

English as a Dynamic Language: English Language Teaching Under Anglocentric Discourse

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Abstract

英語は今や国際共通語として認知されて久しい。日本における英語教育も、この状況に対応できる人材育成という視点から、TOEICのようなビジネスにおける英語能力を測るテストで高得点を取ることばかりを重視する傾向にある。この偏った考えの根幹にあるのは、英米中心主義というイデオロギーである。本研究ノートでは、英国と米国を中心国にとらえ、両国出身の白人が話す英語だけを標準とする英米中心主義に偏向する現行の日本の英語教育が、学習者に与える影響を検証する。さらにはポストコロニアル時代を代表するアフリカ出身の作家の英語に対する姿勢に焦点をあて、外国語学習者が本来持つべき選択肢や、外国語を学ぶことに対する批判的な視点について考察し、英語を教える立場にいる私たちが英米中心主義の影響下にある英語教育の中で何ができるかを提案する。

1. Introduction

In the mid-1980s, Edward Said (1999) observed the English program at a national university in one of the Gulf States and deplored the reality that English had been reduced to “the level of a technical language almost totally stripped not only of expressive and aesthetic characteristics but also of any critical or self-conscious dimension” (Said, p. 318). Said argued that this was the result of English having become the worldwide *lingua franca*, the language most students in Arab universities studied to work for airlines or banks (Said, 1999, p. 318). Yet this very phenomenon can be observed in current university-level English education in Japan, in which students strive to get high scores on the TOEIC test (Test of English for International Communication) with hopes that this will lead to a high-paying job. My past experience as a teacher of English has affirmed that those enrolled were interested primarily in test-taking strategies. My own English-language pedagogy has thus focused only certain aspects of the language that would benefit test-takers, at the expense of conveying the complexity and dynamism of a language that has been historically and culturally a site of ideological contestations. Moreover, I have been deeply affected by anglocentric ideologies, following the norms created by core English-speaking countries. This

paper examines the issues of anglocentric discourse prominent in current English education in Japan, with the assumption that my teaching practices share commonalities with those of the majority of English teachers in Japan. I will suggest some possible changes that could make our pedagogies more open to student development of critical views toward their learning experience.

2. Anglocentric ideologies

Anglocentric ideologies were formed and transmitted through the process of colonization by Center countries, the term first proposed by Johan Galtung (1988) to refer to the powerful Western countries and interests, mostly Britain and America, with English language substituting and replacing local languages. Robert Phillipson (1992) calls this process English linguistic imperialism and argues that Center countries exert control over Third World countries and maintain unequal relations with these peripheral countries through the medium of language. He explains:

The dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. Here structural refers broadly to material properties (for example, institutions financial allocations) and cultural to material or ideological properties (for example, attitudes, pedagogic principles). English linguistic imperialism is one example of linguicism, which is defined as “ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language. (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47)

According to Phillipson, ELT has contributed to ongoing structural and cultural inequalities (p. 67), with English teachers playing an active role in disseminating anglocentric ideologies by using pedagogical methods and techniques developed in Center countries (p. 48).

Although Japan does not share the same colonial history as Third World countries, we can observe similar discursive practices of linguicism being exercised by Center countries in the English education practices. Most schools, for instance, use textbooks created in Center countries with illustrations and photographs of British or American people, mostly White people, represented in the context of White mainstream culture. Furthermore, English language schools prefer to hire teachers from Center countries, evidence of which may be found in school advertisements such as TV commercials or flyers posted on trains. It has

been noted that 93% of assistant language teachers (ALTs) hired as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program are from Inner Circle countries, the term used by Kachru (1985) to refer Center countries, with 60% of them from the US (Kubota, 2018, p.94). We can therefore conclude that “English is still being taught as an inner-circle language, based almost exclusively on American or British English” (Matsuda, p. 719).

The major problem with the current anglocentric discourse is that English of Center countries is represented as the norm and native English speakers as ideal models. Phillipson (1992) describes this problem as a “native speaker fallacy” and argues that this fallacy “reinforces the linguistic norms of the Center, creating an ideological dependence” (p. 199). This dependence results in economic consequences and strengthens unequal power structures because it requires native speakers and materials from the Center (Phillipson, 1992, p. 199). Since the discursive practices are “hegemonic” in the Gramscian (1971) sense in so far as they are not obviously exercised (Phillipson, 1992, p. 72), the native speaker fallacy seems to have permeated English teaching pedagogy in Japan as a natural, unspoken, and widely accepted outcome. As a consequence, students are prone to devalue their English proficiency, which diverges from the norm of the Center, and they continuously feel inferior to native speakers.

3. Discussion

As a learner and a teacher of English, I myself have been obsessed with the idea of anglocentricity which was intensified through my experience of studying at a university institution in the US. In my own studies and teaching, I have blindly pursued American English as an ideal model and imposed such norms on my students. Moreover, without questioning their legitimacy, I have used materials produced in the US and practiced American English in class. In many ways, I represent the perfect subject of anglocentric ideologies in the Foucauldian sense, as a subject of such ideologies and a reproducer of them through my pedagogical practices. Even recognizing this hegemonic discourse, however, it seems impossible to resist it. As Kubota (2018) points out, “no matter how hard educators try to transform this ideology, it is deeply rooted in the established social structures and the consciousness of people, including parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers” (p. 96).

What is rejected in anglocentric discourse and fatally lacking in our pedagogies is the notion that a wide variety of Englishes exist. In the postcolonial era, English has developed

locally through the process which Kachru (1986) defines as “nativization,” thereby “English has indigenized in different parts of the world, and developed distinct and secure local forms determined by local norms as opposed to those of the native speaker in the Center” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 195). Therefore, “we are no longer dealing with one English language, an abstraction from certain canonized uses of it, but with several Englishes (p. 197). In current English education practices in Japan, it seems most of us are still unable to introduce a rich variety of Englishes in our classes. Obsessed with the norms of Center countries and trying to enable students to obtain high scores on standardized tests, I too have failed to represent the rich and dynamic nature of the language.

4. Pedagogical implications

One possible change I may bring to my pedagogical practices is to introduce a variety of English languages in my classes and to expose students to various forms of Englishes. In so doing, I may better address the colonial history of language as well as the issues of anglocentric ideologies that the language carries. While this possibility sounds promising, it still seems to be only a piecemeal solution. In my own experience of teaching career at universities, I have encountered several students who expressed their wish to live without any interaction with English. Some students indicated their desire to live only with the Japanese language because they were proud of being Japanese, and others suggested that they would enjoy learning a foreign language but not English. As Japanese society becomes increasingly diversified, with people from a wide range of countries residing here, learning English may be practical and useful. However, I believe there must be alternatives offered to students who wish to seek out other languages.

Here, two writers in West Africa, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe, offer inroads into rethinking the current state of English education and usage. Born under British colonial rule, both writers had no choice but to learn and use English language. Despite their similar backgrounds, however, they followed different paths as a writer. Ngũgĩ, having started off writing his works in English, denounced the language in his later career and wrote solely in his native tongue of Gikuyu. Ngũgĩ (1986) writes:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world...I believe that my writing in the Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of

Kenyan and African people...I would like to contribute towards the restoration of the harmony between all aspects and divisions of language so as to restore the Kenyan child to his environment. (p. 16)

By contrast, Achebe subverts to dominant position of English while still using it for his writing because he believes English language can carry the weight of his African experiences. Achebe (1989) explains:

I write in English. English is a world language. But I do not write in English because it is a world language. My romance with the world is subsidiary to my involvement with Nigeria...As long as Nigeria wishes to exist as a nation it has no choice in the foreseeable future but to hold its more than two hundred component nationalities together through an alien language, English. (p. 60)

Their different, somewhat opposing, attitudes toward English language convey not only its profound nature and implications but also the possibilities to internalize and personalize the language. Through their determination, we can see that English is not a mere set of technical words, nor is it just a medium of communication, but it represents a way to see the world we live in, to create the meaning of our experience, and to understand who we are. Just as these writers show different ways to confront with English language, there must be multiple ways for English learners to reconcile with the language. In other words, we can decide to learn a language to gain a new perspective, or we can decide otherwise if we believe that the language does not meet our needs.

5. Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is a life-long process, and thus, teachers can only attempt to better prepare students for this life-long journey. It is impossible for teachers to make a complete change in the dominant discourse of English teaching practices in Japan where anglocentric ideologies are so firmly rooted. It is true, however, that teachers may be in the best position to enact change to the practice of language learning. In her scholarship on gender identity, Judith Butler (1993) presents the notion of “performance” as a mode of resistance, as a means of exposing naturalized, hegemonic cultural and social power networks. This notion may offer a hint for what an English teacher can accomplish. Perhaps by making explicit the teacher identity that I take on through anglocentric discursive practices, I can reveal my performance of the role of the teacher, thus exposing the hegemonic power structure of English linguistic imperialism. Drawing upon the realization that

English is more profound than may be apparent on standardized tests and integrating this into my pedagogy, I hope to provide students with multiple ways to engage with English language and to gain critical understanding of their learning experience.

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