

Fears and Hopes: Globalization and The Teaching of The International Auxiliary Language

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While it is a familiar phenomenon for one language to serve as a lingua franca over a large area of many languages, for example, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and French, what is unusual, however, is that never before has a single language spread for such purposes over most of the world as English has done in this century. This article examines the fears and hopes associated with the globalization of the foremost international auxiliary language, namely English, and recounts its main implications for language teachers and the classroom.

As we near the year 2000, political scientists speak of a “New World Order”. Many dramatic changes have happened internationally. Who would have dreamt that the Iron Curtain would come down so quickly? The end of the Cold War and the relaxation of East-West tensions are unsettling national stabilities in several countries. Even the United Nations is finally gaining prominence in world events. It may be observed that with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1992, the world moved towards a stronger acknowledgement of its global finitude. At this point of time, it is obvious that globalism has not as yet assumed transcendence since nationalism is still the banner which every country still ascribes to. However, while global thinking is certainly not new, it is gaining recognition and acceptance. And while nationalism has traditionally been a dominant force in social identity, it is losing strength. Just as environmentalists encourage people to think globally and act locally, countries are beginning to juggle global concerns with national issues.

Suddenly, the rise of the big blue marble as the backdrop to television news, as the logo for international conferences, sports events and commercial enterprise is discernible in every corner. Whether we realise it or not, it has become the icon of the age. This world icon has come to represent a sign or symbol that not only denotes a set of ideas pertaining to globalism but also connotes, at one precise strike, such emotions as reverence, conviction and inspiration.

Until the second world war, the tallest buildings in any city or town provided stark witness to the leading belief systems. For many years, churches were probably the tallest buildings in any town. Only in the last few decade, have banks and office buildings come to dominate the urban landscape. The western world has moved through a variety or religious, emotional and social mindset. In the western world, Christianity has long been the dominant mind set. For many centuries, there was a pervasive use of crosses and other religious symbols. There are, of course, people who still continue to make the sign of the cross and wear crosses round their necks but this is no longer fashionable. A more predominant symbol since the 1950's has been the frightening and fatalistic image of the mushroom-shaped cloud of the atomic bomb. An atomic mushroom has consistently, if not consciously, ruled international relations and stimulated personal fears. Following this and perhaps as a result of the terror, or an effort to countermand that deep fear, we have just completed an era where the coca-cola sign was identified as the most widely recognised trademark. This image of consumerism, with its swirls and bubbled letters, has been surveyed as the most readily recognised symbol throughout the world.

Lately, however, a new symbol has entered our collective consciousness. The graphic portraits of the Earth could only be imagined until the 1960's. A satellite photo of the Earth first gained prominence at Expo 67. This image of the earth has since then penetrated every aspect of culture and media. The big blue marble icon is now pervasive. As with previous icons, the satellite picture of earth is now increasingly used as a motif on clothing and accessories, posters and in advertisements. This icon, symbolic of a new consciousness, proposes the important economic, political and social concerns that must be addressed in world shifts from the dominant paradigms of capitalist economies to a global (named in this case "environment") mindset that supersedes global limits in relation to conventional capitalist guidelines for economic development.

In the past, it was possible for people to be born into a family, to remain within the clan, live in a small community, work in a pre-assigned

occupation, and die without much accomplishment beyond having survived harsh conditions. Even today, masses of humanity are still living under such circumstances. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that the situation is changing. The technological advances that have greatly facilitated the movement of people and ideas have removed the barriers that have kept people apart and ignorant. Whether we like it or not, the era of isolation has come to an end. The global village heralds the dawn of association and integration.

Whenever there is change, there is resistance. Therefore, it is not surprising that we are also witnessing a huge world-wide increase in nationalistic and ethnic fervour in the world. These developments are the final efforts of various segments of humanity to establish and affirm their respective identities. From a psychological perspective, this is an essential aspect of the development of human societies, as well as human individuals.

By some stroke of its own sheer good fortune, the English language seems to be bound up in the phenomenon of globalism. One of the essential tenets of globalism is the emergence of an international auxiliary language. Each world war and technological development seem to propel it forward. Today, English is the indisputable language of international communication. It has official status in 60 countries and a prominent place in 20 more (Johnson 1996). It is the main language of books, academic journals, the media and international sports and entertainment. It does not appear to have any close rival and seems positioned to grow even stronger. While it is a familiar phenomenon for one language to serve as a lingua franca over a large area of many languages, for example, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and French, what is unusual, however, is that never before has a single language spread for such purposes over most of the world as English as done in this century.

Not surprisingly, it was only a matter of time before the moral and cultural implications of the phenomenal spread of English after the Second World War began to be questioned not just by philosophers or politicians but by language professionals themselves. By the eighties, more and more concerns began to surface regarding the theoretical, methodological, ethical and professional issues related to global spread and use of English¹ Researchers

began to question the spread of English as being “natural” and “neutral” and attempted to deconstruct “English” and “EIL”.

1. The “Worldliness” of English

In 1991, Tollefson (1991), argued that language education had become increasingly ideological with the spread of English. He showed how language is one criteria for determining which people would complete different levels of education. In other words, whenever people had to learn a new language to have access to education or to understand classroom instruction, language became a factor in creating and sustaining economic division..

In 1992, Phillipson’s (1992) book *Linguistic Imperialism*, an extensive study of “North-South inequalities and exploitation”, received a lot of attention when it first appeared.² Quoting an English language entrepreneur who said that “once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad; now we are sending English teachers,” Phillipson advanced the idea of “linguistic imperialism”, that is, that the spread of English was a post-colonial plot on the part of the core-English-speaking countries, which hoped to maintain their dominance over “periphery” (mostly developing) countries. Another term introduced by Phillipson was “linguicism”, a situation where the imposition of a language, in this case, English, was equated to the imposition of the cultural, social, emotional and linguistic norms of the dominating society onto the dominated society to maintain an unequal allocation of power and resources.

Other researchers worried that the dominance of English, if allowed to follow a natural course, would not only diminish the use of minority languages but replace them entirely (cf. Shannon 1995, Sonntag 1995). The study of “languages in contact” became increasingly to be viewed as “languages in competition” (Fishman 1991, Pool 1991). Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins (1988) described the phenomenon of linguistic hegemony

¹ For example, at the 26th Annual Convention of TESOL held on March 3-7, 1992 at Vancouver, Canada, there was a colloquium on *Partnership and patronage in ELT Development* to explore the methods, motives and effects of ELT in the countries of the Commonwealth and Eastern Europe.

² The book was immediately reviewed by five professionals in *World Englishes*, 1992, 12, 3, pp.335-373.

in the case of languages achieving the status of “dominant” or “prestigious” or “inferior” as a result of competition with other languages. Once a language achieve hegemonic status, dominated languages became more easily perceived as inferior and their speakers internalise their lowly status. Consequently users abandon their language for the dominated one. Throughout the world, similar scenarios have been played out between dominant and dominated languages, some examples being French vs. Breton, Turkish vs. Kurdish and neo-national vs. indigenous language.

Pennycook (1994) takes the argument of linguistic imperialism a few step further. He uses theories of post-modernism to deconstruct the discourse of English as an International Language (EIL), English, and indeed language, itself. His argument is that one can never just “teach a language” since it is bound up with its own worldly ideology. Pennycook develops the notion of the “worldliness of English” and devotes two central chapters to case studies of this phenomenon in Malaysia and Singapore. For Pennycook, English is a remnant of western imperialism, operating globally in conjunction with capitalist forces, especially in the operations of multinational corporations. Besides being the language of science and economic advancement, it is also the language of unequal distribution of wealth.

2. A Case Study

It is my view, however, that the fears of “linguistic hegemony”, “linguistic imperialism”, and “worldliness of English” ascribes too much power to the language, as opposed to the language policy makers and the language users. I will use the republic of Singapore as a case in point to illustrate how the dominance of English early in its history has come about not so much as a result of linguistic imperialism but through a conscious decision on the part of its leaders and populace, after the careful consideration of world trends and local conditions. The implementation of a national education system with English as the medium of instruction came about through a “bottom-up” rather than a “top-down” process and was attained relatively easily— without strong controversy or bloodshed.

Like the world at large, Singapore has many distinct races and cultures and is a multi-cultural community possessing extreme multilingualism, both individual and societal. It is also a unique country in the sense that is a place where the term “bilingualism” is not associated simply with minority groups, or with migrants, but one in which knowing and using several languages is expected. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that while many countries try to teach their children to be literate in more than one language, Singapore tries to do it in reverse — it tries to educate an entire population so that everyone is literate in English and at the same time has a reasonable knowledge of his mother tongue (Pakir 1994). A study of Singapore is therefore a study of how English has edged its way to become the principal school language, a major workplace language, the language of government, an ethnic link language, as well as a native language for an increasing number of children.

It must be noted, firstly, that it was a conscious choice on the part of the Singapore government not to indulge in the linguistic nationalism of many post-colonial countries but rather to concentrate on economic survival, which was invariably linked with political survival. In 1959, at the point of independence, Singapore was segmented by deep ethnic and linguistic segmentation. It was poor, had a rapidly rising birth-rate and possessed few prospects for economic survival. Political identity was contested terrain and it was dependent largely on external trade. To ensure its survival, it was deemed imperative that it should have a dominant language which would enable it to survive politically, socially and culturally. English was seen as the language which would attract foreign investment, and give the society the leading edge in education, academic achievement, international trade and business. The policy of economic nationalism, which had characterised many post-colonial states, was therefore eschewed for one of pragmatic viability in a changing world.

The possession of “linguistic capital” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), for example, ownership of the world’s foremost auxiliary language, was widely viewed as easily convertible into other forms of capital, such as educational qualifications and higher incomes. This belief was apparent in the large sums of money parents were willing to spend on language tuition for their children and in their personal choice of enrolling their children in English-medium

schools so as to give them a “headstart”.³ Not surprisingly, enrolments in Chinese, Tamil and Malay-medium schools began to decline sharply in the sixties and seventies.⁴ In the seventies, preference for enrolment into Primary One English-medium schools had risen to a ratio of 8:1. By 1978, the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had to specially intervene through a series of external measures to save the best Chinese schools as well as the Chinese-medium Nanyang University. To ensure their existence, 13 Chinese schools were selected by the Ministry of Education to continue teaching Chinese as a first language, but their students also had to learn English as a first language. Similarly, to ensure its survival, Nanyang University was amalgamated with the National University of Singapore through what was known as the Joint Campus scheme of 1978/1979.

The choice of English over that of Mandarin, Tamil and Malay as the medium of instruction in schools was therefore a “bottoms-up” decision by the populace, the defacto but “invisible” planner. While there has always been fears that the widespread adoption of English would lead to a loss of ethnic identity and more importantly, a loss of “Asian values”, yet the populace voted with their feet where choice of language-stream schools for their children’s education were concerned. When it came to the crunch, they valued a situation of an ethnic culture open to risks and changes but with increasing material returns as one preferable to the full retention of ethnic culture and history but with diminishing material returns. There was a pragmatic realisation that their lack of a command in English would mean the continued marginalization of their descendants in a world that would continue to use the language in greater and greater amounts. It would also deny them access to the extensive resources available in English, resources which have developed as a consequence of globalization.

While it has been argued that linguisticism violates the human rights of speakers of dominated languages, however, paradoxically, the aim of ensuring

³ The Census of 1980 showed English as a clear indicator of socio-economic status. Homes which declared English as a predominant household language had higher income levels.

⁴ With independence in 1959, Singapore decided to retain the system of four language-medium schools (English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay) to cater to the needs of the different ethnic groups.

human rights is often used to persuade speakers of languages other than English, that they should adopt English as their dominant language because English is the key to modernisation and thus political and economic power and control. Where minority languages are concerned, research has also shown that it is not so much numerical domination which is responsible for minority status but linguistic diversity. Countries with the most linguistic diversities often have serious racial problems and a poor economy (Robinson 1993:52-70). In addition, Fasold (1984) and Pool (1991) has shown how multilingualism leads to slower economic development. Recently, after years of economic nationalism, Malaysia (Singapore's closest neighbour), has also been following in Singapore's footsteps by renewing an emphasis in the learning of English in the hope of accelerating economic development for itself.⁵

Bilingualism and biculturalism are also not seemed as necessarily linked. In Singapore, the position is stated very clearly "yes" to English and "no" to western cultural values. Singaporeans like to think of their city as "modern" but not "western". Similarly, while English is the official language of ASEAN, ASEAN has not shown itself to be either pro-British or pro-American. In Hong Kong, students and their parents state their preference in English but show very little interest in supporting the weight of British, European, Western culture and civilisation. So although English is the world language, neither British and American seems able to use English to dominate international organisation or their policies as they might wish to.

Perhaps there is a lesson for the rest of the world grappling with the issue of cultural identity and language maintenance. One of the unfortunate aspects of the world debate on culture is the emphasis which some people place on the preservation of culture, almost with the same attitude that one has towards the preservation of museum pieces. A "pragmatic multilingualism" (Pakir 1991), such as that observed in Singapore, view the study of cultures as important human endeavours as long as the profit and prestige involved in these activities do not become motivating forces blocking the progress of a whole people. Preserving one's culture does not mean clinging on to the past

⁵ This returned attention to English is also happening in Sri Lanka.

but changing as one goes along. In the light of unceasing globalization and cultural diversity, perhaps it is time to highlight the use of the international auxiliary language more as a means to an end rather than as an emblem of culture.

For Singaporeans, the mechanistic view that English is incorrigibly permeated with imperialism and reaction is something quite alien since it denies the complex social potential of language. A language must be at the service of people who use it. There is a “pragmatic multilingualism” in existence, a situation where the population has knowingly done their calculations and view the adoption of English not so much as a threat to their own languages but as their response to globalism. English is seen as the key to a share of the world’s symbolic power, towards the accumulation of cultural, political and economic capital. If it was not English, some other world language would have to be adopted.

3. Implications for Teaching

The globalization of English holds many implications for the language teacher and the classroom. Perhaps the most important notion that children needs to learn is that just because a language is dominant, it is not superior to other linguistic options that by a different sets of historical chances might have been dominant. In order to do this, current language policy should favour bilingualism both as policy and classroom practice. At this point, it should be clear that we are talking about an international *auxiliary* language and not about a language to *replace* all the others. Bilingualism can be a source of great joy, increased intellectual development and creativity, and cultural sensitivity, and it is perfectly possible to organise education so that children develop high levels of competence in at least two languages. One notes that while English is the official language in, for example, Nigeria, it has not succeeded in displacing any of the indigenous language. The Scandinavians and Dutch with a good command of English have also not phrased out their own languages or been educated through the medium of English. Similarly, in Singapore, English is learnt in school together with another official language - Mandarin, Tamil or Malay.

Second, what language educators need to do is to devise language programmes which enable students to understand how their linguistic rights may best be served. In other words, if there is a tension created by their right to their language of choice and their right of access to the language of power, students need to know how to exercise these rights in their best interest. Students need to understand what possibilities exist for appropriating the language of power as opposed to being colonised by it. English teaching methodology needs to find a way of teaching which empowers students by enabling them to understand how they are positioned in and by it. First it has to reject a unitary view of language and a romantic view of communicative competence (Chew 1996). Critical pedagogies is needed to confront the worldliness of English (Pennycook 1994). In other words, education should not only produce knowledge but also critical subjects (Chew 1994).

In this respect, the language teacher should be fully aware of the relationship between language, education and inequality. He or she needs to ensure that students have access to a standard form of the language and yet at the same time encourage them to use English in their own way within the context of their own communicative situation, appropriately. While there should be a focus on particular parts of language that are significant in particular discourses, students should also be made aware that these forms represent only one set of particular possibilities (Chew 1995).

The language curriculum should begin to include the acceptance and recognition of varieties of languages. The only way to grasp the viability of the sudden emergence of English as the international auxiliary language is to realise that native and non-native users feel that it is their own possession, with its own range of users, its own body of users, and its own set of linguistic behaviours. There are many countries where institutionalised second language varieties of English has developed, for example, India, Kenya, and Puerto Rico and where the attitudinal conflict between indigenous and external norms is being resolved in favour of localised educated norms. Today, aggressive use of English, not just in Singapore but in other parts of the world, is changing the concept of ownership. English is beginning to function independently, without the participation of nation

speakers, for the use and benefit of non-native speakers. In Nigeria, for instance, it is no longer perceived as the imperial tongue and the reasons for learning it is pragmatic in nature. Bisong (1995) maintains that “Nigerians are sophisticated enough to know what is in their interest and their interest includes the ability to operate with the lingua franca in multilingual situation”. As is well known in Singapore, one language can, in act, be the courier of many cultures and sub-cultures, of myriad values and sets of values, of different religions and of antagonistic political systems as is the case of English (cf. Ho and Platt 1993, Gupta 1992). Some pertinent questions for the consideration of language educators are “What is lost and what is gained by the indigenization of English?” and “What constitutes an internationally viable variety of English?” (Janks 1996).

The diversity of races using English implies that the syllabus of the 21st Century must in large part contain not only the teaching of basic grammar but also the learning and identification of different pronunciation patterns, as well as aspects on the cultural structuring of information. Since grammatically acceptable standard English can be spoken with any accent, all learners would have to learn tolerance for different pronunciation patterns as well as the way different cultural groups structure information. Problems of intelligibility associated with the recognition of polymodels are generally a matter of exposure and familiarity. Grammatically acceptable standard English can be spoken with any accent. The listener who spend many hours of experience listening to a non-native speaker is apt to find a non-native speaker more intelligible than the listener who has never heard non-native English before and vice versa. With regards to intelligibility, it would be emphasised that the responsibility for effective communication must be shared by speaker and listener. Native speakers should learn tolerance for different pronunciation patterns as well as the ways in which non-native speakers structure information (Smith 1987).

The growth in the use of English should be seen more as part of the world-wide movement of globalism rather than as an aspect of linguistic imperialism. The recent emphasis on the study of power and domination in language use has led to a blinkered view where the growth of English is concerned. There seems to be a denial of the salient underlying momentum of

the whole of the 20th century - globalization. A new world requires new ways of perception and new responses to change. As language educators, we can at least be aware of the fears and hopes of the “new world order”. We can begin to see change as an educative process and commence looking for principles to provide a new intellectual framework to simultaneously protect and nourish diverse cultural groups while enfranchising them as members of an emerging world community. We must recognise the role that an international auxiliary language has to play in the emerging global civilisation. If students are to flourish in today’s multicultural world, provincial educational model must be replaced with a more sophisticated multicultural approach that proceeds from the bedrock realisation of the world as a global village.

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