English language teaching: linguistic and cultural imperialism?

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Abstract

Este trabalho examina a posição do Inglês como língua internacional em termos de forças políticas e econômicas que contribuíram para a posição dominante do inglês na arena mundial. O trabalho examina a acusação de que o ensino de inglês como segunda língua ou língua estrangeira contribui para o imperialismo lingüístico e cultural e desafia o pressuposto de que os falantes nativos de inglês são necessariamente os melhores professores. Recomenda-se aos profissionais de língua inglesa a adoção de uma filosofia de relativismo pragmático na sua avaliação das necessidades do aprendiz de forma a evitar tendências etnocêntricas em seus currículos.

> To put things more metaphorically, whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them.
>
> Robert Phillipson (1992, p.1)

> If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for me.
>
> United States Member of Congress[1]

INTRODUCTION

The position of English as today's most widely-used language has variously been a source of wonderment and alarm to observers. Most of the first chapter of *The Story of English* is a panegyric to the language in all its diverse applications and indispensability to the smooth functioning of world affairs (McCrum *et al.*, pp.19-48). Not all feel so elated about this situation, however, and even a cursory analysis of the transformation of the language from the speech of a few isolated Germanic tribes (the starting-point chosen in *The Story of English*) into the modern *lingua franca*, and in particular of the last few hundred years of that process, reveals why: The spread of English is a by-product of British and American imperialist expansion, and has resulted in what some (e.g., Day, 1981) have called linguistic and cultural genocide.

If this is indeed the case, it raises some important questions for members of a profession whose *raison d'être* is the dissemination of this language: If English has become the gateway to the scientific, technological, and business worlds, then does the knowledge of English – or lack of it – deepen intranational and international stratification along established class lines? Are English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals complicit in propagandizing the Americanization / Westernization of the world and thus supporting the capitalist agenda of the Core[2] countries? Does ELT promote an ethnocentric and elitist perspective through its materials and methodologies? If, on the other hand, English has by now become,

as many believe, the epitome of a "public domain" commodity, does ELT further unity and cooperation by promoting a shared communication tool? Is it possible to identify and teach an "International English", free from anachronistic and irrelevant cultural information, to better serve the needs of the world's citizenry?

These are issues with which ELT professionals frequently struggle. The debate involves all areas of the profession, as it questions some of the basic assumptions of both theoretical and applied linguistics – to the extent of challenging the use of "native" and "non-native" in the context of English speakers – but most of all it is of significance to the practitioner. This paper will examine some of the principal themes in the debate, as seen from both the teacher's and the learner's perspective, in an attempt construct a philosophical and attitudinal framework for those who are or wish to be involved in this field.

"INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE" OR "WORLD ENGLISHES"?

Before embarking on an investigation of the issues outlined above, it is worth pausing to examine the extent to which English is used in today's world, the glossography[3] of the language, to borrow Nayar's term. This is a much harder task than one might suppose. Bryson (1990, p.180) points out that even in those countries where English is supposedly the first language, there are millions of inhabitants who do not speak the language at all, so that a best estimate of this population would be between 300 million and 400 million. English is also the second or official language in more than thirty other countries, so that *The Story of English* gives a figure of 750 million for those that "use" the language (McCrum *et al.*, 1986, p.19), which is about the same as the number of people who speak Mandarin Chinese. Impressive though this statistic is, however, it does not begin to reflect the number of people who use English in the dozens of scientific, technological, and professional fields in which it has become the standard medium of communication.

What the above estimates fail to do, however, is give any indication of what is meant by "English" and this is where the discussion begins to have relevance for the ELT profession, which has traditionally promoted at best two dialects or varieties[4]: "The Queen's English" and Standard American English – both of which are spoken by a minority of people in those countries. The resemblance between these two mythical standards is indisputably strong, but not enough prevent frequent misunderstandings between speakers of each, for contextual and historical reasons thoroughly explored elsewhere (see McCrum *et al.*, 1986; see also Bryson, 1994 and 1990 for extensive bibliographies). The lexical, phonological, and syntactic components of these varieties exist on continua on which can also be found, for example, Scottish English, Black English Vernacular, and more than sixty creoles such as Hawaiian and Neo-Melanesian, all of which are claimed by their speakers to be English, and many of which are mutually unintelligible.

No less complex is the case of those countries where English is used as a second or official language. Whether English was chosen for practical reasons, as in the case of Namibia (see Phillipson, 1992, pp.288-9) or is a legacy of colonialism (as in India, sub-Saharan Africa, or the Philippines), the socio-linguistic context has not remained static. A case in point is India. Kachru describes the process by which the language has been adopted and adapted thus:

> The elite language was eventually used against the Englishmen, against their roles and their intentions; it became the language of resurgence, of nationalism, and political awakening at one level. (Kachru, 1984, p.184)

In other words, English is controlled to those who use it, and it is theirs to do with as they see fit. Several commentators have made the point that in spite of its imperialist past, English is serving a useful purpose in countries where ethnic divisions would make the choice of official language extremely troublesome. A case in point is India, where no more than 16 percent of the population speak any one

of 1, 652 languages and dialects. In such a situation, English has certain practicalities. As Kachru puts it:

> English does have one clear advantage, attitudinally and linguistically: It has acquired a *neutrality* in a linguistic context where native languages, dialects, and styles sometimes have acquired undesirable connotations. Whereas native codes are functionally marked in terms of caste, religion, and so forth, English has no such "markers", at least in the non-native context. It was originally the foreign (alien) ruler's language, but that drawback is often overshadowed by what it can do for its users. (Kachru, 1984, p.185)

This is not to say that English is being taught in all schools in India, much less that all education is conducted in English. In fact, no more than five percent of Indians speak English,[5] but this five percent are the regional political and economic elites, who need a common language in order to communicate among themselves. It is this context that English is taught in Indian schools, when it is taught at all. This is not always the case, however. Phillipson (1992) describes a number of cases in which economic development aid to developing countries has been contingent upon or at least supplemented by language and education policies which, apart from resulting in subtractive bilingualism (or less charitably, linguistic genocide), actively promote an Core-ethnocentric perspective. Some of the reasons for this are discussed in more detail below, but what is of interest here is that the evolution of the *lingua franca* is not being left to chance.

Few students of English as a foreign language are disturbed by, or perhaps even aware of, the degree of heterogeneity in this "international language", and the vast majority opt for one or other of the two "standards". This has the dual effect of further promoting standardization – to the point where many native-speaker ELT professionals feel compelled to adjust their own speech in order to conform – and of reinforcing the mythical superiority of these varieties. Nayar takes a pragmatic, if slightly cynical, view of this

matter. The supremacy of one variety over others is a bi-product of the global political economy, and has nothing whatsoever to do with superiority. This may seem to be laboring the point, but there are those who see the prodigious literature, lexical richness, and pedigree of American and British English as evidence of some inherent linguistic superiority, and reason enough for the world to want to learn it. Nayar predicts that:

> [The] Old varieties will generally retain some norm-providing role until the New varieties develop sufficiently strong armies and navies and technology behind them, if not dictionaries and grammars. (It is interesting to note that the U.S. thought of Britain as a de facto norm provider well into the twentieth century; Australia no longer thinks of Britain as the norm provider; and Singapore is slowly discovering its own English muscles.) (Nayar, 1994, p.2)

Of course, notwithstanding the issue of superiority, a strong case can be made for standardization. There is, after all, no point in learning Hawaiian Creole if you are a Korean who does a lot of business in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, what should such a Korean learn, and more importantly, how should he or she learn it? The obvious answer is that a language student should learn the language of the speech community in which he or she intends to operate, but in the world of international affairs, this is an unrealistic expectation. Since English has become the language of international business (a speech community itself), it makes sense to study English. Two further questions then arise: What *is* international business English, and how is it used? Unfortunately, there is very little empirical data to answer either of these questions. Here, as elsewhere, there are "new affiliations, affinities and loyalties" at work, to use Nayar's expression, so that our Korean businessperson may or may not need to know, say, how to compliment a client's wife's cooking.[6]

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

For ELT practitioners much of the debate about linguistic and cultural imperialism revolves around the question of whether language teaching should include culture teaching. This is the area in which teachers often feel most uncomfortable, and, when asked to use curricula and materials that are heavily ethnocentric, most like cultural imperialists. As anthropologists have repeatedly pointed out, however, there is a certain futility in the attempt to separate the two: meaning in language is only possible because of the accumulation of cultural texts[7] to which any new text can be related. In a sense, then, the teaching of culture is inevitable and necessary. Of course, at some levels, "culture" is easy to spot – and to avoid, if so desired – as the following teacher commentary illustrates:

> How appropriate is a textbook that contains a dialogue and patterns teaching a Thai learner how to introduce herself to a stranger at a party, when a) Thais typically don't have Western-style parties. b) It is culturally inappropriate in Thailand to walk up to a complete stranger and introduce oneself. One usually waits for or approaches a third party to make introductions. (Gwyn Williams, TESL-L 11/4/93)

The answer, once again, depends on the speech community in which one intends to operate. If, for example, a Thai needs to function in a US setting, then such a textbook would be entirely appropriate. Stern (1992) identifies six aspects of culture about which the average language learner is likely to require information: places; individual persons and way of life; people and society in general; history; institutions; and art, music, literature, and other major achievements. The explicit teaching of this content, however, has to be done at the request of the learner, wherever the teaching is taking place. Even when students are involved in the process of content selection (see Nunan, 1988, pp.62-6) mismatches can occur, such as the following:

> As a context for the presentation of a structure (I think it was comparatives, or something like that), I elicited the name of a

> famous person from the class, and they came up with Princess Diana (who had recently been in the news). One of my [Egyptian] students almost jumped down my throat. "I come here all the way from the Southern Suburbs to learn about Princess Diana!", she shouted in absolute disgust. Perhaps rather an extreme example, but one which shows how little British culture and society has to do with the language most (I would dare to say almost all) of my students, for starters, want to learn. (B. Khouri, TESL-L 5/6/97 – emphasis added)

At other levels, however, the cultural texts or metatexts to which the language relates are not so easy to identify. Most teachers trained in the US or Britain today would describe their methodology as "communicative" to a greater or lesser extent. There is a very real danger, however, that "communicative" in this context means "communicating like me," using discourse strategies which are wholly appropriate in the US context but not so elsewhere, as in the following example:

> When I ask a Japanese woman standing at a US bus stop if the bus stops here, she should give a yes/no answer, not giggle and say "maybe." When I ask an auto repairman in Turkey to tell me when my car will be repaired, and he replies: "God willing," I can understand that he replies thus because he believes it blasphemous to predict the future (and because he knows how hard it is to get spare parts). (Judith Snoke, TESL-L 9/5/92)

Once again, the matter needs to be resolved by a careful analysis of the target speech community: The Turkish mechanic would not do a roaring trade in the US[8], and, if he had any intention of emigrating to that country, would need to know why. The question of methodological appropriateness goes deeper than this, however. Hunter (1996) asserts that in the expectations of most students who are unfamiliar with Communicative Language Teaching, good language learning is still equated with error-free output, and that

> [a]s a corollary, good language teaching is equated with sequenced, structured input and consistent correction of erroneous output. This poses a very real dilemma for the teacher who espouses a

> communicative approach, since her primary objective is to nurture communicative competence in her students, rather than total accuracy. (Hunter, 1996, p.1)

This objective will meet with opposition in the EFL classroom if, for example, the cultural norms of the learners prohibit the production of erroneous utterances – or any utterances at all, as in the following example:

> The Chinese cultural script for what is permissible in class does not include students overtly communicating. Interestingly, whispering to each other does seem to be permissible. However, my American/professional script for the language classroom demands a more overt commitment to communication. I don't think this is cultural imperialism. Maybe it is methodology. (Roger Chrisman, TESL-L 5/6/97)

THE CULT OF THE "NATIVE SPEAKER"

What emerges from the above discussion is the caveat that ELT professionals need to be aware of and sensitive to the cultural scripts of the speech community in which they are operating, just as the learner does. Phillipson, among others, charges that this is far from the reality in the ELT world as most native-speaker teachers function monolingually, coming as they do from countries such as the US and Britain which are notorious for their paucity of foreign-language programs. Furthermore, ELT has traditionally contended that only native-speakers can teach the language with authority, a tenet which Phillipson flatly states "has no scientific validity" (1992, p.195). In contrast, non-native speakers

> may in fact be better qualified than native speakers, if they have gone through the laborious process of acquiring English as a second language and if they have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners. Success in learning a foreign language, particularly in learning to speak it well, may correlate highly with success in teaching. (Phillipson, 1992, p.195)

If this is indeed the case, Phillipson concludes, native speakers who intend to teach ESL/EFL should, as a minimal requirement, have a proven competence in a foreign language and a detailed knowledge of the language and culture of their students.

Why, then, does the myth of native-speaker superiority persist? Given the constant lambasting visited upon native speakers of English for their lack of proficiency in their own language by the likes of William Safire and Randolph Quirk, one has to wonder. Nevertheless, native speakers are considered more authoritative, and their intuitions more trustworthy, than non-native speakers, regardless of age and exposure to the language. Nayar examines this phenomenon quite thoroughly, and offers the following explanation:

> Linguistic and communicative competence of all English speakers is evaluated, often incorrectly, in terms of the so-called native speaker norms...and even Second Language Acquisition theories [such as Krashen's] are based on observations of English learning in native speaking countries. (Nayar, 1994, p.5)

Now, a native speaking country might seem to be a reasonable starting-point for an investigation of language acquisition, and it would be if the language were one with a limited glossography, for example Serbo-Croatian. Nayar's point here is that, as has been discussed above, English is learned everywhere and for a multitude if purposes, and so the criteria by which it is judged grammatical should vary from context to context.

Even the term native speaker is suspect in Nayar's view, as it could be defined by a number of features, such as: "a) Primacy in order of acquisition; b) Manner and environment of acquisition; c) Acculturation by growing up in the speech community; d) Phonological, linguistic and communicative competence; e) Dominance, frequency and comfort of use; f) Ethnicity; g) Nationality/domicile; h) Self-perception of linguistic identity; i) Other-perception of linguistic membership and eligibility; j) Monolinguality" (Nayar, p.3). Of these, Nayar reasons – somewhat circularly – only the last is a true guarantee of native speakerdom,

as the monoglot has no other language to be a native speaker of. The importance of definition becomes apparent when one considers that cognitive or nativist language acquisition theories rely heavily on native-speaker intuition to separate the grammatical from the non-grammatical.

It is not necessary to undermine the entire edifice of modern linguistics, nor to do away with the terms themselves, to make the point that non-native speakers can be better teachers than native speakers in many contexts. But it is worth questioning the use of the terms as discriminatory devices, especially where hiring practices are concerned. Many administrators feel comfortable with the requirement that their teachers be native speakers, but might feel less so advertising for "monoglots only." [9]

LANGUAGE AND POWER

Significant though these issues are, however, they are something of a distraction from the more important question of what the global effects of the internationalization of English might be and why this internationalization is taking place. These are questions that many ELT professionals prefer not to ask themselves.[10] The most common response to the second question is that learners study English out of economic necessity, which is precisely the same reason that teachers teach it. While this is at least partly true (few teachers, it has to be said, get rich teaching English!) it does not obviate the need to analyze the nature of this "economic necessity," for as Pennycook (1990) asserts, language teaching that refuses to explore the cultural, economic, and political aspects of language learning has more to do with assimilating learners than empowering them.

Let us leave aside for a moment the issue of the individual teacher's role in and responsibility for this "assimilation" and focus on what is meant by the term. The post-colonial and post-Cold War period would seem to be more characterized by political nationalism

and self-determination than by the kind of imperialist aggression witnessed in the past 150 years, but the tools of the trade have changed with the times. Economic force has proved to be considerably more effective than military in both the speed and efficiency of establishing hegemony, and as Vera Menezes adds, "language is one of the reproduction agents of economic domination and constitutes, par excellence, what Bourdieu & Passeron call symbolic violence." (1991, p.4) Joshua Fishman, once a proponent of English as an international language, identifies the relation between the language and ideology, and urges that

> The relative unrelatedness of English to ideological issues in much of the Third World today must not be viewed as a phenomenon that requires no further qualification. Westernization, modernization, the spread of international youth culture, popular technology and consumerism are all ideologically encumbered and have ideological as well as behavioral and econo-technical consequences. (Fishman, 1987, p.8)

The ELT profession without doubt contributes to this process (perhaps even more so in the case of non-English-speaking Core countries), so much so that a government Minister from Sri Lanka wryly remarked that "English teaching is a bigger weapon in the armory of the English-speaking peoples than star wars."[11] (quoted in Phillipson, 1992, p.9) It is also a "weapon" that pays for itself, and indeed contributes billions of dollars a year to the US and UK economies. Nevertheless, the level of professionalism and organizational structure of ELT (even in the US and UK) are far from commensurate with its size, so that several commentators have likened it more to an industry than a profession (see Phillipson, 1992, p.5)

As a teacher, one has to be extremely careful not to respond to these issues with fatalism. Whatever the role of ELT, teachers are its principal agents and can thus effect changes within it. On the other hand, teachers have to be careful not to fall prey to the arrogance of judging what is and is not good for their students. After all, learners

choose to learn English, and often make incredible sacrifices in order to do so. This is not to say that one should not be aware of the forces at work, and of their effect. Many teachers, for example, would be horrified to learn of the pernicious effects that the dissemination of the language has had. For example, in India, "English is used as a tool of power to cultivate a group of people who will identify with the cultural and other norms of the political elite." (Kachru, 1984, p.181) Vera Menezes adds this example from Brazilian popular culture:

> In the seventies, many songs were composed in English by Brazilians who adopted English pseudonyms because they had realized that Brazilian people disdained their own language and overvalued English. The pseudonyms worked as masks to hide their Brazilian identities and contributed to reinforce the myth that foreign products are always better than native ones....Among many artists who joined this movement, we can mention, for instance... Morris Albert, who composed some of the songs which became famous all over the world , such as Feelings, Conversation and She's my girl. (Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva, 1991, p.6)

It is hard to imagine this degree of assimilation happening in the US or Britain if, say, Chinese were to become the dominant world language of the next century, which is not beyond the realms of possibility. On the other hand, the political and economic elites of any country tend to gravitate towards and promote the culture of the dominant regional or global nations, so perhaps the future US pop artists will compose in Mandarin under Chinese pseudonyms!

CONCLUSION

The ELT profession, as has been shown, cannot be entirely exonerated from charges of ethnocentricity and cultural and linguistic imperialism. The driving force of the profession has come from the US and UK, two countries characterized by their antipathy towards multilingualism, and this has necessarily shaped its perceptions, if

not the reality, of what "international English" is or should be. The language will not be controlled, however, as it obeys the same law in the international arena as it did in England and the US, namely that it changes to suit situationalized purposes. The implication of this for the profession are that it needs to become more inclusive and tolerant of linguistic diversity, and reassess its definitions of terms such as "native speaker", if it is not simply to be overtaken by developments. Teachers thus need to cultivate a philosophy of pragmatic relativism in their professional lives, realizing that the situationalized needs of their learners are more relevant than the linguistic and cultural agendas which they, the teachers, often have little say in anyway. This philosophy is wonderfully encapsulated in the following teacher commentary:

> Think...how much more motivated, more enfranchised, and more empowered our students might feel if they thought they had a bona fide stake in the life of the language, if, rather than discouraging playfulness and experimentation and correcting their essays down to conventionality and standards of correctness, we spent more time helping them develop a sense of what works and what doesn't. Doing so will bring us closer to the reality of an internationalized English which is much larger than any one of us can comprehend. It will also help us see that the language does not belong to any of us or even, finally, to all of us but that we belong to the language, and that each of us has rights to the language commensurate with our commitment to it. (Carol Renner, University of Regensburg, Germany[12])

NOTES

[1] Anonymously quoted in The Guardian, April 30th, 1988.

[2] The term "Core" is used to denote the political and economic hegemony of the industrialized countries of the West/North/First World, in contrast to the "Periphery", which consists of the developing and underdeveloped nations.

[3] "the historical-structural and functional aspects of the global spread, status, role and entrenchment of a language" (Nayar, 1994, p.1)

[4] This term is used in *The Story of English* "to avoid the pejorative overtones of *dialect.*" (McCrum *et al.*, 1986, p.13)

[5] according to Bryson (1990, p.187)

[6] Some of the "functions" units of business English coursebooks are the epitome of sexist and ethnocentric writing.

[7] *Text* in this context is taken to mean any piece of language, written or verbal.

[8] Or would he? There are no doubt some communities in the US where this answer would not seem inappropriate.

[9] Readers of this paper may wish to try the following exercise as a way of sounding out their own perceptions of *native* and *non-native*: Read through the paper and decide which of the quoted sources would easily fit into one or other category.

[10] As one teacher lamented, "the insistence that we be models of deportment and enlightenment is coercive. Neither administrators nor students have this sort of demand put on them. Most of us are part-timers, not through choice, who entered ESL out of sense of dedication to students and a love of language. Now we find that we must meet high moral and ethical standards as well." (Marianna Scheffer, TESL-L 6/3/96)

[11] meaning the national defense project, rather than the movie

[12] Response to P. B. Nayar (1994) in *TESL-EJ* [On-line journal]*, Vol. 1 Nº 1*, p.10

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