

How can linguistic diversity in English language teaching support environmental justice?

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Many of the world's poorest people live in areas of high linguistic diversity and high biodiversity. Some of these places have also seen violent processes of colonization, which made many languages to vanish. In this process, the colonizer's language was forced upon originary peoples around those lands, but their accent is undeniable proof of the resistance of their cultures in the face of linguisticism.

In this poster session, I will share a project that combined English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes and Arts in a bilingual school in Brazil. Its main objective was to inform Middle School students more about young activists in the Global South and, through their speeches, to produce art pieces that would reflect their environmental awareness. This allowed them to work with different English varieties in the classroom, while listening to stories coming from those seeking environmental justice in the Global South. This project had inspiration on some of the "Bow Seat Ocean Awareness Programs" resources. Here, we will showcase an artwork, created by one student, about the Kenyan activist Elizabeth Wanjiru Wathuti (Figure 1, on the next page).

One of the byproducts of colonization, as stated by Liboiron (2021), is pollution and the destruction of the environment. For example, as global warming effects increase yearly, the small country of Tuvalu (in Oceania) may be one of the first nations to sink and disappear. Such a destiny is ultimately linked to linguistic diversity: as a matter of fact, one of Tuvalu's official languages is English, but few have heard of the "Tuvaluan English". Why is that? As Mufwene (2001) shows us, the contact between the originary peoples' languages and the English spoken by the colonizers has an important role in the formation of some English language varieties. Centuries, or decades, later, those born in these nations can be considered native speakers of English, as this language was imposed over their territories long ago. However, we rarely get to see labels such as "Pakistani" or "Tuvaluan" English.

Gnerre (1985) states that a linguistic variety is "worth" what its speakers are "worth" in society, that is, it is a reflection of the power and authority they have in economic and social relations. Sociolinguistics helps us to study the relationship between language and society, and also to better understand the dynamics of power related to language varieties. To illustrate this situation, one may refer to two sociolinguistic studies on native speakers (Labov, 1972, Kerswill, 2003), showing how their pronunciation changes according to the prestige of certain English language models. If this bias is found on native speakers, those who speak English as an official language (or even as a foreign language) in the Global South may face similar stigma regarding their accent. By bringing linguistic diversity to our second language classrooms, it is possible to tackle important and sensitive topics of the planet, whilst promoting and celebrating different accents.



Figure. 1: Elizabeth Wanjiru Wathuti. Image credit: Paola Discacciati Borba Cruz.

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