

ELT: A Trojan Horse in Disguise?

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ABSTRACT: Many people believe that language teaching is a neutral practice. However, this belief is not without its own opponents. To many scholars, teaching languages cannot be devoid of teaching cultural values of the target language, which tacitly aims at denigrating cultural values of the community of the learners who are learning it. The ultimate purpose of such cultural oppression, according to these scholars, is to provide the owners of the target language with a means to establish their supremacy and maintain a hegemonic control over other cultures. This article tries to present the arguments that scholars provide against the common belief that holds ELT as a neutral and unbiased profession. The article also tries to provide practical guidelines for ELT practitioners to help them uncover the hidden tenets that govern the ELT profession in today's world.

Keywords: English language teaching, English linguistic imperialism, hegemonic control

Today's world is being restructured by hegemonic powers. As Edge (2003) argues, these powers seek to establish a relationship with the rest of the world that is not essentially based on the explicit coercion but on implicit consent on the part of the majority to accept the values of the imperial powers. Phillipson (1992) believes that the imperial powers have taken the advantage of language as an efficient means for establishing their supremacy in the world.

The history of the English language and its teaching is fraught with hegemonic coloration that can be manifested in four interrelated dimensions, namely the scholastic, linguistic, cultural, and economic (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The scholastic dimension, as Kumaravadivelu argues, relates to the ways in which the Western scholars have furthered their own vested interests by disseminating Western knowledge at the expense of denigrating the local knowledge. The linguistic dimension concerns the devaluation of knowledge and use of local language(s) in relation to the Western languages. The cultural dimension integrates the teaching of the English language with the teaching of the Western culture with the aim of developing cultural empathy in the L2 learners towards the target language community. The economic dimension can be viewed as a direct outcome of the other dimensions. When the local knowledge, language, and culture are all degraded, there will remain no room for fierce resistance against the importation of ideas and teaching materials from outside. In other words, when the local suppliers of educational and cultural commodities lose their credibility, the local market will be inundated by the imported materials and ideas that may have little affinity with the culture of the local community.

At this juncture we need to elaborate on two fundamental issues. First, what is English linguistic imperialism? Second, how does ELT serve the interests of hegemonic powers? Phillipson (1992) provides the following working definition for the concept. He defines the English linguistic imperialism by stating that "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (p. 47). The theory operates, as Phillipson argues, with a division of the world into a

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dominant center and dominated peripheries. In such a classification, ESL and EFL countries constitute the periphery and the English speaking nations constitute the center. The center establishes a hierarchical role relationship with the periphery by setting up the linguistic norms and disseminating the norms within the periphery communities. In this context, hegemony can be realized as the explicit and/or implicit incorporation of values, beliefs, purposes, and activities into the ELT profession so that it would contribute to the maintenance of English as a dominant language.

Before elaborating on the ways in which ELT serves the imperialism, one needs to verify its political nature. The underlying assumption behind the conviction that regards ELT as a non-political enterprise is the supposition that it can be divorced from its social, political, and economic realities. Such an argument, however, is not without its critics. Pennycook (1989), for instance, questions the validity of such assertions by stating that “all education is political and all knowledge is interested” (p. 590). He, therefore, attributes great prominence to the sociopolitical nature of education. In a similar vein, Holliday (1997) also proclaims that language teaching is in nature a political act and cautions about the moral dilemmas that surround its practitioners. Phillipson (1992) claims that the development of ELT as a profession was itself a direct response to a political imperative. As a proof to his argument, Phillipson refers to a conference held at Makerere University in Uganda in 1961 to manifest the center-periphery relationship regarding the ELT expertise and practices. According to Phillipson, five basic tenets emerged from this conference which became unofficial and yet unchallenged doctrines underlying much of ELT work after the conference. These tenets are:

1. English is best taught monolingually.
2. The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker.
3. The earlier English is taught, the better the results.
4. The more English is taught, the better the results.
5. If other languages are used too much, standards of English will drop (p.185).

Phillipson argues that these tenets have become the cornerstones of the hegemony of English worldwide.

It is interesting to note that many of these tenets are based on arguments that are challenged by second language acquisition research. However, it seems that research loses its scholastic credence when it provides unfavorable results for the scholars who reside in the center circles. Reacting against the first tenet, Auerbach (1993) argues that the monolingual tenet is solely proposed to denigrate the positive role of the learners’ mother tongue on route to acquiring languages. Kachru (1997) also scoffs at the second tenet as another unfounded myth that aims at opening new job openings for inner-circle members. He also takes issue with the concept of native speaker, treating it as an ideologically loaded terminology. Kachru believes that the tenet intends to divert the attention away from the development of local solutions to pedagogical problems and encourages the dependence of both outer and expanding circles on the capacity of the inner circles. Cummins (1979) also raises serious objections against the third tenet by claiming that adults can be as successful as the younger language learners as far as the cognitive academic language ability is concerned. Hakuta (2001) also shows that there is no period within maturational termini at the end of which L2 learning capacity dramatically declines. Widdowson (2003) also perceives the topic of the Standard English as absurd. He believes that such an argument is “based on the idea that one can take out a patent on the language and claim the right to exert control over it to keep it exclusive” (p. 36).

To set the ELT practice free from the shackles of hegemonic ideologies, an urgent call for a thorough reconstruction and revision of ELT at theoretical, pedagogical, and attitudinal levels is in order (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). At the theoretical level, he suggests, the profession needs to generate an environment that fosters multiple identities within the learner communities. A means to achieve this objective, according to Canagarajah (1999), is to move away from the prevailing notion of English as a culturally loaded concept to English as a communicational tool that gives room to different varieties of English that are used for expressing norms that are typically local in tone and function.

At pedagogical level, Kumaravadivelu (2006) calls for a renewed relationship between the center and periphery regarding the major areas of ELT activity that include materials development, teaching methodology, and teacher education. As for the materials development, Tomlinson (2005) considers the existing trends in developing language materials for global markets as flawed and advocates for a less biased approach that respects the local needs of the learners in the periphery communities.

Seidlhofer (1999) recommends the creation and implementation of the corpora of the international Englishes as a means to achieve this objective. As he argues, this corpus of international Englishes would provide the materials developers with rich samples of non-native made language that can be used for developing ELT materials.

As for the teaching aspect, Kumaravadivelu (2001) proposes the idea of a post-method pedagogy to give the community of non-native English teachers a voice to activate their latent agency in the ELT profession. The post method pedagogy hinges upon the parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility. The most important aspect of the post method pedagogy is its particularity that promotes a pedagogy which is “sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 538). In short, the parameter of particularity facilitates the development of a context related, location specific pedagogy which is built upon a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural and political particularities. The parameter of practicality aims for a teacher generated theory of practice and tries to bridge the gap between theory and practice by encouraging teachers to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize. The parameter of possibility deals with the sociopolitical perception that students bring with them to the classroom. As he argues:

The experiences participants bring to the pedagogical setting are shaped not just by the learning/teaching episodes they have encountered in the past but also by the broader social, economic, and political environment in which they have grown up. These experiences have the potential to alter pedagogic practices in ways unintended and unexpected by policy planners, curriculum designers, or textbook producers. (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 543)

The above discussed theoretical and pedagogical reforms cannot succeed without a fundamental change in the prevalent attitudes of ELT practitioners. The dichotomy of native/non-native speakers, which is the subject of much debate in ELT, can be a good starting point for this change in attitudes. It goes without saying that most ELT practitioners assume that achieving native-like competence or proficiency is the ultimate goal of English language learners. As a result of this assumption, these practitioners come to believe that the native speaker models and teachers of English are preferred to non-native speakers. Such assumptions, however, cannot be accepted uncritically. As McKay (2003) argues, the first assumption is fallacious for two main reasons. First, the whole notion of defining a native speaker and native speaker competency is fraught with difficulty. Second, the proposition that the learners of English need or desire the so-called native speaker competency is erroneous because many learners have goals other than integrating in the target language community. Many of these learners learn English because they want to have access to scientific and technological information, global economic trade, and higher education.

There is also a reaction against the assumption that non-native speaking teachers are less efficient than native speaker teachers. Medgyes (1992) maintains that non-native English speaking teachers (non-NESTs) enjoy qualities that native English speaking teachers lack. As he argues, non-native English speaking teachers can:

1. Serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English.
2. Teach learning strategies more effectively.
3. Provide learners with more information about the English language.
4. Anticipate language difficulties.
5. Be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners.
6. Benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongue (pp. 346-347).

We therefore need to change our attitude toward the native speakers' advantage and superiority in teaching languages and stop marginalizing non-native speaking teachers, because the process of marginalization aims at maintaining the authority of the center over the periphery. This tacit marginalization process seeks to preserve the dominance of interested Western knowledge over local knowledge by promoting some flawed practices. These practices include such fallacies as: the superiority of native-speaking teachers over non-native ones; discouraging the use of first language in language programs, and detaching the processes of learning and teaching from the sociolinguistic contexts and realities of language use and usage.

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