

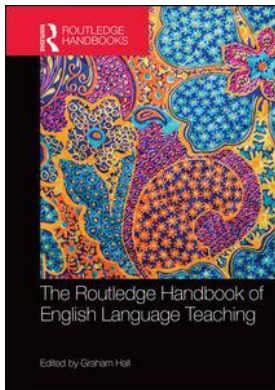
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Alastair Pennycook

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Politics, power relationships and ELT

Alastair Pennycook

Introduction: power and politics in ELT

That English language teaching (ELT) is inextricably bound up with multiple power relationships is indisputable. English did not spread globally as if it had a capacity to take over the world without human help. It was pushed by many forces that saw an interest in its promotion and pulled by many who also perceived value in acquiring it. A language only spreads because people learn it, and where learning happens, teaching is often (though not always) involved. So the global spread of English, with its connections to colonial exploitation and the contemporary inequalities fostered by globalisation and neoliberal ideologies (an emphasis away from equity, welfare and government spending towards privatisation, deregulation and the rule of the market; see Holborow, 2015; also Menard-Warwick et al., this volume), as well as its relations, for example, to travel, popular culture, technology and religion, cannot be understood outside such global forces. ELT, therefore, with its audience of ‘Others’ (a division between teaching English and speakers of other languages is embedded in acronyms such as TESOL) is inescapably caught up in questions of power.

As Joseph (2006) has observed, language is steeped from top to bottom in relations of power, or in other words it is profoundly political (the political here refers not so much to the tawdry battles fought out in our national parliaments but to the everyday struggles over whose version of the world will prevail). And because of its involvement in so much of what is going on in the world, English and ELT are even more so. Rather than the bland terms in which English is often understood – as a neutral medium of international communication, a language that holds out the promise of social and economic development to all those who learn it, a language of equal opportunity, a language that the world needs in order to be able to communicate – we need to understand that it is also an exclusionary class dialect, favouring particular people, countries, cultures, forms of knowledge and possibilities of development; it is a language which creates barriers as much as it presents possibilities.

Tollefson (2000: 8) warns that “at a time when English is widely seen as a key to the economic success of nations and the economic well-being of individuals, the spread of English also contributes to significant social, political, and economic inequalities.” Bruthiaux (2002: 292–293) argues convincingly that English language education is “an outlandish irrelevance” for many of

the world's poor, and "talk of a role for English language education in facilitating the process of poverty reduction and a major allocation of public resources to that end is likely to prove misguided and wasteful." As ELT practitioners, therefore, we cannot simply bury our heads in our classrooms and assume none of this has anything to do with us. Nor can we simply adopt individually oriented access arguments on the basis that any improvement in learners' English will likely bring them benefits. There is much more at stake here. For those "who do not have access to high-quality English language education, the spread of English presents a formidable obstacle to education, employment, and other activities requiring English proficiency" (Tollefson, 2000: 9), so ELT may have as much to do with the creation as the alleviation of inequality.

Ramanathan's (2005: 112) study of English and Vernacular medium education in India shows, how English is a deeply divisive language, tied on the one hand to the denigration of vernacular languages, cultures and ways of learning and teaching, and, on the other, dovetailing "with the values and aspirations of the elite Indian middle class". While English opens doors to some, it is simultaneously a barrier to learning, development and employment for others. Ferguson (2013: 35) explains that there is a "massive popular demand not just for English but for English-medium education" based on the reasonable assumption in the current global economy that "without English-language skills, one's labour mobility and employment prospects are restricted"; yet at the same time, English language education has many deleterious effects, including distorting already weak primary education sectors, advantaging urban elites over rural poor, constraining the use of other languages and diverting resources from other areas.

So for those of us involved in ELT, we need to consider how all that we do in the name of English teaching is inevitably connected to power and politics. What are the wider implications of promoting an English-only policy in a classroom, of choosing a textbook with glossy images of international travel, of deciding that 'furnitures' is acceptable or unacceptable, of choosing to work at a private language school, of knowing or not knowing the first language(s) of our students, of choosing to hire 'native speakers' at a school? In the next section, I will provide a brief overview of the prevailing paradigms for looking at the global spread of English – World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca and Linguistic Imperialism – and point to their general shortcomings for understanding power and ELT. The following section will then look at local manifestations of ELT, ways in which ELT is bound up with local economies and education systems, racial and linguistic prejudice, styles of popular culture and economies of desire. The final section of the chapter will discuss the implications of all this for the practice of ELT.

Prevailing discourses: World Englishes, ELF and Linguistic Imperialism

Despite the evident connections, power has not always been sufficiently part of discussions of ELT. There are several reasons for this, including the lack of attention to power and politics in linguistics, applied linguistics and educational theory, and the role ELT plays as a form of service industry to globalisation. Discussion of the global spread of English has been dominated in recent times by the World Englishes (WE) (Kachru, 1992), and more recently English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Seidlhofer, 2011) frameworks (for further discussion, see Seargeant, this volume). Although Kachru's model of Three Circles of English – the Inner Circle where English is widely spoken as a first language, the Outer, postcolonial Circle where it is used internally as a second or additional language, and the Expanding Circle, where it is largely used for external, foreign language communication – has changed the ways in which we view varieties of English and norms of correctness (giving us multiple Englishes), and although the ELF programme has usefully drawn attention to the ways in which English is used in daily interactions among multilingual

speakers, both approaches have been criticised for eschewing questions of power and presenting instead a utopian vision of linguistic diversity.

Kachru's (1992) Three Circle model of World Englishes posits a new list of standard varieties – based rather confusingly on a mixture of social, historical and geographical factors – but tends to overlook difference within regions. As Martin (2014: 53) observes in the context of the Philippines, there are at very least circles within circles, comprising an Inner Circle “of educated, elite Filipinos who have embraced the English language”, an Outer Circle who may be aware of Philippine English as a variety but are “either powerless to support it and/or ambivalent about its promotion” and an Expanding Circle for whom the language is “largely inaccessible”. Tupas (2006: 169) points out that “the power to (re)create English ascribed to the Outer Circle is mainly reserved only for those who have been invested with such power in the first place (the educated/the rich/the creative writers, etc.)” Thus, as Parakrama (1995: 25–26) argues, “the smoothing out of struggle within and without language is replicated in the homogenising of the varieties of English on the basis of ‘upper-class’ forms. Kachru is thus able to theorise on the nature of a monolithic Indian English.” Whilst appearing, therefore, to work from an inclusionary political agenda in its attempt to have the new Englishes acknowledged as varieties of English, this approach to language is equally exclusionary. Ultimately, concludes Bruthiaux, “the Three Circles model is a 20th century construct that has outlived its usefulness” (2003: 161).

The more recent work on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2011) is perhaps a little more promising in that it does not work with either nation-based nor class-based linguistic models (though there is still insufficient attention to what we might call ‘English from below’ or the everyday interactions of non-elites). As O’Regan (2014: 540) notes, however, there is a “profound disconnect between the desire to identify and promote ‘ELF’ features and functions and the practical necessity of dealing with the structural iniquities of a global capitalism which will by default always distribute economic and linguistic resources in a way which benefits the few over the many and which confers especial prestige upon selective language forms”. Thus while the ELF approach has been able to avoid some of the problems of the World Englishes focus on nation- and class-based varieties and can open up a more flexible and mobile version of English, it has likewise never engaged adequately with questions of power. While the WE approach has framed its position as a struggle between the former colonial Centre and its postcolonial offspring, the ELF approach has located its struggle between so-called native and non-native speakers (see Llorca, this volume). Yet neither of these sites of struggle engages with wider questions of power, inequality, class, ideology or access.

Phillipson's (1992, 2009) Linguistic Imperialism framework, by contrast, developed “to account for linguistic hierarchisation, to address issues of why some languages come to be used more and others less, what structures and ideologies facilitate such processes, and the role of language professionals” (1997: 238), places questions of power much more squarely in the picture. There are two discernible strands to Phillipson's argument. On the one hand, linguistic imperialism is concerned with the ways in which English is constantly promoted over other languages, the role played by organisations such as the British Council in the promotion and orchestration of the global spread of English (it was far from accidental), and the ways in which this inequitable position of English has become embedded in ELT dogmas, such as promoting native speaker teachers of English over their non-native speaker counterparts or suggesting that the learning of English is better started as early as possible (a trend that is continuing worldwide, with English language teaching occurring more and more at the primary and even pre-primary levels; see Enever, this volume).

On the other hand, linguistic imperialism “dovetails with communicative, cultural, educational, and scientific imperialism in a rapidly evolving world in which corporate-led globalisation

is seeking to impose or induce a neo-imperial world order” (Phillipson, 2006: 357), thus drawing attention to the relation between English, neo-liberalism and globalisation. At stake, therefore, in this vision of English linguistic imperialism is not only the ascendancy of English in relation to other languages but also the role English plays in much broader processes of the dominance of forms of global capital and the assumed homogenisation of world culture. For Phillipson (2008: 38), “acceptance of the status of English, and its assumed neutrality implies uncritical adherence to the dominant world disorder, unless policies to counteract neolinguistic imperialism and to resist linguistic capital dispossession are in force.”

While Phillipson usefully locates English within inequitable relations of globalisation, there are several limitations to this view. Park and Wee (2012) explain that a “problem of linguistic imperialism’s macrosocial emphasis is that it does not leave room for more specific and ethnographically sensitive accounts of actual language use” (p.16). As Holborow (2012: 27) puts it, in order to equate imperialism and linguistic imperialism, Phillipson has to “materialise language”, a position that cannot adequately account for the ways in which English is resisted and appropriated, and how English users “may find ways to negotiate, alter and oppose political structures, and reconstruct their languages, cultures and identities to their advantage. The intention is not to *reject* English, but to *reconstitute* it in more inclusive, ethical, and democratic terms” (Canagarajah, 1999: 2). Phillipson’s version of linguistic imperialism assumes processes of homogenisation without examining local complexities of cultural appropriation and language use (Pennycook, 2007; Bruthiaux, 2008). It is essential, as Blommaert (2010: 20) notes, to approach the sociolinguistics of globalisation in terms of a “chequered, layered complex of processes evolving simultaneously at a variety of scales and in reference to a variety of centres”.

In order to place ELT – teaching practices, curricula, materials, tests – in the wider context of the global spread of English, it is essential to understand English in relation to globalisation, neoliberalism, exploitation and discrimination. But we need an understanding of language in relation to power that operates neither with a utopian vision of linguistic diversity nor with a dystopian assumption of linguistic imperialism. While we ignore Phillipson’s warnings at our peril, it is important to develop a multifaceted understanding of the power and politics of ELT. Phillipson’s critique of the global spread of English has compelled many to reflect on global inequities in which English plays a role, but his insistence that this should be seen in terms of imperialism has also narrowed the scope of the debate. The equation of a linguistic imperialism thesis with a critical standpoint, and the frequent dismissal of this totalising version of events on the grounds that it overstates the case, draws attention away from the necessity to evaluate the global spread of English, and the role of English language teachers as its agents, critically and carefully. What is required, then, is a more sensitive account of power, language and context and the implications for ELT.

Locality, desire and contingency: the embeddedness of English

A theory of imperialism is not a prerequisite to look critically at questions of power and politics in ELT, but if we reject linguistic imperialism for its monologically dystopian approach to language and culture in favour of the utopian visions of diversity in WE or ELF frameworks, we are equally poorly served. More important in relation to the power and politics of English are close and detailed understandings of the ways in which English is embedded in local economies of desire and the ways in which demand for English is part of a larger picture of images of change, modernisation, access and longing. It is tied to the languages, cultures, styles and aesthetics of popular culture, with its particular attractions for youth, rebellion and conformity; it is enmeshed within local economies and all the inclusions, exclusions and inequalities this may entail; it is

bound up with changing modes of communication, from shifting Internet uses to its role in text-messaging; it is increasingly entrenched in educational systems, bringing to the fore many concerns about knowledge, pedagogy and the curriculum. We need to understand the diversity of what English is and what it means in all these contexts, and we need to do so not with prior assumptions about globalisation and its effects but with critical studies of the local embeddedness of English.

As Borjian (2013: 166) shows, English education in post-revolutionary Iran has been a “site of struggle, in which multiple forces compete”. One major aspect of this was the state and religious (closely combined) opposition to Western forms of modernity, leading to an attempt to create “an indigenized model of English education, free from the influence of the English-speaking nations” (Borjian, 2013: 160). It is important to understand, then, that *indigenisation* of English education was not so much a local movement to make English their own but rather a state ideology to oppose Western influence. Meanwhile, the privatisation of ELT provision led to an opposing trend that tended more towards Anglo-American models of ELT. The point here, once again, is that ELT is always caught up in a range of political, religious, cultural and economic battles. In Algeria, by contrast, the growth of English education sits in a different set of complex historical and political relations, involving both French as the former colonial language as well as postcolonial processes of Arabisation. English, as a “new intruder in Algeria’s sociolinguistic scenery”, suggests Benrabah (2013: 124) may bring the benefits of helping Algerians to see both that there are other alternatives to French and that other languages, such as Berber, have much to offer alongside Arabic. Language conflicts around English, French, Berber and Arabic in Algeria, Benrabah shows, are always bound up with the complexity of other local political struggles.

There are several implications for ELT, since these perspectives force us to rethink what we mean by the idea of English. No longer can we consider it to be a pre-given object that we are employed to deliver; rather, it is a many-headed hydra (Rapatahana and Bunce, 2012) enmeshed in complex local contexts of power and struggle. From the relation between English and other languages in the Pacific (Barker, 2012) to its role in countries such as Sri Lanka (Parakrama, 2012), the position of English is complex and many sided. To understand the power and politics of ELT, then, we need detailed understandings of the role English plays in relation to local languages, politics and economies. This requires meticulous studies of English and its users, as well as theories of power that are well adapted to contextual understandings. As ELT professionals, we are never just teaching something called English but rather are involved in economic and social change, cultural renewal, people’s dreams and desires.

There are therefore many Englishes, not so much in the terms of language varieties posited by the World Englishes framework but rather in terms of different Englishes in relation to different social and economic forces. In South Korea, for example, where ‘English fever’ has driven people to remarkable extremes (from prenatal classes to tongue surgery and sending young children overseas to study), English has become naturalised ‘as the language of global competitiveness’, so that English as a neoliberal language is regarded as a “natural and neutral medium of academic excellence” (Piller and Cho, 2013: 24). As a new destination for such English language learners, the Philippines markets itself as a place where ‘authentic English’ (an Outer Circle variety) is spoken, yet its real drawcard is that its English is “cheap and affordable” (Lorente and Tupas, 2014: 79). For the Philippines, like other countries such as Pakistan (Rahman, 2009) with low economic development but relatively strong access to English, the language becomes one of commercial opportunity, so that businesses such as call centres on the one hand open up jobs for local college-educated employees but on the other hand distort the local economy and education system and perpetuate forms of global inequality (Friginal, 2009).

As ELT practitioners, we need to understand not only these roles English plays in relation to the economy but also student motivations to learn English, which may concern more than just pragmatic goals of social and economic development (Kubota, 2011). Since English is often marketed in relation to a particular set of images of sexual desire, it is important to appreciate the gender and sexual politics involved in English language learning and the ways in which English, as advertised for language schools and presented in textbooks, “emerges as a powerful tool to construct a gendered identity and to gain access to the romanticized West” (Piller and Takahashi, 2006: 69). As Motha and Lin (2014: 332) contend, “at the center of every English language learning moment lies desire: desire for the language; for the identities represented by particular accents and varieties of English; for capital, power, and images that are associated with English; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that English unlocks.” The ELT practitioner, therefore, may become an object of desire, a gatekeeper, a constructor or destroyer of dreams.

Like Darwin and Norton’s (2015) understanding of *investment* as the intersection between identity, ideology and capital, this notion of desire is best understood not as an internal psychological characteristic but rather, as Takahashi (2013: 144) explains in her exploration of Japanese women’s ‘desire’ for English, as “constructed at the intersection between the macro-discourses of the West and foreign men and ideologies of Japanese women’s life-courses in terms of education, occupation, and heterosexuality”. Focusing on the ways in which these discourses of desire implicate white Western men, Appleby (2013: 144) shows how “an embodied hegemonic masculinity” is constructed in the Japanese ELT industry, producing as a commodity “an extroverted and eroticised White Western ideal for male teachers”. Any understanding of the motivations to learn English, therefore, has to deal with relations of power not only in economic and educational terms but also as they are tied to questions of desire, gender, sexuality (Nelson, 2009), and the marketing of English and English language teachers as products (see also Gray, this volume).

An appreciation of the complicities of power – the ways in which ELT is tied up not only with neoliberal economic relations but also other forms of power and prejudice – sheds light on the ways in which assumptions of native speaker authority privilege not only a particular version of language ideology but are also often tied to particular racial formations (white faces, white voices) (Shuck, 2006; Ruecker, 2011). “Both race and nativeness are elements of ‘the idealized native speaker’” (Romney, 2010: 19). People of colour may not be accepted as native speakers (who are assumed to be white): “The problem lies in the tendency to equate the native speaker with white and the non-native speaker with non-white. These equations certainly explain discrimination against non-native professionals, many of whom are people of colour” (Kubota and Lin, 2009: 8). Indeed, since teaching “second or foreign languages entails complex relations of power fuelled by differences created by racialization” (Kubota and Lin, 2009: 16), the field of ELT might be reconceptualised “with a disciplinary base that no longer revolves solely around teaching methodology and language studies but instead takes as a point of departure race and empire” (Motha, 2014: 129).

Before ELT practitioners consider the politics of their classroom, therefore, it is important to consider the local and contingent politics of English (Pennycook, 2010). It is often said that language and culture are closely tied together, that to learn a language is to learn a culture, yet such a proposition overlooks the contingent relations between linguistic and cultural forms or the local uses of language. Attention has been drawn to the connections, for example, between English language teaching and Christian missionary activity. As Varghese and Johnston (2007: 7) observe, the widespread use of English and the opportunities this provides for missionary work dressed up as English language teaching raises “profound moral questions about the professional

activities and purposes of teachers and organizations in our occupation". In a post-9/11 world and with "American foreign and domestic policy driven increasingly by imperialist goals and guided by an evangelical Christian agenda" (ibid.: 6), English language education and missionary work present a contingent set of relations between language and culture.

The point here is not that to learn English is to be exposed to Christian values – as Mahboob (2009) argues, English can equally serve as an Islamic language – but that English may be called upon to do particular cultural and ideological work in particular pedagogical contexts. The promotion, use and teaching of English in contexts of economic development, military conflict, religious struggle, mobility, tertiary access and so on have to be understood in relation to the meanings English is expected to carry, as a language of progress, democratic reform, religious change, economic development, advanced knowledge, popular culture and much more. These connections are by no means coincidental – they are a product of the roles English comes to play in the world – but they are at the same time contingent. That is to say, they are a product of the many relations of power and politics with which English is embroiled.

Power, politics and pedagogy: responses to the politics of ELT

When we talk of English today we mean many things, many of them not necessarily having to do with some core notion of language. The question becomes not whether some monolithic thing called English is imperialistic or an escape from poverty, nor how many varieties there may be of this thing called English, but rather what kind of mobilisations underlie acts of English use or learning? Something called English is mobilised by English language industries, including ELT, with particular language effects. But something called English is also part of complex language chains, mobilised as part of multiple acts of identity and desire. It is not English – if by that we mean a certain grammar and lexicon – that is at stake here. It is the discourses around English that matter, the ways in which an idea of English is caught up in all that we do so badly in the name of education, all the exacerbations of inequality that go under the label of globalisation, all the linguistic calumnies that denigrate other ways of speaking, all the shamefully racist institutional interactions that occur in schools, hospitals, law courts, police stations, social security offices and unemployment centres.

Whether we see English as a monster, juggernaut, bully or governess (Rapatahana and Bunce, 2012), we clearly need to do something about this pedagogically. As Gray suggests, "ideologies associated with English which take it as self-evident that it is perforce the language of economic prosperity and individual wealth are also those of the ELT industry itself" (2012: 98). While we might, like ostriches (Pennycook, 2001), be tempted to bury our heads in the classroom and refuse to engage with these issues, we surely owe more to the educational needs of our students than to ignore the many dimensions of power and politics in ELT. One level of pedagogical response to the dominance of English is to see ELT not so much as centrally about the promotion of English but rather as a process of working out where English can usefully sit within an ecology of languages. When we observe the growth of Southeast Asian economies – their increased roles in the global economy and the resultant pressure to teach English earlier and younger in a region with wide linguistic diversity – there are real causes for concern that current language education policies favouring only the national language plus English will lead to Asian multilingualism being reduced to bilingualism only in the national language and English (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

As ELT professionals, therefore, we would do well to question the linguistic, educational and pedagogical ideologies behind "the one-classroom-one-language pedagogical straitjacket" (Lin, 2013: 540) that many current ELT approaches continue to endorse, and embrace instead a

broader, multilingual approach to our classrooms. Approaches such as communicative language teaching are far from neutral pedagogical technologies (Pennycook, 1989) but are rather “intimately linked to the production of a certain kind of student and worker subjectivity suitable for participating in a certain kind of political economy” (Lin, 2013: 540). Rather than focusing so intently on English as the sole objective of our teaching, we can start to reimagine classes as part of a broader multilingual context, and, indeed, following Motha (2014), to engage in a project of *provincialising English*. Such multilingualism, furthermore, needs to be understood not so much in terms of separate monolingualisms (adding English to one or more other languages) but rather in much more fluid terms (see also Carroll and Combs, and Kerr, this volume).

Drawing on recent sociolinguistic approaches to *translanguaging* (García and Li, 2014) and *metrolinguism* (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015), we can start to think of ELT classrooms in terms of *principled polycentrism* (Pennycook, 2014). This is not the polycentrism of a World Englishes focus, with its established norms of regional varieties of English, but a more fluid concept based on the idea that students are developing complex repertoires of multilingual and multimodal resources. This enables us to think in terms of ELT as developing resourceful speakers who are able to use available language resources and to shift between styles, discourses, registers and genres. This brings the recent sociolinguistic emphasis on repertoires and resources into conversation with a focus on the need to learn how to negotiate and accommodate, rather than to be proficient in one variety of English. So an emerging goal of ELT may be less towards proficient native-speaker-like speakers (which has always been a confused and misguided goal) and to think instead in polycentric terms of resourceful speakers (Pennycook, 2012) who can draw on multiple linguistic and semiotic resources.

Focusing on the politics of the classroom itself, it is important to understand on the one hand the permeability of the classroom walls – that is to say that what goes on inside the classroom is always tied to what goes on outside – and the local questions of power and politics within the classroom (Pennycook, 2000). Benson (1997: 32) outlines the ways in which “we are inclined to think of the politics of language teaching in terms of language planning and educational policy while neglecting the political content of everyday language and language learning practices”. Shifting our thinking, he suggests, entails a political understanding of the social context of education, classroom roles and relations, the nature of tasks and the content and language of the lesson. According to Auerbach (1995: 12), “dynamics of power and inequality show up in every aspect of classroom life, from physical setting to needs assessment, participant structures, curriculum development, lesson content, materials, instructional processes, discourse patterns, language use, and evaluation.”

Everything in the classroom – from how we teach (how we conduct ourselves as a teacher, as master, authority, facilitator, organiser), what we teach (whether we focus only on English, on grammar, on communication, on tests), how we respond to students (correcting, ignoring, cajoling, praising), how we understand language and learning (favouring noise over silence, emphasising expression over accuracy), how we think of our classroom (as a place to have fun or a site for serious learning), to the materials we use (off-the-shelf international textbooks, materials from the local community), the ways we organise our class (in rows, pairs, tables, circles) and the way we assess the students (against what norms, in terms of what language possibilities) – needs to be seen as social and cultural practices that have broader implications than just elements of classroom interaction. The point here is not that choosing what we might consider the preferable options listed above absolves us of questions of power, but that all these choices are embedded in larger social and ideological formations.

Critical pedagogical approaches to ELT (Morgan, 1998; Benesch, 2001; Crookes, 2013 and also this volume) have sought in various ways to address many of these concerns. Critical

pedagogy itself embraces a range of different approaches. For Crookes (2013: 9), it is “teaching for social justice, in ways that support the development of active engaged citizens”, that is to say a form of critical ELT that focuses on social change through learning English. Chun’s (2015) overview of commonalities in critical literacy practices includes drawing on students’ and teachers’ historically lived experiences, viewing language as a social semiotic, focusing on power both within and outside the classroom, engaging with commonsense notions of the everyday, developing self-reflexive practice, renewing a sense of community and maintaining a common goal. There has been considerable resistance to such critical approaches to education. The classroom should, from some perspectives, be a neutral place for language learning, and to teach critically is to impose one’s views on others. Such a view both misses the larger political context of the classroom and also underestimates the capacity of students to resist and evaluate what is before them (Benesch, 2001). Given the power and politics of ELT, a politically acquiescent position as an English language educator is an equally political position.

Other work has sought to develop critical responses to textbooks (Gray, 2012 and also this volume). Gray (2010: 3) shows how global coursebooks inscribe a set of values in English associated with “individualism, egalitarianism, cosmopolitanism, mobility and affluence”, or the very cultural and ideological formations with which English is connected in international contexts. It is important from this point of view for teachers and students to work against the ways English-language classes interpellate students into particular ways of thinking, talking and being through these corporatised ELT materials. Testing is perhaps the hardest domain to struggle against, so powerful are the interests and operations of major language tests (Shohamy, 2001). The point for any of these critical approaches to pedagogy, literacy, materials or testing is not that they provide any easy solution to the complex relations among classrooms, language and power but that they address such questions with power always to the fore. Critical approaches to ELT view the politics of ELT as a given – not a given to be accepted but a given against which we must always struggle.

Conclusion

Discussions of ELT all too often assume that they know what the object of ELT is: this system of grammar and words called English. But clearly this is not adequate, since English is many things besides. The global spread of English and the materials and practices of ELT that support it cannot be removed from questions of power and politics. But to understand these political implications, we need an exhaustive understanding of relations of power. Rather than easy suppositions about domination, about some having power and others not, or assuming ELT inevitably to be a tool of neoliberalism, we need to explore the ways in which power operates in local contexts. Such an approach by no means turns its back on the broader context of globalisation but rather insists that this can never be understood outside its local realisations.

Such an understanding urges us on the one hand to acknowledge that what we mean by English is always contingent on local relations of power and desire, the ways that English means many different things and is caught up in many forms of hope, longing, discrimination and inequality. It also allows us on the other hand to avoid a hopelessness faced by immovable forces of global domination and instead to see that we can seek to change inequitable conditions of power through our small-scale actions that address local conditions of difference, desire and disparity, seeking out ELT responses through an understanding of translanguaging practices in the classroom, critical discussions of textbooks and ideological formations, questioning of the norms of ELT practices and their interests. Power and politics are ubiquitous in language and language education, but resistance and change are always possible.

Discussion questions

- Describe a classroom context with which you are familiar. Using a series of concentric circles (or arrows, or boxes or whatever works for you) show all the other factors involved in this interaction, from the gender and ethnicity of the participants and their hopes and desires, to the local and regional language policies and broader economic factors at play.
- What pedagogical responses do you consider would be appropriate and effective to deal with the issues outlined in the first question?
- It has been said that one is never 'just' an English teacher on two counts: English is never just English, and teaching is never just teaching. Describe to what extent you agree with this analysis, and explain what it implies for ELT generally.
- Using examples from your own experience, to what extent do English learning and use perpetuate inequality, open up opportunity, homogenise cultures and/or create diversity?

Related topics

Educational perspectives on ELT; Language and culture in ELT; 'Native speakers', English and ELT; Values in the ELT classroom; World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca.

Further reading

- Appleby, R. (2010) *ELT, gender and international development: Myths of progress in a neocolonial world*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. (This volume provides good background for understanding the relations between English education and development.)
- Chun, C. (2015) *Power and meaning making in an EAP classroom: Engaging with the everyday*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. (A recent account of critical pedagogy in the context of English for academic purposes.)
- Gray, J. (2010) *The construction of English: Culture, consumerism and promotion in the ELT global coursebook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (A useful analysis of the global coursebook market.)
- Motha, S. (2014) *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, Columbia University. (This book presents a strong case for understanding and resisting racism in ELT.)
- Phillipson, R. (2009) *Linguistic imperialism continued*. London: Routledge. (This text reiterates Robert Phillipson's views on linguistic imperialism.)

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