

## Empowerment or Disempowerment: That is the Question (English as an international language) in EIL

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### Abstract

English has become the dominant global language of communication, business, industries, entertainment, diplomacy, politics, science and the internet. Governments as well as some scholars appear to be accepting such a spread of English uncritically. Over a billion people speak English as their second or foreign language; these second- and foreign-language speakers of English include millions of migrant and immigrant English as a Second Language (ESL) school-age students, over 560,000 international ESL university students in the US and over 137,000 in Canada (OECD 2003) and about a billion others in the rest of the world speak English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Guo and Beckett, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to argue whether the increasing dominance of the English language is contributing to neocolonialism by empowering the already powerful and leaving the disadvantaged further behind, an issue that needs attention. Specifically, the paper will start how English has become an international language since 1871 and then will discuss how English as a dominant language worldwide is forcing a pedagogical and social culture on to its learners, along the way socio-psychologically, linguistically and politically putting them in danger of losing their first languages, cultures and identities, and contributing to the devaluation of local knowledge and cultures. Drawing on the work of critical theorists who have pointed out the close relationship between language and power, the paper will strive to show how the global spread of English is not only a product of globalization, but also the most potent instrument of cultural control and cultural construct of neocolonialism.

**Key Words:** EIL(English as an international language), English, empowerment

English has become the dominant global language of communication, business, industries, entertainment, diplomacy, politics, science and the internet. Governments as well as some scholars appear to be accepting such a spread of English uncritically. These second- and foreign-language speakers of English include millions of migrant and immigrant English as a Second Language (ESL) school-age students (Faltis, 2006), over 560,000 international ESL university students in the United States and over 137,000 in Canada (OECD 2003). About a billion others in the rest of the world speak English as a Foreign Language. The purpose of this study is to argue that the increasing dominance of the English language is contributing to neocolonialism by empowering the already powerful and leaving the

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disadvantaged further behind, an issue that needs attention. Specifically, the study will start how English has become an international language since 1871 and then will discuss how English as a dominant language worldwide is forcing an unfamiliar pedagogical and social culture on to its learners, along the way socio-psychologically, linguistically and politically putting them in danger of losing their first languages, cultures and identities, and contributing to the devaluation of local knowledge and cultures. Drawing on the work of critical theorists who have pointed out the close relationship between language and power, the study also aims to show how the global spread of English is not only a product of colonialism, but also the most potent instrument of cultural control and cultural construct of colonialism.

David Crystal (1997:1) opened his much-cited book on English as a Global Language by claiming 'English is a global language,' he wrote, 'the kind of statement which seems so obvious that most people would give it hardly a second thought. The notion that the language no longer 'belongs' to its native speakers has been used to predicate a claim to its emancipation from Anglo-American culture. To trace the major historical moves in the theorizing of English, particularly in relation to its teaching started with national language, through its aggressive imperial stage, to its apparently 'post-cultural' status as a 'global language' that belongs to one and all (Kayman, 2004:2).

English is presented to us nowadays as, for the first time, a 'true' world language: not any longer a linguistic 'kingdom' but a stateless medium for communicating in a global community. If the 'kingdom' of language and the language of 'kingdoms' related to issues of national culture, what happens to the politics of language in the move from kingdom to global means of communication. In the words of a former director-general of the British Council, Sir John Hanson: 'The world wants to speak English – who doubts it?'. As opposed to Spenser's aspiration to national linguistic sovereignty (cited in Kayman, 2004) the success of English is presented as the result of the world's desire for a language in which to communicate, not just with anglophone nations, but with each other. The desire

to communicate redoubles the natural grounding of the status of English as global language.

Kayman goes on citing another scholar in the process of English being a global language that in 1871, E.A. Abbott, an influential educationalist and author of the first Shakespearian grammar, gave a lecture to the College of Preceptors, 'On Teaching the English Language', in which he sought to 'lay down one law for our teaching – that it shall be independent of Latin'. Abbott goes on: "I will ask you to consider this Lecture as a kind of declaration of independence on the part of our mother tongue, a protest that the English language ought to be recognized as requiring and enjoying laws of its own, independent of any foreign jurisdiction".

While the children of the lower classes were put to school in Britain to become good Englishmen and women, in the wake of the Anglicists' victory in the debate on Indian education in 1835, English literature was also employed to teach students in British India the tongue of the colonial 'mother country'. As Gauri Viswanathan and others have made amply clear, the study of English was central to Britain's rule of India, purposefully aimed, in Lord Macaulay's infamous words, 'to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'.

English, taught through the literature, was conceived explicitly as a vehicle for the imposition of cultural values. Trench (1854) links this patriotic project to the imperial mission, as he ends his first lecture on 'English Past and Present' by quoting the famous passage from the great German philologist Jacob Grimm, 'the scholar who in our days is most profoundly acquainted with the great group of the Gothic languages in Europe': In truth the English language, which by no mere accident has produced and upborne the greatest and most predominant poet of modern times, as distinguished from the ancient classical poetry, may with all right be called a world-language; and, like the English people, appears destined hereafter to prevail with a sway more extensive even than its

present over all the portions of the globe. For in wealth, good sense, and closeness of structure no other of the languages at this day spoken can be compared with it – not even our German.

The move in early British foreign-language teaching theory to release it from its culturally thick imperial context resulted, in effect, in a theoretical version of language that radically loosened language's relation to culture as well. As early as 1884, the 'original' for Henry Higgins, Henry Sweet, had attacked contemporary philology in the name of 'The practical study of language'. Sweet's critique of contemporary philology strikingly sets up a series of what have become very familiar and abiding binaries that underlie the idea of 'just the language' – not least of which is the association of language with practicality, rather than with cultural values. Sweet begins his article on 'Words, logic, and grammar' of 1876 as follows: One of the most striking features of the history of linguistic science as compared with zoology, botany, and the other so-called natural sciences, is its one-sidedly historical character. Philologists have hitherto confined their attention to the most ancient dead languages, valuing modern languages only in as far as they retain remnants of older linguistic formations – much as if zoology were to identify itself with palaeontology, and refuse to trouble itself with the investigation of living species, except when it promised to throw light on the structure of extinct ones.

The idea of English as a 'practical' language, divorced from its cultural history, was taken up enthusiastically by the early promoters of English as an international language associated with the British Council in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1941 H.V. Routh, the first Byron Professor of English in Athens, looked forward to the end of the war and foresaw that: In the eyes of the world, and especially of Europe, England will no longer be one nation among others competing for cultural prestige. She will be the dominating force in international politics, the professed and confessed arbiter of liberty. This hegemony will, of course, enormously enhance our influence, but not our popularity.

In his account of the progress of English as a global language, Crystal (1997) points out that the prospect that a lingua franca might be needed for the whole world is something which has emerged strongly in the twentieth century, and since the 1950s in particular. The international forum for political communication – the United Nations – dates only from 1945. Since then, many international bodies have come into being, such as the World Bank (also 1945), UNESCO and UNICEF (both 1946), the World Health Organization (1948) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (1957).

Yet the publication of Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* at the beginning of the 1990s may in a way mark the end of the term's usefulness (more recently, while not abandoning the term, Phillipson has moved towards the language of 'linguistic ecology'). Nigel Newton, responsible for Bloomsbury Publishing, embarked on the project because it was clear in this period towards the end of the Cold War that the English language was gaining a level of adoption by non-native speakers which could never have been dreamt of by propagandists among the Cold Warriors themselves. English has become the preferred language of communication in the same way that so many propositions that have been around for a long time suddenly achieve widespread acceptance. Rather than a result of the Cold War victory of neoliberalism, English characteristically becomes 'the preferred language of communication' with the authority of a natural process. However, if we are to accept Newton's invitation to see English as a world lingua franca in the context of international politics, particularly the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, we cannot help but raise the question of its relation to the culture or cultures of the 'New World Order'.

The communications revolution – computers, the Internet, satellite communications – has been strategically deployed in many accounts as central to the process of globalisation, bracketed outside the terrains of power as simply the vehicle that facilitates the flows of power and value. As Anthony Giddens put it in his 1999 Reith Lectures, 'Globalisation is political, technological and cultural, as well as economic. It has been influenced above all by developments in systems of communication, dating back only to the late 1960s.'

At least from a chronological point of view, English-language teaching theory led the way in this double 'communications revolution'. It was precisely while the technology for e-mail, the Internet and the World Wide Web was being developed that the theoretical and pedagogical grounds for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) were laid out. The popular collection of essays edited by Christopher Brumfit and Keith Johnson in *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching* was published in the same year that the first IBM PC came on the market (1979).

The intended effect of this specification, to use the author's own language of presence, vitality and freedom, 'was to "convert language teaching from structure-dominated scholastic sterility into a vital medium for the freer movement of people and ideas" with the an emphasis on the use of language in direct person-to-person encounters'.

Literary studies and the developing energies of cultural studies were of course moving at the time in quite the opposite direction, emphasizing cultural difference and the materiality of the text, and embracing all media as cultural texts. Thus, characteristically, Jacques Derrida began his 1972 polemic with John Searle by asking: 'Is it certain that to the word communication corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable?' None the less, the priority of 'communication' over 'culture', and the aligning of language with the former in English-language teaching was reinforced in the 1980s when, again largely sponsored by the British Council, attention turned to 'language-based approaches to literature' or the teaching of 'language through literature', both of which sought to subordinate cultural texts to the theories and methodologies of communicative language teaching. By far the largest single group of language learners everywhere consists of people who want to prepare themselves to communicate socially with people from other countries, exchanging information and opinions on everyday matters in a relatively straightforward way, and to conduct the necessary business of everyday living when abroad with a reasonable degree of independence. The Threshold Level was the first attempt to set out in systematic detail just what such an objective implies in terms of the situations the learners might have to

deal with and what they should be able to do by means of language in those situations – what feelings and ideas they would need to express, or ask about, or argue about. Thus, for example, the most recent specification, Threshold 1990, offers the possibility of constructing interesting cultural narratives. The first function that is introduced is ‘imparting and seeking factual information’. This begins with ‘Identifying (defining)’ – examples given include: ‘This is the bedroom’, ‘He is the owner of the restaurant’, ‘the train has left’. This function is followed by a long section for ‘Expressing and finding out attitudes’. This starts again with ‘factual, agreement, etc.’ – e.g. ‘I (quite) agree’, ‘That’s correct’ –before moving on to six categories of ‘volitional’ followed by twenty-nine categories of ‘emotional’ attitudes. Next comes ‘Deciding on courses of action (Suasion)’ – e.g. ‘Let’s go’, ‘Shall we dance?’–, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, leads to ‘Socialising’ – e.g. ‘Excuse me’, ‘Hullo’, ‘I say. . .’. Then comes ‘Structuring discourse’ (e.g. ‘Ladies and gentlemen!’, ‘Ahem’, ‘As I see it, terrorists are murderers’), which is followed, finally (and somewhat poignantly), by ‘Communication Repair’ (‘signalling non-understanding’ – e.g. ‘Sorry, I don’t understand’ or ‘Could you repeat that please?’)

Language teaching becomes not only an instruction in ‘the language’, but equally a training in ‘communicating’, in types of behaviour. Deborah Cameron (1995) has persuasively demonstrated the relation between the recent promotion of ‘communication skills’ in education, the workplace, and the popular culture of self-improvement, and the construction of contemporary ‘enterprise culture’ which transforms citizens into consumers.

As a result of the new world order emerging from the Second World War which was dominated by the USA, English is established as the world’s principal international language (Williams, 1987: 15) Consequently English was the first and very often the only foreign language taught at school level in the West European countries: In fact “ the teaching of at least one widely spoken European language to pupils from the age of ten, envisaged by the Council of Europe (1969) was reduced in reality to the teaching of English and nothing but English, to the vast majority of school children all over Europe.

One of the outstanding features of foreign language teaching in Europe is its unbalanced and naive preference for English as an international language, a preference that does not allow for regional language needs (Schroder & Zapp; 1983:121-123).

Drawing on the work of critical linguists such as Fairclough (1995) and Pennycook (1998), who have drawn the attention to the close relationship between language and power, it is possible to see how the global spread of English is not only a product of colonialism, but also the most potent instrument of cultural control (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995) and cultural construct of colonialism (Pennycook 1998). Some scholars echo the critique of the spread of English as 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson 1988), which may impoverish indigenous languages and cultures (Cooke 1988; Phillipson 1992) and privilege certain groups of people while having an adverse effect on others who do not have as much access to English language learning (Pennycook 1995). They show how these are manifested in reality, discuss the theoretical underpinnings of such manifestations, and call for a critical treatment of the dominance of the English language by helping learners to develop critical language awareness in order to contest and change practices of domination (Fairclough, 1995) and by reclaiming the local in this global phenomenon (Canagarajah 2005).

Velikala (2008: 167) mentions how an Indian sees globalization. "you see, we come here with lot of hopes ... But, we only learn their accent, their academic writing... What is international in this? See, ultimately, it is we who learn to eat sandwiches and not that they learn to eat chapatti. In his book *Linguistic Imperialism*, Robert Phillipson asserts that 'globally, what we are experiencing is that English is both replacing other languages and displacing them' (1992, 27). As a global language, English has become a requirement for decent employment, social status and financial security in various parts of the world, including language minority areas whose inhabitants must learn the dominant language of their countries. For example, the Uighurs in the north-western People's Republic of China (PRC) are feeling increasing pressure to learn Mandarin Chinese as well as English for their basic survival, making local languages and knowledge irrelevant. This is pressuring

parents to send their children to schools that teach in Mandarin Chinese so that their children learn Chinese, English and academic subjects. This seems to be causing terrible social and psychological displacement as well as the loss of their first language and culture and identity, as children learn the socially constructed 'high' value of the English language and the 'irrelevance' of their first language at the young age of 5. (Maya, India)

Learners who come from diverse cultures of learning to participate in the UK higher education system read the role of the English language in terms of its power in reshaping their process of knowing. They feel that the power of the English language and the discourse that is appreciated within UK academia encourage them to feel and become particular selves going about learning in particular ways. While some students resist this kind of intellectual transmutation during their stay at the university, others question the absence of appreciation for other ways of coming to know. They make an attempt to understand how the act of learning can be reduced to following a particular set of language forms or rules. Still others move on to think whether the role of the English language has not yet completed its act of colonising cultural Others and whether international higher education provides spaces for linguistic hegemony. What has also emerged is that learners from other cultures become much more sensitive about their ways of being and knowing once they encounter different ways of knowing. Moreover, the issues that dislocate them from their own ways of knowing are read in terms of power, politics and history. Within this context, the English language is identified as a politically empowered linguistic power that dominates the alternative ways of knowing that learners bring to UK higher education pedagogy over other cultures. This power of language results in the disarticulation between the pedagogy of the host institution and the pedagogies that are familiar to learners who come from different cultures of learning. However, if this situation were articulated, new intercultural learning spaces would arise where learning would take place between varied cultures. Within an intercultural learning space, there will be a lot more spaces for both the learners and the teachers to improve their intercultural fluency; the ability to engage with and to relate to the stories of learning and teaching of other cultures. These intercultural learning spaces occupied by people

with intercultural fluency would help to construct rich pedagogies rather than a pedagogy that marginalises alternative narratives of learning through the power of language.

In short, it is an oft-voiced assertion that English is unlike any other language in the history of the world in terms of its status and position. Never before has the world witnessed a language spreading so extensively throughout the global population. Yet if this phenomenon is unparalleled, so too is the extent of the discussion, dispute, and disagreement over the language. The subject of English in the world is one that is predominantly ideology-led (Seargeant, 2008). It seems that the two major paradigms in this field will go on clashing : that which promotes English as a single, universal code; and that which advocates the need for the acknowledgement of discrete, localized varieties. The near future will show whether these two paradigms will compromise or lead to disempowerment of the vernaculars.

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