Introduction

So much of human progress is based on our ability to communicate with one another, and modern technology has greatly expanded the means via which we can communicate. Learning additional languages, such as English, expands the range of people with whom we can communicate. *English Across Fracture Lines*, a collection of 17 chapters edited by Elizabeth J Erling and published by the British Council, shares stories from a wide range of contexts in which the learning of English has led to or at least given hope for human progress based on better communication. Before beginning this review, we want to state our admiration to the authors who have placed themselves in potentially perilous circumstances while attempting to heal fractures in the human landscape.

Another word of preface is provided by Erling, who acknowledges that the learning of English by people with other first languages does bring with it certain problems (Erling, 2017; Pennycook, 2002). In particular, English finds itself entwined with the countries in which it is an Inner Circle language (Kachru, 1992). That said, teachers of any language and of any subject matter have little control over whether their students use what is taught for good or for ill, and for that matter, controversies often arise over the best course of action in many situations. This uncertainty is particularly the case when there exist fracture lines, which Erling defines as “difficult situations stemming from political, religious, ethnic or environmental instability” (p. 11).

The book’s chapters bring together voices from a variety of contexts, often where non-native speakers of different languages learn and use English to communicate with each other, rather than with native English speakers. In these contexts, English is clearly not intended to replace people’s languages, but instead English is to act as an addition to people’s communicative toolboxes. The editor’s stated goal is to “offer a space for reflection on how ELT can nurture well-being by equipping learners with a language in which not only injustice and pain are ar-
ticulated and expressed to the wider international community as a means of resistance, but also forgiveness and empathy” (p. 13).

The Book’s Content

Apart from the Introduction, the remaining 16 chapters in English Across Fracture Lines are categorized into two themes. The first theme addresses the English language classroom as a site for promoting resilience, empathy, and resistance. The eight chapters here cover the voices of a variety of fractured countries and territories, and lessons learned therein. Afghan and Iraqi English teachers explain why it is so important to them that their students learn English (Ch. 2), and give readers a glimpse of what life has been like following the fall of two widely reviled regimes. We see in this chapter how English can be a practical tool (to protect oneself from foreign soldiers mistaking you for an anti-American insurgent) and an outreach tool (to encourage people of the West not to hate Islam), and why it is so valued by people risking their lives to use and teach it. In Chapter 3, English teaching emerges as a means of hope and resistance in the Gaza Strip, where students learn how English can become a tool for non-violent resistance of occupation, and also for raising awareness of their situation in other parts of the world. In Chapter 4, we see how forgiveness shapes pedagogy in schools in the Middle East, and the authors suggest that this pedagogy can be adapted for other contexts as well. Chapter 5 describes one educator’s approach to environmental education that goes beyond the shallow environmentalism of recycling drives and beach clean-ups towards a deep environmentalism (Stibbe, 2004), attempting to counter the values of consumerism by pushing environmental issues to the forefront of the curriculum. The author brings a “think global, act local” mindset which enables classes to take meaningful actions to protect our environment. Chapter 6 takes us to Malta, where teachers are attempting to deal with issues of migration, empathy, and diversity via multicultural poetry. The lessons seem to be not for the migrants themselves but for students in communities where migrants are heading or transiting through. Chapter 7 focuses on the difficulties faced by migrants as they attempt to adapt to new communities, and explores the views of different stakeholders in the process. In addition to school-aged children and their teachers, the study also looks at adults attempting to improve their English skills to prepare to enter the UK workforce. Chapter 8 looks at the myriad challenges faced by Syrian refugees in multicultural, multilingual Lebanon,
where a training program aims to equip local teachers with the skillsets they need to confront these challenges. Diversity is the key word in this training program, which covers many areas that may be of use to teachers in similarly challenging environments. Students here are not just struggling to adapt to the use of French and English in classrooms, but even Arabic, as the versions spoken locally may not be comprehensible to the refugees. Finally, Chapter 9 looks at the strains that fracture lines place on teachers, whose mental health and well-being are also at risk when dealing with troubled youth, lessons that can prove useful for those working in environments were the fault lines might not be as visible.

The book’s second theme addresses the role of English in creating and maintaining relationships and stability, locally and globally. Chapter 10 offers an analysis of English language signs by anti-government protesters in Egypt, and how English was used in protests in 2011 to engage with foreign media outlets and their audiences. The author also looks at how this skilful media manipulation was met with similar tactics from the opposite side, who used signs to attack the legitimacy of the anti-government groups. In Chapter 11, the author shares her experiences directing social enterprises in four countries with serious fault lines: Cambodia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Palestine. She describes how informal language exchanges between the author and local staff were an effective way to enhance literacy and numeracy, and overcome social stigmas that were hindering employee growth. She also provides interesting insights into exactly how scars from previous conflicts linger long after the gunfire ceases. Chapter 12 looks at the language needs of economic migrants, in this case people from Bangladesh who temporarily leave their families for employment in the Middle East. The author describes the tenuous situations experienced by these economic migrants, but demonstrates how language ability can increase the resilience of the workers and help them navigate the treacherous waters of this working world. In Chapter 13, we see the evolution of foreign language teaching in Laos as the country shifted from an emphasis on Russian to an emphasis on English, and how the cultural and socio-political elements of not just the nation but also the region affect the development of language teaching there. Chapter 14 gives us a glimpse into the secretive nation of North Korea, and the challenges that the British Council is facing as they endeavour to teach English to the citizens of (mostly) Pyongyang. This glimpse is fascinating, though many of the lessons the author has drawn from his experiences are probably
not applicable to many other contexts the readers might face. Chapter 15 details the development of community problem solving and conflict resolution skills in English Clubs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where locally organized English Clubs are giving the (mostly) young men of remote parts of the country chances to develop English skills and healing some of the wounds from the bloody conflict with Rwanda, which still affects relations between the countries involved. The English Clubs are highlighted as being valuable tools in the struggle to repair these local fault lines. The final two chapters cover the teaching of English to peacekeeping forces. Chapter 16 reflects on the British Council’s Peacekeeping English Project, and reflects on some of the lessons learned there. The project has been able to demonstrate its successes, and the chapter provides some insight into the long term viability of such endeavors. These lessons include the importance of being flexible in tenuous circumstances, focusing on the development of the participants rather than materials, and ensuring proper institutionalization to facilitate longevity even after the original developers have departed. In some of the contexts the students of these programs are operating in, effective English communication can be a matter of life or death – literally. Chapter 17 looks at the use of English and pidgin variants by Bangladeshi peacekeepers in Sierra Leone, where their language skills have helped their efforts to stop conflicts and win over the local populace. In fact, language skills appear to have been central, and this underscores the importance of intercultural communication in ELT.

Perhaps, the book’s main takeaway is stated by Birch and Nasser, the authors of Chapter 4, who on page 34 advocated that we English as an Additional Language teachers not “limit our pedagogical goals to correct pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary,” that we not “restrict our attention to sanitised speech functions, facile interactions and simplistic intercultural communication.”, because if we do restrict ourselves and our students in this manner, “we fail to imagine realistic alternatives to the status quo. We waste our strategic positions and power to educate for a peaceful and more sustainable world.” Birch and Nasser quoted Freire (2004) in the same vein, that we need to join with students and colleagues to be transformers of the world, rather than merely helping students adapt to the world as it now exists.

One way that the book may have been improved would have been further mention of the Anglosphere’s role in the creation of so many of the fracture lines documented therein. These conflicts were not the results of forces of nature, like
cracks in the earth caused by earthquakes; rather, they resulted from human interventions. For instance, journalist Seamus Milne (2015) gave a chilling overview of the ways Western Anglophone powers have contributed to the fault lines in the Middle East. Readers might benefit from more context on the fault lines’ origins, many of which can be traced to Anglophone countries.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, the editor and authors of the chapters in this volume are to be admired. Firstly, their well-written book goes beyond providing accounts of their teaching and research contexts; they also include insights into theoretical frameworks and research methodology, as well as references at the end of each chapter. Secondly, by teaching across fracture lines, these educators often put themselves in harm’s way; at the very least, they vicariously share the difficulties with which their students’ lives are fraught.

This brings us to an interesting question: What about many of the rest of us teachers of English as an Additional Language who teach in seemingly more comfortable circumstances? For instance, the two authors of this review teach in Singapore (a stable and developed country) to university students whose families can afford to send them here. We would argue that even in such “comfortable” contexts, fracture lines exist, and many of us can make contributions to the cause for a more peaceful world. For example, we all have students who face discrimination because of disability, physical appearance, or sexual preference; students who lack empathy and who are unskilled at community problem solving and conflict resolution, even in matters as everyday as how to cooperate on a group project; students who seem to only want to interact with peers from their own country; and students who are so wrapped up in consumerism or the struggles of meeting academic requirements that they manifest little interest in the global fracture lines described in this book. Moreover, the fracture lines exist not only between humans and their respective communities, and nations, but also in their mistreatment of other species and much of the world’s natural resources. Across the board, a careful examination of the language used to discuss these many issues will reveal disrespectful or combative biases in word and thought that lead to unhealthy and unsustainable relationships with other genders, other cultures, other species, and even the environment that sustains us all.
Happily, many teachers, including those in contexts such as ours, do encourage our students to learn about and act on behalf of those less fortunate than themselves, as well as facilitating students’ development and deployment of the skills and attitudes highlighted in this book’s first theme: resilience, empathy, and resistance. For instance, the TESOL International Association has a Social Responsibility interest section, and the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) has a Global Issues special interest group. A similar organization, the Global Issues in Language Education special interest group - http://www.gilesig.org/newsletter - in the Japan Association for Language Teaching, deserves highlighting for the very informative newsletter they have been producing for many years. Furthermore, publishers are to be praised for including such issues, skills, and attitudes in the teaching materials they distribute. Last but not least, the British Council is to be thanked for making this valuable volume free online at https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/english-across-fracture-lines.

References


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