teacher.

The monitor took the lead and said that just as I had apologized to the group, he felt I should do the same thing at the start of the next class. The group agreed that that was a great idea. I committed to do that, and indeed I did offer the whole class an apology at the start of my next class. While awkward, students' responsiveness greatly improved, and I made sure after that that I never stood on a chair again during a class in my two and a half years teaching in China. Thankfully, no one ever referred to the chair incident in a hurtful way again, though a few people did remind me of it sometimes when we talked about Chinese and Canadian cultural differences.

As Messerschmitt and Hafernik (2009) indicated was possible, from my perspective this was an incident with negative conflict that became constructive. I believe how the situation was handled actually improved my relationship with students, and reflected reconciliation. Thinking back to the cooperative principle, the meeting with the monitor and other students seemed to incorporate the right quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. In terms of manner, remembering that important conversation I believe it reflected the brevity, orderliness, and clarity that Siegel, Broadbridge, and Firth (2019) argue are needed for communicative success. As for politeness theory, I had apparently made my students lose face, and they worked with me to help me understand how we could all regain positive face while avoiding impositions (negative face), and we made decisions together in that conversation that restored our relationship.

Abrams (2020) declares, "Mistakes are opportunities for developing situationally appropriate knowledge regarding what works and what does not, so that we can better align our interests with others in future instances of conflict" (pp. 303–304). I would like to say clearly that the chair incident led to me offending my students in class, which impeded their ability to learn and to focus on our lesson. There were cultural and educational expectations about teacher behaviour in China that I was unaware of, and I broke one of the apparent taboos. To this day, I still do not fully understand why everyone was so upset, but I do understand that what I did was wrong and that I needed to make amends for it. Among the helps in resolving this situation are that I had a class monitor and students who were committed to communicating with me about my

offense, and they worked together to help me understand what I had done wrong and what I could do to set things right. People seemed to value their relationship with me and wished to give me the benefit of the doubt, and therefore they did not allow my offense to irreparably harm our relationships, individually or collectively, long term.

2) EFL Writing Plagiarism Incidents

The second reflection actually involves a series of *EFL writing plagiarism incidents* from the summer of 2010, when I was teaching three required undergraduate EFL writing skills classes at a private university outside of Jakarta, Indonesia. In multiple sections of the course, some students submitted writings that they had copied from the Internet for their homework assignments. It was obvious each time, as I could Google a sentence and find the source online.

Since this was not the first time I had faced plagiarism in ESL or EFL, I was not surprised, but the syllabus I had been given had a clear plagiarism policy that stated that work copied or plagiarized would be given zero, and that students could not make up for such work with resubmissions. Early on when this happened, I spoke with some Indonesian teachers and my Indonesian Dean, who affirmed that the syllabus policy was what I should do. I spoke to each of my three classes about the problem, reminded students of the syllabus policy, and shared that because I was there to help them improve their English writing, I needed them to actually practise the writing skills that our class and textbook focused on. I said that when they copied something written by someone else that did not help them improve their English writing, and it meant they would receive no credit for such work that they submitted. I reminded students that if they copied someone's writing from the Internet, I could easily locate it and provide proof that it was not their own written work. But several students continued to submit nicely typed required homework assignments that were plagiarized, and that I therefore had to give them zero on.

Discussing this ongoing situation with Indonesian colleagues confirmed that they were not surprised by plagiarism happening repeatedly. Some shared with me privately that they had had similar experiences when they were teaching that required course, which most of them taught regularly. As it happened, one reason I went there to teach that summer was that the President of the university was an American who had previously been the Provost where I worked before, and he invited foreign faculty to come teach for the summer to support the university in its desire to offer a Westernized approach to education. At a dinner shortly before I

left at the end of the summer semester, I mentioned the plagiarism situation to him as something that I felt badly about, because the students who continued to plagiarize would fail my course.

I then learned from the President that he had recently had a situation where a Dean had plagiarized, by presenting someone else's work as their own in a moving talk given to the administration that was particularly well received. Apparently they had used a moving story they had read but presented it as their own, and everyone was moved by it and talked about how impressive it was . . . until someone who had been in the audience shared with the President that they had read the same story in a book by a famous author, and noted that the Dean had not attributed the story to the original author when they had spoken. When the President later confronted the Dean about that information, they admitted that they did not know how to incorporate the perfect story into the talk without presenting it as their own, so they let others think it was their experience. At the dinner, the President informed me that he had asked the Dean to resign at the end of the summer semester. Interestingly, before I left I learned that it was actually a Dean who had given me advice about how to deal with plagiarism in my classes.

Considering these EFL writing plagiarism incidents in relation to the cooperative principle, in terms of quality I reminded my students about the course syllabus policy and explained that if they submitted something copied from the Internet or elsewhere that was plagiarism. I wonder if I should have done more. As for quality and relevance, I only addressed the classes and students involved. In terms of manner, I considered what I did clear and orderly, but perhaps I could have been clearer. Since teaching there, I have found articles on plagiarism in Indonesia that I was unaware of at the time. As for politeness theory, it surprised me that the offending students did not seem to be bothered by losing face by receiving zero grades, as the course syllabus indicated they would, and students exercised their right with negative face to have the freedom to make their own decisions. Moreau, Campbell, and Greener (2014) write, "Cultures that value saving the face of the other tend to see domination and confrontation as unnecessarily aggressive and humiliating" (pp. 339–340). In hindsight, I am grateful I did not make a big deal of the EFL writing plagiarism, either in or out of class.

Unfortunately, with these EFL writing plagiarism incidents I do not feel that there was the level of resolution I experienced with the chair incident in China. I completed the summer courses successfully but in each section of 30 I had at least two or three students who failed my class because they repeatedly plagiarized a significant number of writing assignments. My

Indonesian colleagues said that was normal, and par for the course. In previous situations where I faced plagiarism, students had changed their action, or even if they continued it, they recognized it was wrong and that it harmed them. None of those Indonesian students actually ever talked to me about it after I gave them numerous zero grades, and they knew they would have to repeat the course. Part of my discomfort about the EFL writing plagiarism incidents was that there seemed to be other important dynamics going on that I did not really understand. This is one of the challenges with situations of collaboration. Yet in this context helps were that there was a clear plagiarism policy, faculty who supported me in upholding it, and students who did not contest it.

A final comment on these EFL plagiarism incidents is that time is often necessary in order to develop understanding and to work toward better collaboration and reconciliation. But in this case I was hired to teach intensive EFL writing courses, and I was only on site for eight weeks. Perhaps if I had done more research on plagiarism in writing in this context before I arrived or if I had been at the university for a full four month semester there would have been more time and greater opportunity to help more students avoid failing the course. However, as Brown and Levinson's (1987) expectations of negative face require allowing others to make their own decisions and to avoid imposition, without more experience and time it would be hard to know. From the reaction of my Indonesian colleagues, perhaps the result would be the same.

3) The Harassment Situation

The third critical incident is very personal, so I will be less specific. I will call it *the harassment situation* which unfortunately took place over two academic years early during my time teaching in the United States. One of my former graduate students at the university repeatedly harassed me in many different ways. After she graduated from one of our programs, she began to teach part-time in my department. As it became more intense, through email, phone messages, face to face, and so on, I collected a lot of evidence of the harassing behaviours and worked with my department chair about the situation. As the harassment moved into a second semester, the Dean also became involved. The situation is really complicated, because the former student who became a part-time instructional colleague was married to another full-time professor at the university. When it became clear that my department chair and the Dean were not really helping to stop the harassment, I contacted Human Resources, as harassment policies

and guidelines existed, but they were unfortunately not being followed. Yet the harassment expanded and the situation grew worse during the first academic year.

Towards the end of the spring, or second, semester, the Dean called a meeting with the part-time colleague, her husband (to support her), my department chair, and me. The Dean's goals were to bring things out in the open, address the problem head on, and to draw up an agreement of conduct and consequences. I had reservations about the meeting, and I was not offered the option of anyone present to support me, but we tried to discuss the problems and agreed to a set of limits and consequences for breaking them. The part-time colleague apologized, I accepted her apology, and I thought we had an agreement and that she would stop harassing me. Moreau, Campbell, and Greener (2014) write about an interesting strategy in conflict resolution called "taking the low-down position, which, by making yourself vulnerable, allows you to take the heat in a difficult situation" (p. 345). In some ways I believe that meeting put me in the low-down position, and made me vulnerable. I hoped at the time that that would help bring resolution to the situation. After the spring semester came summer break, when I had no classes that year, and I avoided the part-time colleague and her husband.

Once the fall semester started at the end of August, unfortunately the harassment continued. I communicated examples of it to the department chair and Dean, but both hesitated and did not actually follow through on the consequences set for the part-time colleague. That fall semester the university installed a new President, at a very public ceremony and luncheon in October. I attended with some students and another colleague, but later that week I learned that I had just been falsely accused of sexual harassment by the part-time colleague who was harassing me. Apparently the main reported event took place during the new President's inauguration luncheon, when thankfully I was surrounded by some students and another colleague from my department. So I went from being harassed in many small yet troublesome ways to now being harassed by being falsely accused of sexual harassment by a part-time instructor in my department who was in fact harassing me. A university investigation was carried out, during which I, my students, colleagues, and others were interviewed. Shortly before Christmas the university rightly determined that there was no evidence that I had sexually harassed that person.

As I worked with my chair and Dean to carry on teaching, research, and service, the part-time colleague continued to harass me in the second spring semester. I appealed to the university Provost to follow through on the consequences agreed to by the part-time colleague, my chair

and Dean. It was clear to me by this point that, as Hill (2006) affirmed, "Reconciliation is a costly life-style" (p. 40). It can really take a toll. I had kept communication lines open and tried to maintain professional relationships while guarding my safety and sanity, but the harassment continued. After receiving outside legal counsel, I informed the Provost that if the university did not act soon according to the agreement with the part-time colleague, there would be legal consequences. Finally, near the end of the second spring, after almost two years, it was announced that both the part-time colleague who harassed me and her professor husband were leaving the university at the end of the semester. Apparently, unbeknownst to me, the professor husband had apparently joined his wife in the charges of harassment and in the lies against me, so the university determined both had to leave. To be clear, let me state that preserving that relationship with the former student/part-time colleague during and after those two years of harassment was simply not possible, as Abrams (2020) suggests is sometimes the case.

During the whole harassment situation, I was very aware of communication and aimed to follow Grice's (1989) cooperative principle carefully. I quickly realized that any responses to my harasser were often misconstrued and used later to harass me further, so in terms of quantity I worked hard to only ever communicate what was required to respond, and never more. As for quality, truth became crucial in the face of my harasser's lies, so I worked to only communicate what was accurate and relevant in any interactions with her. As for manner, I aimed to be clear, brief, and orderly, and opted to respond in writing as much as possible, to have a paper trail of the continued harassment and my responses to it. In reference to politeness theory, harassers are not trying to be polite, but in this case my harasser was concerned about her image, and she often wanted to experience positive face. Yet she also wanted the freedom of negative face to make her own decisions and to avoid impositions on her that she had actually agreed to previously.

Reflecting on this third incident, there were important helps that enabled me to survive almost two years of continued trauma. One was counselling, which I started after the first year, to process what was happening to me. Another was that I worked in a context that had procedures and policies to follow, but unfortunately they were not set up for the type of harassment I endured. I also had colleagues, family members, and friends who supported me in numerous ways. Hindrances, however, included administrators not following through, and not carrying out the consequences agreed upon during the meeting near the end of the first year of harassment. Although the harasser had apologized to me and I had extended forgiveness, as

Abrams (2020) suggested, she continued to harass me, and expanded and increased her harassment the second year. As Abrams (2020) observed, "in some instances conflict resolution is not possible, and participants *must* walk away from the situation; if individuals are in danger, they should *not* feel compelled to stay in contact with their opponent (e.g., a stalker)" (p. 302). My harasser and her husband had something against me and were bent on harming me in a significant way. I wish that they had left and everything went back to normal. But that is not how that story ends. Yet for our purposes, that is the end of the third critical incident.

Further Reflections on Collaboration, Conflict, and Reconciliation

I want to recognize that in two of the three critical incidents outlined and reflected on above my EFL students communicated with me in English, despite us being in Chinese and Indonesian contexts. The fact that those incidents ended positively in China and perhaps neutrally in Indonesia is a testimony to my students' hard work and perseverance. Dealing with conflict in one's native language can be difficult; doing so in a second or foreign language is admirable. An article by Kohn (2022) considers issues with global Englishes and "the pedagogical challenge of developing one's own voice" (p. 119). Especially with the chair incident, my EFL students found their voice in English and were able to use it effectively to address our conflict.

Readers of this article might think, as a reviewer indicated in their comments, that the chair incident largely involved a cultural misunderstanding, the EFL plagiarism incidents seemed to reflect different cultural game rules, and the harassment situation attempted collaboration yet reconciliation did not happen. While that assessment may be accurate on one level, I believe that is an oversimplification of reality and my experiences. Obviously, there was a whole lot more going on in the three critical incidents than I have the space to share, yet I included these incidents and some of my reflections on them because doing so offers potential glimpses into the complexity of collaboration, conflict, and reconciliation for those who work in ESL and EFL teaching and in ELT teacher education. Collaboration and conflict involve more than one person: they may involve a teacher and a group of students, as in the chair incident, or a teacher and several students in different classes, as with the EFL plagiarism incidents, or a teacher and a colleague/former student, as with the harassment situation. In order to collaborate well and work toward reconciliation, the various parties involved need to work together. I am grateful that the

chair incident ended well, from my perspective, but honestly that result is not as common in my many years of experience teaching. Reconciliation also takes two or more people; one person alone cannot work toward it and expect a good outcome. And forcing people to collaborate may not end well, as happened toward the end of the first year with the harassment situation introduced here. In the plagiarism incidents, there was no option to ask students to redo their work, due to the university policy, but they were not forced to stop plagiarizing, either.

Perhaps a reader is thinking, so why bother sharing about these things? First, as Westwood (2014) noted, offenses are inevitable in ELT, and they may come in the form of misunderstandings, as perhaps with the incidents shared here in China and Indonesia. Therefore it would be helpful for ESL/EFL teachers to be trained to think ahead of how to act and react in different situations in or out of class. For example, in the program where I now work an important course I teach includes students presenting and discussing various dilemmas and how we as teachers and Christians might consider options in addressing them. Second, as one reviewer of this article noted, it may be helpful for teachers to recognize that over the course of their careers in ELT they will likely need to deal with numerous incidents of conflict and misunderstanding, or worse. Perhaps such recognition may help them be better prepared with potential reconciliation strategies.

While Grice's (1989) cooperative principle and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory may be criticized as being too Western, these basic frameworks can nonetheless be helpful to those who want to collaborate with others, address conflict, especially cross-culturally, and work toward reconciliation. Yet even when we follow Grice's (1989) maxims and aim to recognize people's need for positive and negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), there is no guarantee of communicative success, especially in conflict, as the three critical incidents above indicated. However, any limitations in communication and in the attempts at reconciliation, particularly in the harassment situation, were due to my or others' human failures or weaknesses. I remain confident that God can and does work miracles in conflicts, healing in relationships, and that He has used even that awful harassment situation for my good (Romans 8:28).

For Christian teachers and teacher educators, our Christian faith guides and sustains us in our life and work, including our collaborations, situations of conflict, and reconciliation efforts. For me, and others, faith is not just a set of beliefs, it is a way of life centred around our personal relationship with God. We collaborate with others because we know that where two or more

believers are gathered, Jesus is among us (Matthew 18:20). We know our work is better when we work in collaboration with others. But as Westwood (2014) indicated, with people in ELT, there will be offenses. So conflict is to be expected (Messerschmitt & Hafernik, 2009), reconciliation is necessary when at all possible, and Christians are committed to such reconciliation (Dormer & Woelk, 2018). In fact, Christians working in ELT believe that we are called to a ministry of reconciliation, because God reconciled us to Himself through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18), as Snow (2001) has indicated.

Since this is a series of personal reflections, I can add that personality-wise I avoid conflict at all costs. In fact, in StrengthsFinder "harmony," which is about helping others find common ground through practical solutions, is one of my top strengths. Although I avoid conflict, by living in several different contexts and cultures I have come to learn through experience that avoiding conflict does not necessarily create peace, and instead can actually lead to silent wars with others. Yet Jesus calls us as believers to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and Hebrews 12:14 tells us to make every effort to live in peace with everyone. A relevant quote from Snow (2001) comes to mind:

> Christ through his sacrifice broke down barriers between humankind and God. Christians are entrusted with the task of reconciling the world to God (2 Cor. 5:17-20), and one aspect of this is actively working toward the cause of peace in the world. (p. 125)

As Snow suggests, peacemaking (or harmony) is an active pursuit, which may be useful for Christians to remember as we work toward collaboration and reconciliation.

I would like to note some additional helps in my collaborations and reconciliation were willing interlocutors, people who talked to me and worked with me, as well as helpers, and the goodwill of those that I taught and worked with. Other helps included official policies and procedures, regarding plagiarism or harassment, even if they were not always followed. On a personal note, for me prayer was the biggest help – not just me asking God for assistance, guidance, intervention, and protection, but also other people's prayers sustaining me, including through two long academic years of harassment. But hindrances to collaboration and reconciliation also existed, in simple things such as cultural differences, personal and institutional expectations, people not following the policies and procedures they had agreed to work within, and some people's real and consistent intent to harm themselves and/or me. Moreau, Campbell, and Greener (2014) wisely state: "Remember that despite the best efforts and

practiced skills, not all conflict is resolved" (p. 347). They quote Romans 12:18 to exhort Christians to live at peace with everyone, as much as depends on us. Moreau, Campbell, and Greener (2014) also suggest that "Whether or not conflict is resolved, forgiveness should be offered," since we also need to offer it in order to receive forgiveness from God (Matthew 6:14–15) (p. 347).

Conclusion

Let me end by referring to the question mark in my title. Yes, I have experienced collaboration and reconciliation during a long and ongoing career in English language teaching, but I have also faced a costly lifestyle as someone who has aimed to work on collaboration, address conflict, and work toward reconciliation. As we have seen recently in world conflicts, sometimes it frankly may not be possible to reconcile relationships when we collaborate with others who create conflict and are bent on harming us – even working to destroy us or our careers. As Abrams (2020) noted, in such situations we need to walk away and work to protect ourselves and those in our care. To conclude, however, I would say that even when seemingly impossible, for Christians in ELT our goal must always be to pursue collaboration and reconciliation in the face of conflict, as much as it depends on us (Romans 12:18).

Acknowledgements
This article expands upon an earlier paper presented as part of the panel "Faith-inspired Collaboration and Reconciliation in ELT" at the TESOL 2022 convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. I am grateful to the other panelists – Jan Edwards Dormer, I Komang Budiarta, Maxine Pond, and Leona Leighton – for their contributions, which have influenced my thinking. I also appreciated the audience there for good questions and observations. Finally, I acknowledge the feedback and suggestions of three reviewers and the editors, whose comments helped improve this published version. I believe such feedback reflects the fact that collaboration and reconciliation can go hand in hand when we work together with faith in the face of conflict.

References

Abrams, Z. I. (2020). *Intercultural communication and language pedagogy: From theory to practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.

Chenail, J. S., & Chenail, R. J. (2009). Communicating qualitative analytical results following Grice's conversational maxims. *The Weekly Qualitative Report, 2*(12), 67–76.

Dai, X., & Chen, G. M. (2017). *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony*. Routledge.

DeCapua, A., & Wintergerst, A. C. (2016). *Crossing cultures in the language classroom* (2nd

ed.). University of Michigan Press.
Dormer, J. E., & Woelk, C. (2018). *Teaching English for reconciliation: Pursuing peace through transformed relationships in language learning and teaching*. William Carey Library.
Grice, H. P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Harvard University Press.
Hill, B. V. (2006). Teaching as reconciliation. *Journal of Education and Christian Belief, 10*(1), 33–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/205699710601000104
Kiyama, S., Tamaoka, K., & Takiura, M. (2012). Applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to a non-western culture: Evidence from Japanese facework behaviors. *Sage Open, 2*(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244012470116
Kohn, K. (2022). Global Englishes and the pedagogical challenge of developing one's own voice. *Asian Englishes, 24*(2), 119–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2022.2056795
Messerschmitt, D. S., & Hafernik, J. J. (2009). *Dilemmas in teaching English to speakers of other languages: 40 cases*. University of Michigan Press.
Moreau, A. S., Campbell, E. H., & Greener, S. (2014). *Effective intercultural communication: A Christian perspective*. Baker Academic.
Siegel, J., Broadbridge, J., & Firth, M. (2019). Saying it 'just right': Teaching for pragmatic success in ELT. *ELT Journal, 73*(1), 31–40. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccy018
Smith, D. A. (2007). Moral agency, spirituality, and the language classroom. In D. Smith & T. Osborn (Eds.), *Spirituality, social justice, and language learning* (pp. 33–50). Information Age.
Snow, D. B. (2001). *English teaching as Christian mission: An applied theology*. Herald Press.
Snow, D. (2015). English teaching, intercultural competence, and critical incident exercises. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 15*(2), 285–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2014.980746
Usó-Juan, E. (2022). Exploring the role of strategy instruction on learners' ability to write authentic email requests to faculty. *Language Teaching Research, 26*(2), 213–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168821106997
Westwood, M. K. (2014). Addressing reconciliation in the ESL classroom. *International Journal of Christianity and English Language Teaching, 1*, 82–92.
Wierzbicka, A. (2003). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Michael Lessard-Clouston (michael.lessard-clouston@biola.edu) is a Professor of TESOL in the School of Education at Biola University in La Mirada, California, where he teaches in its M.A. TESOL program. His most recent books are Second Language Acquisition Applied to English Language Teaching *(2018) and* Teaching Vocabulary *(2021), both published by TESOL Press.*