The Global Spread of English: Ethical and Pedagogic Concerns for ESL/EFL Teachers

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This paper deals with the phenomenon of the global spread of the English language and the moral and ethical concerns associated with it. The paper shows that as English has become a language widely used in international contexts, it can be a potential cause to inequality among people and among nations, and a threat to any other language and culture. However, like globalization, English cannot be avoided or ignored, which places ESL/EFL teachers in a dilemma, as they need to resolve conflicts between internationalism and national cultural identity – that is, working to help students to communicate effectively with the world while maintaining their national and cultural values. Implications are given to classroom teachers in the process of managing this dilemma.

One sign of globalization in the world today is the rapid spread of the English language. English has been used by more and more countries and people as a vehicle of communication in business, science, technology, education and entertainment. Phrases such as "international language," "global language," or "lingua franca" are very often used both in daily conversations and writings to refer to the role of the English language in the world.

Has English really become an international language or a lingua franca that people from different countries can equally use and benefit as a tool to communicate with each other, or to gain access to international business,

science, education and politics? What variety of English has become international English? Is the global spread of English natural, neutral and universally beneficial? What does linguistic imperialism mean for ESL/EFL teachers? These questions help frame the agenda for this paper.

THE GLOBAL USE OF ENGLISH

Statistics regarding the worldwide use of English given by many scholars in the field easily lead people to believe that English has become the most global of languages. Crystal (1997) notes that a total of 670 million people in the world use English with a native or near native command. The figure rises to 1,800 million if we include English users with "reasonable competence" (p. 61). Strevens (1983) gives a figure of over 600 million people, of whom half use English as native speakers and half either pick it up or have been taught it. Kachru (1985) suggests that we can think of the spread of English in terms of three concentric circles. *The Inner Circle* represents the traditional bases of English, incorporating various accents of the native spoken English speaking countries as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. *The Outer Circle* or *Extended Circle* refers to the country contexts in which English was first introduced as a colonial language, then was used as a second language such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Singapore. *The Expanding Circle* involves countries where English is introduced as a foreign language. This circle encompasses such countries as China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, the former USSR, and Saudi Arabia. According to Crystal's estimates (1997), there are about 320-380 million English users in the inner circle, 150-300 million users in the outer circle, and the number may range from 100 million to 1,000 million in the expanding circle. The spread of English has exacerbated heated debates on the benefits or the harms it can bring to people and nations.

ENGLISH IS ALL GOOD

Although few people today would hold that the English language only belongs to England, the USA, or Australia, many still assume that English is all beneficial to the world. For example, Burchfield (1985) wrote:

> English has also become a lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English. Poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruelest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance. (Burchfield cited in Phillipson, 1992, p. 2)

Smith (1983) also believes that English has become nearly a universal language and the reason why it currently appeals to many speakers of other languages is primarily because it is an instrument that can be used to gain access the technology and civilization of the world rather than a connection to the cultural values of the native English speaking countries. He comments:

> [T]he dominance of English in commercial, technical, scientific, and political spheres has led many countries to adopt the language as the means of wider communication with the world, its use in these contexts does not indicate a desire to imitate the culture, philosophy, or life style of native speaking countries. (1983, p. 32)

Platt, Weber and Ho (1984) support the notion of "New Englishes," recognizing that many of the New Nations which were once British colonies, such as Singapore, India and Pakistan see the importance of English not only as a language of commerce, science and technology, but also as an international language of communication essential for development. Well-known examples of New Englishes as cited by these authors include Indian English, Philippine English, Singaporean English and African Englishes of some nations in Africa. Platt, Weber and Ho argue

that New Englishes often have a high status in these nations because they are used as a regular language for everyday communication among communities.

Similarly, Kachru (1985, 1986) recognizes the existence of varieties of English, believing that there is a repertoire of models of English and that the localized innovations in English have a pragmatic base because native speakers of English "seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardization" (1985, p. 30). English, according to Kachru, "has acquired a neutrality in a linguistic context" and "true, English is associated with a small and elite group: but it is in their role that the neutrality of a language become vital" (p. 9).

It seems that through terms like "international language," "global language," "means of communication," "lingua franca" and "neutrality," the above writers believe that English and its global spread is neutral, universal and culture free–English belongs to all those who want to use it. In our daily life many people also simply think that English has naturally become a common property that everyone in the world, regardless of his or her cultural and linguistic differences, can use it as a neutral and transparent medium of communication, or English has become a pragmatic language, the neutral medium that everyone globally can employ to gain access to business, science and technology. It is not hard to find phrases such as *English is the key to a better life; English is the ticket to success*; *Learning English for a better future* appearing in a local newspaper advertisements, a school newsletter, a government document everywhere in Vietnam, China, the Philippines or other parts of the world.

However, a critical examination of the social, cultural and political use of English in the international context and the power relationship among the speakers of English and speakers of other languages will show that there is another part of the picture, as demonstrated in the following.

ENGLISH IS NOT ALL GOOD: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

In his well-known book *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992), Phillipson offers rigorous critiques of the global spread of English and Western culture and values. Based on the imperialism theory developed by Galtung (1980) which posits of six mutually interlocking types of imperialism: economic, political, military, communicative (communication and transport), cultural and social, Phillipson coins the concept *linguistic imperialism*. Phillipson (1992, p. 47) defines *linguistic imperialism* as "the dominance of English [which is] asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities" between English and other languages, between people who speak English and those who do not. For Phillipson *linguistic imperialism* is one example of *linguicism*. *Linguicism* may be in operation simultaneously with *sexism, racism, or classism* but it refers exclusively to "ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (Phillipson, p. 4). Thus, it is not easy to see that those who speak English have more power and status than those who do not.

English as a Threat to Other Languages

Similar to Phillipson, Pennycook (1994) believes that English is a language of imperialism serving particular class interests. He expresses his deep concerns about moral and political implications of English teaching in the world in terms of the threat it poses to indigenous languages, and also the role English plays as a gatekeeper to better jobs and position in many societies. Pennycook maintains that as long as English becomes the first choice as an additional language, and the language in which so much is written and in which so much of the media occurs, it will certainly downplay the role of other languages. This phenomenon is seen in many regions of the

world. For instance, in Guam and the North Marianas, English will have a big chance to replace Chamorro–the native language of the people there–until there are no speakers left, as long as the Marianas remain under the control of the USA (Day, 1985, cited in Pennycook, 1994).

English as a Gatekeeper to Social and Economic Opportunities

As critical as the problem of English as a killer of other languages is the fact that English functions as a gatekeeper to position and social status in many societies. On commenting on the phenomenon of linguistic imperialism in the former colonies of Britain, Phillipson (1992) concludes:

> English [in these countries] has a dominant role internally, occupying space that other languages could not possibly fill. English is also the key external link, in politics, commerce, science, technology, military alliances, entertainment and tourism. The relationship between English and other languages is an unequal one, and this has important consequences in almost all spheres of life. (p. 30)

This is clearly seen in many countries in Asia. Tollefson (1991), for instance, shows that in the Philippines English plays a major role "creating and maintaining social divisions that serve an economy dominated by a small Philippine elite and foreign economic interests" (p. 186). The same problem is also evident in India. Although it is easy to assume that India is an English speaking country, and English is an official language of the government and is used as the medium of instruction in higher education, only 2-3% of its population is literate in English (35% literate in Indian languages) (Phillipson, 1992). In Singapore, Pennycook (1994) notes that differences in English competence result in differences in income level, with only 35% of the lowest income bracket in 1975 claiming to understand English, as opposed to 77.5% of the top income bracket (other languages were more evenly spread over income groups).

English as a Gatekeeper to Educational and Employment Opportunities

It is easy to see that English helps some people to gain good jobs and opportunities for education. Paradoxical as it seems, English can serve as a gatekeeper to these opportunities. Among many countries in Asia, Vietnam can provide an example of people who have unequal access to opportunities for employment and further education abroad due to differences in their English language skills.

Since the country opened up to the West in early 1990, the demand to learn English in Vietnam has been fed by an increasing influx of foreign investments, most of which came from countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia, Malaysia the European Union and recently the USA. All these investors expect English to be the means of communication. As a result, people rush into English classes. Those who are fortunate enough to have a good command of English are able to work for foreign companies, which can help them earn up to 10 times as much as the salary the state organizations afford to pay. English also serves as a gatekeeper for the opportunities to further education abroad. For the past decade, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) has continuously granted Vietnamese government workers and students about 200 scholarships per year to study in Australia at many levels. However, in order to apply for these development scholarships, "candidates will need to meet a minimum standard of IELTS [the International English Language Testing System] capability," as stated on the website of the Australian Development Scholarship (www.ads.edu.vn), in order to be considered applicable for the very first round of selection. This requirement stops many competent middle career employees, who have studied Russian or other foreign languages, from access to these scholarships.

In the business of language teaching, the sudden replacement of Russian by English in Vietnam has made Russian teachers struggle for their professional survival. In fact, many of them have to go back to school to be retrained to become teachers of English (Phan, 2005; Pham, 2001a).

Although the retrained teachers know two foreign languages–Russian and English, former teachers of Russian normally have a lower status compared with the "normal" teachers of English because of inadequate training. As Phan (2005, p. 7) points out, "English and ELT have lent a hand in creating distance and ever confrontation between teachers of different languages, particularly teachers of Russian and teachers of English in Vietnam. Teaching and learning English is no longer neutral or politics free."

English as a Threat to the World Culture and Knowledge

Pennycook (1994, p. 21) observes that English "has become part of the process whereby one part of the world has become politically, economically and culturally dominated by the other. English is, in fact, the connection between people with culture and knowledge which "are far less readily localizable" (p. 19). English is a dominant language in arts, theater, music and cinema. The global popularity of Hollywood movies is an example of the dominance of American cinema in the world. Citing Flaitz (1988), Pennycook remarks that it is through popular music that English is making a major invasion over French culture and thus, it has given a threat to the French hegemony in music as well as in the other cultural property of French people. In Singapore, Lim (1991) also observes that the use of Western books, science, technology and music drives Singaporeans into a dilemma: to use English "as a means to plug into the world technology... [but] not to imbibe a culture we do not want" (p. 58).

English as a Benefit to its Western Owners

Phillipson (1992) posits that the global use of English has brought very real economic and political advantages to the Western English speaking countries. He believes that the current position of English in the world is not an accidental or natural result of world forces. Through his analysis of the British Council and other agencies, whose work is to promote the English language and Anglo-Saxon culture, he makes clear that promoting the

worldwide use of English has been, in fact, deliberate government policy in the Western English speaking countries aiming for their economic and political purposes. For example, the industry of teaching English as a second language is not only a very good business, in terms of the production of the teaching materials such as textbooks, visual and audio study kits, and other learning facilities but also good politics which enhances the image of countries such as the UK and the USA.

Furthermore, English is also a gatekeeper to higher social status for immigrants. Tollefson (1998) observes this problem in the language programs, which are set up to prepare refugees to migrate to the USA. In his studies of the English language program in the Southeast Asian Refugee Camps, Tollefson (1988) argues that these programs "continue to limit refugees' improvement in English language proficiency, capacity for cultural adaptation, and pre-employment skills, thereby contributing to the covert goal of ensuring that most refugees will only be able to compete effectively for minimum-wage employment" (Tollefson, 1988, cited in Pennycook, 1994, p. 18). Tollefson argues that these programs, indeed, serve as preparation centers of a workforce to serve the US economy because they aim towards Americanizing immigrants, when assuming that "American society has little or nothing to learn from immigrants' cultures and that immigrants' primary civic responsibility is to transform themselves by adopting that society's dominant values, attitudes, and behaviors" (p. 58).

The Dominance of the Native Speaker Norms in International Contexts

Despite the fact that English has been used as an official or secondary language in many countries other than the inner countries (Britain, Australia, North America), and the proposals that localized norms of English in many regions of the world should be recognized and accepted in their national contexts (e.g., Kachru, 1985), reality shows there is only one dialect of English – Standard English [1] that dominates international contexts and

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[1] Defining Standard English is problematic. According to Quirk (1982), "standard" is

academic discourses. Many authors (e.g., Phan, 2005; Pham 2001b) argue that linguistic and cultural norms embedded in Standard English are largely set up by its native speakers. Phan comments that although there are many varieties of English such as Singaporean English, Indian English and African English, the "international norms of the language are not set by these Englishes, or even negotiated among them, [thus] only the so called native speakers of English have a voice in the matter" (p. 2). Citing Brutt-Griffler (1998), Johnston (2003), Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2004), Phan goes on to call attention to what lies beneath a register of English, such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes), which is assumed as neutral and culture-free by some teachers. Phan argues that "EAP, a register, in cross-cultural settings acts as a harsh gatekeeper to keep many non-native speakers of English out of its game, as EAP norms are based on the Self's standards... [thus] neither English nor ESP could be neutral" (pp. 4-5). Similarly, Pham (2001) notes that it is difficult, at least currently, for other varieties of English other than Standard English to be accepted in English academic writing courses, as well as in international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS, and in international media and publications of various kinds.[2]

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the natural language that educated English native speakers use. It is "an endemic feature of our [the native speakers of English] mortal condition ... people feel alienated and disoriented if a standard seems to be missing" (p. 30). Strevens (1983) defines Standard English in a more flexible way. For Strevens, it is "a particular dialect of English, being the only non-localized dialect, of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate educational target in teaching English, which may be spoken with an unrestricted choice of accent" (Strevens, 1983, p.80). In this article, Standard English is defined in Strevens' sense.

[2] In her discussion about the best model of English for Asian contexts, Tarone (2005) contends "the ideal language model for our [Asian] students should not be assumed to be the native speaker of English but rather should be the expert member of the target academic discourse community" (p. 6). However, like other authors (e.g., Brutt-Griffler, 1998; Johnston 2003; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2004; Phan, 2005), I believe that this discourse community is currently dominated by native speakers. Let's consider, for example, the fact that a large percentage of international publications in English is managed by publishers in or from the USA, the UK or Australia.

Furthermore, in oral communication in international settings, non-native users of English tend to adopt a standard norm of English, though they may use other non-standard norms within their own community (Pham, 2001b). This phenomenon has been noted by Strevens (1983) in the example of an Indian doctor who communicates with professional colleagues at an international medical conference. He uses a type of "Indian English" in which a Standard English dialect is spoken with a regional accent. This situation differs from one in which an Indian clerk uses non-standard English to communicate daily with his local clients.

The same phenomenon may happen with Singaporean English. For example, a Chinese-born Singaporean businessman can use "Singlish" to communicate effectively with his Malaysian-born friend. But does he use the dialect of English he uses at home to speak at an international conference where the participants are from other countries? Or must he switch to a more universal type of English? It is very likely that he would maintain his own accent, but at the same time use vocabulary and grammar that are familiar to and accepted by his international counterparts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ESL/EFL TEACHERS

Given the dominance of English in the international, regional and local setting, as well as the dominance of Standard English, what can/should ESL/EFL teachers do to combat linguistic imperialism, to ensure economic equality and preserve national and local cultures, and/or to enhance the neutral benefit of English as a means of communication?

Rajagopalan (1999) is concerned that "[t]he concerted rhetoric currently being orchestrated against the pretensions of English ... can understandably lead to an increasing unease and nagging guilt complex among those who are involved ... in the enterprise of spreading the English language" (p. 2000). However, many authors argue that teachers need not feel guilty. For example, while acknowledging that English and English language teaching in many

parts the world are currently influenced by models of the Western English speaking countries, Canagarajah (1999), Holliday (1994), Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) do not reject English. They argue that English is a resource that people can use as they wish. The important thing is that teachers need to teach in a way that can help their students master English rather than being mastered by it. Canagarajah (1999) has shown that people in Sri Lanka have been able to *appropriate* English for their own purpose and benefits, taking into account local social, cultural, ideological factors. Holliday (1994) says that "rather than the destructive notion of a cultural imperialism, I prefer the market place analogy where all parties are equal and there is tremendous potential for industry" (p. 7). Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) suggest that it is important for teachers to help their students to acquire their own voices in using English so that "the English language will enable students of English to do business with the native and non-native speakers of English in the global world market, and for that they need to master the grammar and vocabulary of Standard English. But they also need to retain control of its use" (p. 211).

The ideas above, I suppose, can enlighten ESL/ EFL teachers' practices in many parts of the world. Widdowson (1982) rightly points out that there are two forces in all-human affairs: one is the need to explore the outside world; the other is to preserve one's identity. Language, as he argues, helps us to communicate with the outside world, but at the same time, allows us to identify ourselves, and to reinforce our solidarity.

Perhaps, one major part of ESL/EFL teachers' work is to resolve these two competing forces. Therefore, as ESL/EFL teachers, we need to be well aware of these two forces in our students. More importantly, we need to be aware that these two forces – the issues of internationalism and identity – as Crystal (1997, p. 113) points out, "raise an immediate problem, because they conflict."

In this connection, teachers' responsibilities are daunting: we must help students gain access to Standard English, which empowers them to achieve effective international communication, but at the same time, we must allow students to use English in their own way to achieve their own ends in their own contexts. More significantly and challengingly, we must try to ensure

cooperation or, at least, harmony between these two needs.

If English is more than an instrument of access to international communication, then the aim of our profession is more complicated than just teaching language as a medium or a tool. It is important for teachers to know the different communication needs of students, and even to show students interconnections and differences between local, regional, and global norms for communication.

For this end, being sensitive to the social, cultural, and political contexts of a country is essential. Teachers can have a right to say that a certain use of English is not "standard" and to show students the standard use, but they should not have a right to correct students by yelling "wrong" or forbidding them to use a non-standard form which may work well in the student's own world. It would be wise for teachers to clarify and negotiate with students regarding with whom or in which contexts they can use which variety of English. It is also important for teachers, as Nelson (1995) suggests, to distinguish mistakes from local features in order to respond appropriately to students' language production. I can think of an example to illustrate this point. Many of my students in Vietnam, when speaking English, often address me as *"Teacher,"* so they often say something like *"Teacher, may I ask you a question?"* I know that this practice is "not correct" – native English speakers do not say so in a university classroom. However, I always try to explain to my students that although what they say may not be "Standard English," I do accept this practice within the Vietnamese context. I tell my students that I understand they would feel uncomfortable to use the first name *Hiep* to address me, as many university students in the USA do so with their lecturers, and also that as a Vietnamese teacher, I would feel hurt to be addressed like this. Many students respond that while calling me *Dr Pham* is too formal and distant, and calling me *Hiep* would violate the principle of politeness in our culture, which values the hierarchical relationship between student and teacher, they would feel easier and more comfortable to address me as *Teacher.*

The above example links to the issue of teaching culture. ESL/ EFL

teachers must help students to achieve intelligibility and acceptability when communicating with the outside world, but at the same time, to preserve their own cultural identity. Let me acknowledge that it is not always easy to harmonize these two forces. However, if effective international communication requires students to be aware of cultural differences, then cultural information regarding other foreign countries needs to be introduced for the sake of understanding, comparison and contrast. It is true that students can learn a great deal about their own culture through being introduced and exposed to other cultures. Teachers can help students learn that people are different, and that their use of language can also be different. Because of this, in some cases we need, to some extent, change our behavior, or our rules of speaking to make ourselves better understood in a certain context. But this does not necessarily mean that the new cultural behavior is always desirable to adopt or necessarily better than our own.

In terms of teaching materials, local materials dealing with local issues in the local context should be promoted to balance the old dependence on materials from the Western English speaking countries. However, in addition to formal curricula, it is important for teachers to use an unlimited resource that is close at hand – students' life stories and home issues. Teachers need to maximize opportunities for students to talk and write about their own experiences using their own voices. This can help students "to take control of language, to find the word and make words serve their purposes" (Washima, Harsoon & Naysmith, 1996, p. 233). Even when materials from the USA, and the UK have to be used, teachers can still use them as a resource for discussions in which students can link foreign things, cultural artifacts or lifestyles to whatever they have experience in their home culture.

Finally, the ESL/EFL teachers' role must be educating the general public about the issues with linguistic imperialism and its implications in the world. As Matsuda (2003) comments, while these issues may be familiar to ELT professionals, "the public, including students and their parents, may find these ideas new, radical or even outrageous" (p. 726). Classroom teachers, therefore, need to inform, negotiate and dialogue with students, parents and

policy makers, and the larger society in reference to the values of learning English, and the norms of English those students and parents consider appropriate for their own interests, the ideologies and beliefs associated with English.

CONCLUSION

International communication through English is a pressing issue. ESL/EFL teachers anywhere may encounter moral, pedagogic dilemmas and conflicts in their efforts to work towards resolving the two conflicting forces: *internationalism* and *national/cultural identity* − that is, helping students to be able to communicate with the others in the global market while maintaining their national/cultural values. If English is the primary or only choice for international communication, then language professionals must ensure that English becomes a truly international language which people around the globe can use equally to serve their own varying purposes. This is a very challenging effort for teachers, but the reward is big.

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