The Role of Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Repatriating Victims of Human Trafficking in Thailand: A Case Study

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The role and influence of education goes far beyond the classroom. Education also plays an important role in the social, cultural and economic development of a nation. This notion of using education as a means of empowerment was highlighted by Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere, in his controversial volume *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this sociolinguistic, ethnographic research paper, the basic assumption of Friere’s work will be applied to an English language program developed by a non-government organisation in northern Thailand. The NGO – The New Life Center, opened in 1987 and operates under a Christian ethos. It offers an English language program as part of a holistic approach to helping young girls from Myanmar who have been trafficked to Thailand as part of a transnational sex trade. It will be argued in this paper that teaching English as a second/foreign language is used as a tool for repatriating girls who have been trafficked to northern Thailand from Myanmar. It will also be argued that learning English as a foreign language, has for these victims of human trafficking, been an empowering process and also provided the impetus and means by which cycles of poverty and human trafficking may even be broken in the future. This paper does not aim to provide solutions to issues of trafficking and sexual exploitation, but rather will document the rationale behind and the impacts of, an English language program in northern Thailand for girls who have been trafficked. Although this paper will examine a mere microcosm of this vast area of sociolinguistic research, it must be acknowledged that even very specific case studies can add significant contributions to education research and its consequences. This paper will also encompass an ethnography of communication which examines the functions language carries out in human societies and then the ways in which people use language to fulfil these functions. The data in this paper has been collected from extensive field work with victims of human trafficking in Northern Thailand and has involved data collecting techniques such as observation, interviewing and itinerant ethnography. Quantitative data has been included through the use of United Nations and official government statistics.

Introduction

The role and influence of education goes far beyond the classroom. Education also plays an important role in the social, cultural and economic development of a nation. This paper will explore this role of education by examining the influence of teaching English as a foreign language as a means of breaking cycles of poverty and exploitation in northern Thailand. This notion of using education as a means of empowerment was highlighted by Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere, in his controversial volume *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Friere’s work was based on the premise that:

Man’s ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively (1993, p.14).
In this paper, this basic assumption of Friere’s work will be applied to an English language program developed by a non-government organisation in northern Thailand. The NGO – The New Life Center – uses English as part of a holistic approach to repatriating young girls from Myanmar who have been trafficked to Thailand as part of a transnational sex trade. It will be argued in this paper that learning English as a foreign language, has for these victims of human trafficking, been an empowering process that has not only provided possibilities of a fuller and richer life in Myanmar, but has also provided the impetus and means by which cycles of poverty and human trafficking may even be broken in the future. This paper will examine the social and cultural implications of teaching English as a foreign language within these contexts. To do this the paper will further explore the sociology of language. Fishman says:

Briefly put, the sociology of language focuses upon the entire gamut of topics related to the social organisation of language behaviour, including not only language usage per se, but also language attitudes and overt behaviours toward language and toward language users (Fishman 1972, p.1).

This field concentrates on issues such as linguistic minorities, bilingualism, conflict and language planning (Penalosa 1981, p.4). These issues are at the centre of the topics that will be examined in this paper. Although this paper will examine a mere microcosm of this vast area of sociolinguistic research, it must be acknowledged that even very specific case studies can add significant contributions to education research and its consequences. This paper will also encompass an ethnography of communication which examines the functions language carries out in human societies and then the ways in which people use language to fulfil these functions. To do this specific case studies of past students of the English language program will be highlighted. This paper does not aim to focus on education methodology or pedagogy but rather will look at the social and ethnographic implications of education. Hence this paper could be considered a sociolinguistic, ethnographic research paper.

In order to conduct research such as this it is crucial to firstly look at the broader issues. Two of the key issues related to this research are ethnicity and globalization. These terms have themselves become the buzzwords of the new millennium. They are terms synonymous with conflict, change, exploitation and homogeneity. The issues surrounding ethnicity and globalization are vast and complex but nevertheless extremely important to this paper. It is important that the role and influence of education on ethnicity is contextualized within the globalized world we now live in. Phillipson says:

Globalization has economic, technological, cultural and linguistic strands to it. At the heart of globalization is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. It is vital to assess what purposes the increased use of English is serving (Phillipson:1998, p.101).

Globalization is proving to be the salient context for an increasing number of local sociolinguistic experiences (Coupland 2003, p.466). Heller identifies that the globalized new economy has resulted in the commodification of language and identity and that the “globalized new economy presents specific constraints - both obstacles and opportunities” (Heller 2003, p.473).

This paper focuses on the combined issues of ethnicity and globalization by examining the impact of English education among young ethnic minority girls/women trafficked from Myanmar to Thailand. This paper does not aim to provide solutions to issues of trafficking and sexual exploitation, but rather will document the rationale behind and the impacts of an English language program in northern Thailand for women who have been trafficked. This is important because the impact of NGOs ‘rescuing’ young girls/women from prostitution in northern Thailand has been criticized by some authors. Maggie Jones (2003) in her article...

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Thailand’s Brothel Busters criticizes organisations such as the International Justice Mission (IJM) for its role in rescuing girls which she says leaves them without an income and a future. This paper directly refutes these claims by demonstrating how young women rescued in joint operations between IJM and the New Life Center are provided with skills and hope through educational programs such as learning English as a second/foreign language once they have been rescued.

The paper will be divided into two parts. The first will outline the theoretical basis on which the paper has been written. This will include the importance of the research, the methodologies used in compiling the research, a literature review, a background of the research participants, including ethical issues. Part two of the paper will include an analysis of the data collected and a summary of the research.

PART 1

SIGNIFICANCE AND RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The world’s cultures are in a constant state of change. Ellwood says the entanglement of diverse cultures and economies now known as globalization has been spreading for centuries and the world has been shrinking as a result of it (2001, p.8). English language education has played a significant role in this shrinking world and has been an important part of the globalization trend. In the past 20 years there has been a proliferation of English language courses around the world, so much so, that many educators now accept that English has become the *lingua franca*. Some argue that this expansion of English language teaching contributes to a homogenization of culture and is potentially destructive to the world’s ethnic minorities. Although in some circumstances that might be true, this paper also aims to explore how English language teaching is used to empower and ultimately lead to social change for ethnic minorities and the socially marginalized. Tony McGrew says:

Globalization refers to a multiplicity of linkages and inter-connectedness that transcend the nation states (and by implications the societies) which make up the modern world system. It defines a process through which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant consequences for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe (2003, p.8).

This paper develops these notions by investigating how a language program in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is having significant consequences for young girls/women who have been trafficked from neighbouring Myanmar. It is therefore a case study on one miniscule aspect of the seemingly infinite globalization process. This paper has particular importance for not only English language educators, but also those who work and seek to repatriate those trafficked into sexual slavery. Although there are no official statistics on how many women and children are trafficked annually, it would by conservative to say there are millions. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2005) predicts up to 50,000 people will be trafficked to the United States alone this year and UNICEF predicts more than 200,000 women and children will be trafficked in Africa this year. Rich Friman (2005) in his study of international crime syndicates, said in recent years it was believed up to 800,000 women had been trafficked into western Europe. South-east Asia also remains one of the world’s trafficking epidemic hotspots with an estimated 500,000 women and children the victims of intra-country and inter-country trafficking (Friman 2005). Official Myanmar Government statistics claim that government officials have rescued more than 2000 women and children from human traffickers in the two years since 2002. However, non-government organisations working in Thailand and Myanmar say that number is merely the tip of the iceberg. Director of the New Life Center in Chiang Mai, Karen Smith said that traffickers were constantly
becoming ‘more cunning’ in a bid to overcome successful campaigns aimed at warning vulnerable communities of the dangers of human trafficking. She said:

It is a constant battle to get on top of this situation. The traffickers constantly update their strategies in a bid to protect their interests. We see our work as not only a response to this tragedy but we must also seek preventative strategies to stop it in the first place (Personal Communication May 2003).

Smith said that because many of the young women trafficked from Myanmar had studied elementary English at primary school, many were keen to study English at the centre. She said:

You have to understand that these girls have been through tremendous trauma. Many have been sexually, physically and mentally abused for years and they are still only children. When they are rescued and come to the centre they must relearn social and life skills. Education is a key part of this. Many see that English will give them skills which they can use in Burma that will give them a good job in the tourism industry or with public service. The girls have to return to Burma and we aim to equip them as best we can (Personal Communication May 2003).

Because of the large numbers of people trafficked to Thailand each year, the Thai government has implemented a policy of repatriating victims of trafficking to their home country once they are freed from international crime syndicates. The reality is, that although the Thai government has tried for several years to combat prostitution, it has been largely ineffective because of economic and cultural reasons (Montreevat & Ponsakunpaisan 1997, p.301). There are today more than 200,000 prostitutes working in Thailand generating more than SUS 13-billion in revenue annually (Janchitfah 2005). It is one of Thailand’s major industries. Because of the scale of this problem in south-east Asia, and worldwide, it is crucial that the issue of human trafficking is not only understood but that strategies aimed at its prevention are also examined. This paper’s exploration of the role of EFL teaching as a preventative strategy to trafficking is unique and is an area of teaching English that has had little research conducted on it, hence highlighting the importance of this paper.

LITERATURE SURVEY

With the proliferation of English language programs around the world there is an increasing amount of scholarly research on teaching English as either a second or foreign language. This research covers all aspects of this type of education; however, it would be fair to say, that the area focusing on the social and ethnographic impacts of teaching English is one of the least explored areas of education. Although there have been several provocative and ground-breaking works, such as Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this aspect of teaching English has been relatively slow to emerge thanks largely to the complexity of ethnicity and the fledgling nature of global English teaching. For example, the ethnolinguistic identity theory, which will be discussed later in this paper, only emerged in 1987 even though research in this area had been conducted earlier (1991, p.105). Kneller acknowledges:

At the moment, scholars are engaged in a series of case studies of the cultural factors at work in a range of educational situations. Yet although some notable contributions have been made the examination of the interplay of culture and education has still barely begun (1965, p.10).

Although this is an emerging field of scholarship there are some key works that have been published. For example, Corson’s 1993 volume that examines the linkage between language, power and social justice is particularly relevant to this paper. In this book, Corson (1993) examines the socially-constructed power of language and its fruits. Fairclough (1989, 2001)
has also developed these notions by concluding that in any society language plays an important role in power relationships. Corson and Fairclough’s research opens an important area of scholarship with regard to the linkages of power and language which requires more specific investigation. Because this aspect of education, coupled with issues of human trafficking are issues that have emerged during the past decade, this paper has relied heavily on the use of journal and newspaper articles and web articles as a means of accessing the most current information on the issue. For example, Appelby, Copley, Sithirajvongsa and Pennycook’s (2002) discussion on teaching English as a second language from an international development point of view, is crucial in highlighting the connections between language, power and ethnicity. More of this type of sociolinguistic and ethnographic research has emerged in recent years. Lo Biancoll (2003), Heller (2003) and May (2005) have also conducted provocative research in this area, however, more is still needed. The articles cited in this paper have been drawn from a variety of fields including education, sociology, anthropology, conflict studies and social science. The paper also makes reference to refereed conference papers. It is worthy to note that often ethnographic research papers related to teaching English as second or foreign language often view English teaching with negativity, particularly with regard to educating minorities and the socially marginalized. Because of the scope of research being covered in this paper, this wide-ranging citation has been necessary to identify the complex issues associated with this research paper.

THE HYPOTHESIS

It will be argued in this research paper that:

1. Teaching English as a foreign language is used as a tool for repatriating girls/women who have been trafficked to northern Thailand from Myanmar.
2. Successful language acquisition is part of a strategy for breaking the cycle of human trafficking.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Because this research paper deals largely with issues of human trafficking and exploitation in northern Thailand, it is important to contextualize how this and teaching English as a foreign language have become inter-connected. For the past 20 years northern Thailand has been a hub of human trafficking in south-east Asia. Director of the New Life Center, Karen Smith said government infrastructure programs in the mid 1980s opened up large areas of northern Thailand. She said this development in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Nan, Tak and Phrae, which had previously been remote and isolated, provided traffickers access to hilltribe areas which had previously been cut off from the rest of Thailand. This contact led to a wave of trafficking with families asked to give up their daughters with the promise of high paying domestic helper jobs and restaurant positions in the city. She said:

Most of the families had no idea their daughters would end up working as prostitutes. Most were poor and saw this as an opportunity to relieve their poverty and help their families and communities. Because most of the families were uneducated, they were vulnerable and an easy target for traffickers (Personal Communication June 2003).

Smith said in the past 20 years extensive education campaigns by the Thai government and NGOs had dramatically reduced the number of young women trafficked from within Thailand. However, she said that because of the success of awareness campaigns, traffickers were now smuggling young women into Thailand from Myanmar, Yunnan in south-west China, Cambodia and Laos. She said:

Most of the young women that come to our center now are not from Thailand. The traffickers are using the same tactics in Thailand’s neighbouring countries and using
the porous borders to smuggle these girls into the sex industry in Thailand (Personal Communication June 2003).

As a consequence, the New Life Center has introduced several strategies aimed at combating this trade. One of the strategies the center, which was established by American Baptist missionaries in 1987 and operates under a Christian ethos, has implemented in Thailand is the introduction of an English language program aimed specifically at repatriating victims of human trafficking from Myanmar. This program falls within the stated objectives of the New Life Center which are:

- To provide young tribal girls shelter and the opportunity to attend night school to complete a high school education.
- To support vocational training for residents that will result in marketable skills and employment.
- To provide life skills training to residents (e.g., personal health and safety, nutrition, food preparation and cooking, sewing and handicrafts and human and citizenship rights).
- To equip and empower young tribal girls with the knowledge they need to make wise life decisions.
- To provide an opportunity for young women who have been exploited in any way to realize their potential as people of dignity and worth.
- To actively protest Thailand’s sex trade and all other forms of the exploitation of women in Thai society. (NLC website).

The English language program is intensive and highly practical to the type of language required for the emerging tourism industry in Myanmar. Students who volunteer to participate in the program have the chance to study English up to three hours a day, five days a week. Because most of the students from Myanmar are at the center for six months before they are repatriated, this intensive English program gives many girls the opportunity to develop intermediate to advanced levels of English before they leave Thailand. The use of English language teaching at the New Life Center is not seen as a panacea, but rather it is seen as merely one aspect of a holistic program of repatriation aimed at equipping and empowering victims of trafficking. This point is crucial because it serves to negate the issues highlighted by Yon regarding cultural loss through education. Yon says that globalization in education can crush indigenous culture and lead to a feeling of disempowerment among ethnic minorities (2000, p.6). However, this language experience in northern Thailand is conducted to empower and is seen as a means of creating social and even cultural change.

**METHODOLOGY**

Sociolinguistic and ethnographic research should always use a variety of different methodologies in order to provide an accurate and holistic research framework. This research paper has used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In a bid to meet the challenges associated with such complex research, several different methodologies have been used including:

1. **Interviews**: This research has involved extensive research with the students whose lives form the case studies from which this research has been drawn. Interviews have also been conducted with English language educators, social workers, non-government organisation directors, NGO support staff and government officials. The interviews have been conducted in both English and Thai, while only a small number
required the use of a translator. The interviews have included contact with NGO staff who monitor the victim’s progress following their repatriation to Myanmar. The interview data was either recorded electronically, using a hand-held tape recorder, or was recorded in journals. Progress reports have been obtained via Internet communication. Interview participants were aware the interviews were being conducted for a research paper being conducted for Griffith University.

2. Observation: The research involved observation of the language students in the classroom. This also included some data collection through anecdotal conversations with the students. This participant observation approach, known as itinerant ethnography, was used by anthropologist Louisa Schein in her work with hilltribe communities in China. Schein says:

   Shopping, incidental conversations on trains and buses, the stares and queries my fieldworker model elicited, these kinds of things became vital components of what I have called itinerant ethnography (Schein 2001, p.28).


Because this research involved interviews with human subjects about sensitive issues, ethical constraints were considered during the research. As part of the prescribed requirements of Griffith University, an ethical clearance was provided by the Faculty of Education at Griffith University so this research could be conducted. It is important to highlight that the names of those who have been trafficked and form the basis of the case studies in this paper have been changed in order to protect the identity of the research participants.

PART II

ANALYSIS AND CASE STUDIES

Corson in his study of language, minorities and social justice concluded that language was essentially powerless on its own. However, he concluded that when people use language or it is used in the context of social structures and situations it can indeed become a tool of tremendous power (1993, p.4). As Corson’s work highlights, the linkage between language and power is nothing new. Fairclough, in his study of the connections between language and power, says there was often a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of the social relations of power (Fairclough 1989, p.1). Often, when these concepts are associated with teaching English as a second or foreign language, it inevitably sparks notions of cultural imperialism and disempowerment. These sentiments are expressed in Yon’s volume which highlights the complexity of ethnicity and language education. In an account from a South Pacific island it is stated:

   At the heart of our education and social problems in small indigenous communities is the loss of cultural identity. Young people do not know who they are. Flowing from this lack of identity is a chain of consequences: low self esteem…leading to feelings of disempowerment (2000, p.6).

Similarly Giles and Coupland’s study of language attitudes found some Indian students living in England struggled with finding a balance between their L1 Gujarati and their L2 English. One student said:
If I didn’t speak Gujarati, I would feel drowned…I would suffocate if I didn’t speak Gujarati. If an Indian tries to speak to me in English I always ask ‘can’t’ you speak Gujarati?’. If he can’t I feel distant from him (1991, p.104).

These examples highlight the connection between power and language in a negative way. They demonstrate that English language teaching can sometimes cause disempowerment and even conflict with ethnic communities. Although there is no denying the accuracy of these examples and accounts, it is important that generalizations are not drawn from only negative experiences of English language acquisition. Crucial to the positive influence of English language acquisition, that is central to this paper, is an understanding of the ethnolinguistic identity theory and the social identity theory. These two theories, which are inter-connected, focus on the notion that social categorization of the world involves knowledge of our membership in certain social categories (1991, p.105). Giles and Coupland argue:

Social identity forms an important part of self-concept and it is assumed that we try to achieve a positive sense of social identity in such a way as to make our own social group favourably distinct from other collectivities on valued dimensions. This process of achieving positive distinctiveness enables individuals to achieve a satisfactory social identity and thereby enhances their own positive self-esteem. Thus, when ethnic group identity becomes important for individuals, they may attempt to make themselves favourably distinct on dimensions such as language (1991, p.105).

This last point in Giles and Coupland’s argument is crucial in identifying the link between language and ethnic and social identity. Heller argues that it is through language that person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time and that it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks (Heller 2003, p.473). Weedon’s research stresses the significance of the connection between language, identity and power by saying:

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. It is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed (Weedon 1987, p.21).

Norton-Pierce, applies these concepts to the individual learner seeking to analyse why some people are ambivalent to acquiring a language and others are highly motivated. In her work among migrant language learners in Canada she coined the term ‘investment’. The term signals the socially and historically-constructed relationship of the learner to the target language. An investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner’s own social identity, which changes across time and space (Norton-Pierce 1995, p.9).

The following case studies will show that successful language acquisition is dependent on an understanding of the learners’ investments in the target language – investments that are closely connected to the ongoing production of a language learner’s social identity.

Case Study 1 – Sairya

Sairya was 14 when she was trafficked from a village in the north-west Myanmar province of Chin State. A man came to her village offering her work in Thailand as a domestic helper, telling the family that she would earn more money in Thailand in three months than she would earn in an entire year in Myanmar. Sairya’s family were poor and were of the Chin ethnic minority group. Because she was the eldest daughter they saw this as an excellent opportunity for their daughter to earn money to support her brothers and sisters. Sairya left her village with some other girls from her village in mid 2001. When she arrived in Thailand she was ‘imprisoned’ in a brothel in Chiang Mai for two years. She was eventually rescued in

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May 2003. Sairya had studied English at primary school and spoke and wrote English with lower intermediate competency. She also knew Chin and Burmese and Thai. After arriving at the New Life Center she discovered that there was an opportunity to learn English as a foreign language at the centre. She said:

This is a very important opportunity for me. I have studied English at school. To learn with a foreigner will help me to learn well and give me the skills to go to university. My dream is to go to university and become a doctor so I can help people (Personal Communication July 2003).

Sairya initially studied English at the centre three days a week for three hours each day. Class sizes were small with between two and six students in a class. This involved one hour of class time and two hours of activity time where she would conduct her daily chores and have general conversation with her teachers. Lessons included role play activities and involved discussions on subjects such as cooking, waiting on tables and customer service. The language skills taught were applicable to practical situations in a restaurant or hotel in Myanmar. After three weeks of lessons Sairya asked if she could learn English five days a week and the classes were increased. Sairya’s desire to study extra classes demonstrates that she saw English as an important investment for her social identity. During tuition time she would seek every opportunity to speak English. She continued to learn English for the next three months. During this time her level of spoken competency increased from lower intermediate to upper intermediate. Her written and reading competency also improved. On October 2, 2003 she was returned to her family in Myanmar, however, her English language competency immediately provided her with opportunities. Six weeks after her return to Myanmar she was recruited to be a guest speaker at an international conference in Yangon, Myanmar’s capital, to share her personal experiences of being trafficked. She was also recruited in a trafficking awareness campaign that enabled her to travel to villages throughout Myanmar, warning young girls of the dangers of human trafficking. Sairya said:

Learning English has given me the awareness and confidence to do these things. It is part of a new beginning in my life - a new beginning that will give me a better life (Personal Communication January 2004).

Sairya was awarded a scholarship from the International Justice Mission and successfully applied to Kalemyo University in north-west Myanmar. She is in her second year of a science degree and is a student leader on campus.

Case Study 2 – Naama
Naama was trafficked from her town of Keng Tong in Shan State Myanmar in 2003. She, along with seven other girls, were sold to a trafficker by their teacher. They were tricked one afternoon by the teacher into accepting a ride home in a pick up truck. Instead of being taken to their village they were transported to Chiang Mai and forced to work as prostitutes for several months. On November 11 2003, Naama was rescued in a raid on the brothel. After the raid, Naama testified against the men who had trafficked her before being returned to her home village. After she was ‘rescued’ from the brothel she spent most her time preparing for the court case. She had learnt English in primary school and participated in the initial lessons but then decided that she did not want to learn English or participate in further English language lessons. She did participate in some vocational education classes such as dress making and cooking lessons. After returning to her village in Burma, she struggled to find work. For a few months she operated a small food stall but that only provided her and her family with a meagre income. She then started working as a prostitute. In March this year she was seven months pregnant and had been diagnosed with a venereal disease. She said she didn’t want to work as a prostitute but because there were no other jobs she didn’t see she had a choice (Personal Communication IJM social worker 2005). Social workers said because the
Thai government was so keen to repatriate victims of trafficking, there was now little time for rehabilitation between when the girls were rescued and when they were returned to their home villages.

**Case Study 3 – Giitam**

Giitam grew up in a village in north-west Myanmar. She was a member of the Chin ethnic minority group in northern Myanmar, who live in the border areas that neighbour Bangladesh. She was 14 when a man came to her village seeking domestic helpers and waitresses for his business in Chiang Mai. He gave her parents the first month’s salary Giitam would earn and told them that their daughter would be able to send most of what she earned back to the family. Because the family were poor they agreed to allow their daughter to go to northern Thailand. However, soon after arriving in Thailand, Giitam was locked in a room for two years and forced to work as a prostitute. She was ‘rescued’ in a brothel raid by Thai authorities in May 2003. Shortly after the raid she arrived at the New Life Center and was offered the chance to study English as a foreign language. She actively participated in the classes conducted at the centre three days each week. She had studied English at primary school and had an elementary to lower intermediate spoken English competency. Unlike Sairya, Giitam did not wish to pursue extra English classes, but would occasionally use English to talk about her experiences inside the brothel. She was repatriated to her home village in September 2003. During her five months at the centre, Giitam’s English language spoken competency increased to a lower intermediate level. Upon returning to Myanmar, Giitam decided to move from her village in a remote part of the country to the capital Yangon. She has now obtained work at Yangon’s Booyake Aung San market. She hopes that her work experience in the fruit shop and her improved level of English will provide her the opportunity to work as a receptionist in a guest house or hotel for foreign tourists. She said:

> There was nothing for me in village and people knew what I had done. My English is no good, but much better and by living in the city I have more chance of work. I want to study more English (Personal Communication April 2005).

**Case Study 4 - Letim**

Letim lived with her husband and two young children in Yangon. She operated a food stall in one of the city’s busy streets. She was contacted by her sister who lived in the Myanmar border town of Tachilek, which borders northern Thailand. Her sister told her that a man had contacted her looking for workers, particularly cooks, in northern Thailand. Because she knew Letim was a very good cook and her family was struggling financially she thought this may be a good opportunity for them to earn some money. Letim decided to work in Thailand for a year and met the man offering her work. However, rather than taking her to work in a restaurant, she was forced to work as a prostitute in Chiang Mai. Letim worked in a Chiang Mai brothel for six months before she was rescued. Once she was rescued she came to the New Life Center. She said she had never learnt English and that she did not want to learn English or participate in the English language lessons. Understandably she struggled to cope emotionally with what she had been through and with being separated from her children. After eight months at the New Life Center she was repatriated to Myanmar in December 2003. Before she left Thailand she was diagnosed as having HIV/AIDS. Since returning to Myanmar, Letim has been reunited with her children, however, her husband has left her. She lives in Yangon and she again set up her food stall. Now she is mostly too ill to work and she has no regular income. No one but her parents knows she has HIV/AIDS.
These case studies highlight different stories and support Giles and Coupland’s argument related to positive distinctiveness. As they argue, language acquisition can enhance an individual’s own positive self-esteem which can in turn empower the individual.

These case studies suggest that learning English as a foreign language has for these victims of trafficking not only provided positive self-esteem but has also served to provide hope and alternatives to sexual exploitation. However, those who have not participated in the English language program have often struggled once returning to Myanmar. Case studies one and three support Heller and Weedon’s argument that it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and that it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give the learner new opportunities (Heller 2003, p.473). Sairya and Giitam saw their ‘investment’ in learning English to be advantageous on their return to Myanmar. Over time, their communicative competence developed to include an awareness of how they could challenge and transform their lives in Myanmar. It would be rash to attribute the success of those who have learnt English purely to the language attribution process. As Fairclough argues:

I am not suggesting that power is just a matter of language. There is always a danger, in focusing upon one aspect of a social relation or process, of being tempted to reduce it to that aspect alone, especially if as in this case it is a neglected aspect (Fairclough 1989. p.3).

In such complex linguistic, ethnic and emotional environments there are clearly many factors at play. The fourth case study provides clear evidence for this. However, what this research highlights is that English language acquisition in these contexts may not only be about acquiring a new language, but acquiring a new outlook on life, that is crucial to breaking cycles of poverty and exploitation.

Conclusion

This paper has confirmed Fairclough’s argument that there is direct connection between language and notions of socially-constructed power. Although Fairclough’s argument does not relate directly to teaching English as a second or foreign language, this paper has demonstrated that these notions are relevant when a person acquires an L2. In his breakthrough research Fairclough states: “Language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation (1989, p.1).” The case studies in this paper demonstrate that notions and feelings of disempowerment can be overcome by acquiring English as a foreign language. As case studies one and three demonstrate, acquiring English for these victims of human trafficking, provided the skill and positive self-esteem necessary for successful repatriation in Myanmar. It was not a negative but a positive language acquisition experience. Case study 2 who chose not to participate in the English language program returned to a life of prostitution after being repatriated. This case study demonstrates how vocational skills may have equipped her but they did not break the cycle of prostitution. It must be acknowledged that the sample used in this paper is small and the language program is in its infancy; however, the initial results demonstrate that those who participate in the language program are repatriated with levels of success that break cycles of poverty and exploitation. Despite these initial findings it is acknowledged that additional research would have to be conducted on this to provide a more definitive outcome. Although the preliminary findings in this paper support this, one issue that cannot be denied is that teaching English as a foreign language is being used in northern Thailand as a means of repatriating girls and young women who have been trafficked into the sex industry. Rather than leaving these girls without a future, as Jones argues, ‘rescuing’ girls from Thailand’s sex industry has been a life-changing experience that has provided young women with a future.
career and education in Myanmar. It would be a cynical oversight to claim otherwise. Teaching English as a foreign language is not only a linguistic issue, it is a process that can have positive impacts on individuals and societies socially, ethnically and culturally.
Bibliography


**Websites**

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