

On the Status of English as a “Lingua Franca”: An EFL Academic Context Survey

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Abstract

Recent trends prevalent in the studies about language are stressing the vital role culture, as an inseparable part of language, plays in accumulating so-called international or worldwide prestige. English has become the official language of the business and scientific world (Schütz, 2005). There are a number of elements backing and contributing to this process, directly or indirectly. These elements are mostly of political nature. This study tries to examine and question the present worldview of an EFL academic context regarding the status of English. It is carried out at two interwoven levels. The first section is devoted to the current status of English as the world's number one language of science, politics, sports, business and the like. To this end, a brief, but concise historical overview of “English as a lingua franca” or “English as an international language” and the leading scholars viewpoints in this regard, is provided. The next section is an attempt to crystalize the factors that have helped or are helping this language to gain and develop such a worldview. This qualitative study is pursued through triangulated data collection procedures in an EFL academic context. The data required for this study was gathered through observations, semi-structured interviews, field notes, and focus group discussions. The results signified that English has found its way and position as the world's most recognized lingua franca and this is a policy which is left implicit and untouched in many contexts, such as the Iranian EFL context.

Key words: English as a lingua franca; English in academic context; Critical thinking

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INTRODUCTION

English as an international language has been a matter of concern for many people in recent decades. Everybody has a reason, or is finding a reason, to learn it. This simple argument is behind the valorization of English, and its current status in the world. It is consolidating its presence by engaging an increasing number of learners, who are in need of learning the formal aspects of language (grammar, vocabulary, phonology, etc.), proficient teachers (preferably native speakers), getting acquainted with the target culture (because of the generally accepted view that learning a language requires familiarity with the culture), and also materials and publications (which should be developed by native speaker material developers to feed their economic system). All the above mentioned points, which form the basis of the concept of linguistic imperialism, are believed to be the mechanism that supports the spread of English as an international language.

English has become the prevalent language of choice in many countries. Its choice has affected the cultural, political, or economic life of these countries in the modern world, and this blunt domination of English as the world's lingua franca is unique in history. Graddol (1997) identified three types of speakers using English: those who speak it as a first language (around 375 million speakers), those who speak it as second or additional language (again, some 375 million speakers), and those who learn it as a foreign language (about 750 million learners). Graddol

(1997) also identified the major domains of English as: Working language of international organizations and conferences, Scientific publications, International banking, economic affairs and trade, Advertising for global brands, Audio-visual cultural products such as film, TV, popular music, International tourism, Tertiary (university) education, International safety (airline and maritime travels), International law, As a “relay language” in interpretation and translation, Technology transfer, Internet communication. (p. 8).

There are many factors that backed the dominance of English in the world, but the main causes may be British colonialism in the 19th century, American capitalism and technological progress in the 20th century, and the flexibility of English people in borrowing from other languages in the historical process. It is obvious that the most common way that languages influence each other is the exchange of words. The large-scale importation of words from Latin, French, and other languages into English in the 16th and 17th centuries has been significant.

In its role as a global language, English has become one of the most important academic and professional tools. English is increasingly recognized as, undoubtedly, the most important language to learn by the international community. English has become the official language of the business and scientific world, although in academic and scientific communities, formal English usage is prevalent.

In a study on database analysis, Narvaez-Berthelemot and Russell (2001) I found that English was the main language of publication for journals. The authors argue that communication in the social sciences and humanities is considered more likely to occur in the native language of the researcher or the language of the culture in which the study was carried out, unlike the natural sciences where English is the lingua franca. Their analysis of databases, however, suggests that English also plays a central role in the dissemination of results from social and humanities sciences.

To sum up, today English is recognized as undoubtedly the most important language to learn for the increasingly mobile international community. This is a fact that seems to be irreversible.

Literature Review

The following review is about the issues created by the growing status of English as the predominant international language currently in use. English has become a prominent feature in today's world. According to McArthur (2002), at the beginning of the 21st century, it was estimated that users of English numbered over one billion, although less than a fourth of those used it as their native language (p. 2). The following section discusses this expansion and defines several of the terms associated with this recent global phenomenon.

English is used throughout the world in a multiplicity of contexts, and the following terms were coined to reflect

that diversity.

1. KACHRU'S THREE CIRCLES

The expansion of English followed closely with the settling of colonies and formation of territories by Great Britain. To describe the contexts of English usage among these far-flung former colonies and the rest of the world, Kachru (1992) coined the terms Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle (p. 356). Those territories in which English became the native language are referred to alternately as native speaker (NS) or Inner Circle countries. Examples include Australia, most of Canada, New Zealand, parts of South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In these nations, the varieties of English spoken are referred to as English as a native language (ENL), NS English, or mother tongue (MT) English. Inner Circle varieties hold a position of prestige in the world, however wrongly, and have been described as “norm-providing” (Kachru, 1986, cited in McKay, 2002, p.54). (The Outer Circle comprises those countries that once had strong commerce or colonial ties with Great Britain and now use English as a second language (ESL), usually as the official language. Examples include India, Kenya, Nigeria, Singapore, and parts of South Africa. Described as “norm-developing” (Kachru, 1986, cited in McKay, 2002, p.54), these so-called New Englishes (McArthur, 2001, p.9) came about through years of contact with the L1 languages of their users and have adopted their own conventions which are now considered acceptable indigenized norms of valid English varieties. In comparison to the aforementioned circles, the third circle is a more recent phenomenon which led to a “growth spurt in the language” beginning in the late 1950s according to Crystal (1995, quoted by McArthur, 2002, p.446). In this circle, English continues to expand in usage as the preferred lingua franca in international business, political, and academic arenas, hence the term Expanding Circle. It is in these contexts, described by Kachru (1986, cited in McKay, 2002, p.54) as “norm-dependant” because they have traditionally looked to Inner Circle varieties of English for models, that English is used as a foreign language (EFL). They include most European, Middle Eastern, South American, Francophone African, and Asian countries. However, a blurring of boundaries between Outer and Expanding Circle varieties has begun to occur. According to Lowenberg (2002), as greater numbers of EFL students from the Expanding Circle have been studying English in the Outer Circle, they have internalized some indigenized Outer Circle norms and carried them back to their own countries, thereby resulting in Expanding Circle Englishes with features more characteristic of New Englishes than of Inner Circle varieties as spoken by non-native speakers (NNSs).

2. WORLD ENGLISHES (WES)

The term world Englishes (WES) is used to refer to the myriad varieties of English in use today (McArthur, 2002, p.44; Davies et al. 2003, p.572). Under the umbrella of world Englishes exist both standard and non-standard varieties. Because a standard language is considered the prestige variety, the variety established by the social elite, used in educational institutions, heard in the media, and preserved in the literature of a nation, its mere existence can effectively marginalize those who use non-standard varieties of the language. Non-standard varieties may vary from the standard in terms of phonology, lexis, or grammar, but in her discussion on language standards, McKay (2002) notes that there is less tolerance for grammatical innovation than for lexical innovation because grammar expresses a social identity. She cites Widdowson (1994, p.381) as follows: "The mastery of a particular grammatical system, especially perhaps those features which are redundant, marks you as a member of the community which has developed that system for its own social purpose" (McKay, 2002, p.69).

3. UNITY WITHIN ENGLISH

While great diversity exists in English, scholars also acknowledge the commonalities that unite the language. For communication to occur across cultures through the use of English, speakers of diverse varieties of English must draw upon the features of English they have in common in order to make themselves understood. As Widdowson (1997) points out, "Even if we allow diversification for local communities, we must surely deny it in the interests of global communication" (p. 143). The following terms reflect the unifying forces at work within the dynamics of global English.

4. ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (ELF)

Lingua francas have been traditionally seen as languages used by speakers of different L1s whose main goal in using them is mutual comprehension, not form (McArthur, 2002, p.2). Furthermore, as Seidlhofer puts it, "a lingua franca has no native speakers" (2004, p.211). At one time this might have meant the use of pidgin or "broken" English, as perhaps used in global business dealings (McArthur, 2001, p.1). Now, however, English as a lingua franca (ELF) has come to be seen as a term referring to a 13 standard form of English that NNSs use when communicating with each other. Other interpretations of ELF exist as follows: English used in contexts where at least some of the interlocutors are NNSs, English used in contexts where all the interlocutors are NNSs from the same L1, and English as a "new code," not standard English, but based on it (Elder & Davies, 2006, p.284).

For the purposes of this paper, ELF will be seen as a variety, standard or otherwise, used by NNSs of different L1s.

5. ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE (EIL)

The term international English is often used interchangeably with the term English as an international language (EIL); however, Seidlhofer (2004) makes a slight distinction between the two. Whereas IE refers to one "clearly distinguishable, codified, and unitary variety," EIL refers to the situations of English usage internationally, whether in Expanding Circle, Outer Circle or Inner Circle contexts (p. 210). In this way, EIL can be seen as relating to ELF in that both refer to the context in which the language is used as well as to the actual code itself. This paper will reflect Seidlhofer's understanding of the term EIL.

6. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present status of English as an international language has raised many queries regarding the mechanisms at the interplay between the rise and the spread of this language. English has become the official language of the business and science (Schütz, 2005), politics, education, etc. This fast escalation is neither due to inherent merits of English (Canagarajah 2000), nor due to something intrinsically wonderful about English (its pronunciation, grammar or spelling) which makes it a global language. Rather, there are a number of political reasons contributing to this process. Since academic context has been definitely an important source in valorizing English as the world's lingua franca, it seems vital to examine its present state amongst academia. This study tries to examine and question the present worldview of an EFL academic context regarding the status of English, in order to shed light on the factors that have paved the way for the spread of English in the modern world. The results can contribute to ELT scholars, teachers, students, material developers, syllabus designers, and administrative bureau. The insight gained through this qualitative study can help developing a better educational setting by raising awareness about this issue.

7. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study has three research questions:

- 1st. What is the general perspective of B.A students of English regarding the status of English as the world's lingua franca?
- 2nd. What does this viewpoint indicate about the present and future status of English in the world?
- 3rd. What are the factors that contribute to developing/hinder the spread of such viewpoints?

8. THE STUDY

Participants

The participants of this study were selected among junior college students majoring in English language translation. A total number of 15 students, male and female, with almost the same socio-economic status, and the age range of 21-25 took part in this study. These students had enrolled in a speaking course in which they were supposed to both give a lecture and participate in the discussions run by the teacher.

Procedure

As it was stated earlier in this paper, the data was collected via triangulation process. This included observations in the class, semi-structured interviews, in which the teacher asked open-ended questions about the topic at hand and the students' responses were audiotaped and later transcribed for the purpose of a qualitative analysis, field notes, and focus group discussions. The reason for choosing a triangulation procedure was to enrich the nature of the collected data. The study was designed to shed light on the general viewpoint which exist among academia in an EFL context regarding their major, English, its uses in their life, its properties, the way it functions in the world, their perspectives regarding the standard English, native speakers, and also the English published materials. Besides, this study tries to analyze and find some basic reasons that are contributing to the spread of English, as well as proposing some guidelines to hinder superiorizing the status of English, and inferiorizing the status of local languages.

9. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the research questions presented earlier are reposed and answered based on the qualitative analysis of the collected data.

1st. What is the general perspective of B.A students of English regarding the status of English as the world's lingua franca?

These reflections indicate the students' accepting and approving attitude toward the English language unquestionably. They are also an indication of a phenomenon known as "linguistic imperialism", a process through which the English language spreads. Their comments show that they praise this language, for no clear reason. They see something unique in this language; some inherent merit in its nature. It seems that they do not have a clear idea of what they are doing. There is no trace of sociopolitical awareness toward the policies that support the spread of English in the world and the origins of the so-called "prestige" of this language.

These reflections also show other important concepts that play a crucial role in critical studies: native speaker fallacy, and the notion of standard English (both of which

have roots in the linguistic imperialism notion). This is another indication of the fact that our future teachers have little or no critical awareness. They have accepted the "self/others" dichotomy, which is a way of colonizing disenfranchised people. This is done through injecting an ideology that stresses the idea of "ownership of the language" at one extreme, and making all other versions of English inferior to the so-called "standard English", at the other side of the extreme. And these students have taken this for granted.

The last interpretation is about ELT materials and course designing and developing. Again, due to their uncritical way of thinking, they believe that it is more important to get to know another culture. This shows a move toward accepting a global culture, and there exists no attempt toward the preservation of the local culture. This sort of opinion is contributing to the current status of ELT profession in two ways. First, by expressing resistance toward the inclusion of the source culture, they are fast-forwarding the colonizing movement, and second is the fact that they are fueling the ELT publishing engine, in favor of countries located in power centers.

2nd. What does this viewpoint indicate about the present and future status of English in the world?

In a world where globalization is the trend – a global economy, a global internet, global, global businesses– it should not be surprising to learn that there is now also an undisputed global language, namely English. Because English today is used in a plethora of contexts around the world, as the native language of millions, the official language of numerous nations, and a lingua franca in a multitude of international dealings, more users of English than ever before either feel some ownership in the language through their national dialect or some resentment towards the Western cultural norms that tend to come embedded with the language.

These arguments clearly mention the point that the current policy of hegemonic English has desirably worked in favor of inner-circle countries. English language has paved its way toward colonizing the whole world through language. This is a task that has been done largely in EFL academic settings at least. The English language has established itself as the most prestigious, professionally needed, highly in demand, and the survival element in modern life.

3rd. What are the factors that contribute to developing/hinder the spread of such viewpoints?

As inferred from the uncritical reflections, it can be concluded that the lack of critical thinking abilities can indirectly contribute to the current high status of English as the most accredited and recognized language of the world. The students need to develop further critical thinking skills to be able to understand and analyze the hidden agenda that supports the spread of English as the world's lingua franca.

To conclude, it seems that while on the one hand, we

see globalization which paves the way for the role of English as an international lingua franca, on the other hand, attempts should be made all around the world to create space for other national and local languages to reassert themselves.

CONCLUSION

In our globalized world English has become not only factually the most widely used, but also the most socially acknowledged tool of communication. As language always reflects a particular worldview, this has consequences on the way we think and picture the world. One major field in which this soft war for colonization is taking place is in academic contexts. The results of this study reflected over simplistic viewpoints of EFL students majoring in English. This signifies a need to develop certain critical thinking skills within the educational system. This is also a call for a need to preserve local language and its major component, culture, and also identities. Attaining such a perspective can introduce some benefits to an EFL education system. McKay (2002) echoes the ideas of Kachru in her theories of teaching EIL and asserts that a new ELT pedagogy is needed which will "take into account the cross-cultural values of the use of English in multilingual communities, the questioning of native-speaker models, and the recognition of the equality of the varieties of English that have resulted from the global spread of the language" (cited in Seidlhofer, 2004, p.225).

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