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Exposing Learners to World Englishes Through a Multiliteracies Approach

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Introduction

With technological advances providing people with more means of communication than have been available at any other time in history, the role of English in the world is being re-examined from a range of perspectives. This text will look at English and English language teaching (ELT) on a global scale, drawing on issues and pedagogy that have arisen from the spread of English to develop practices at the classroom level.

Firstly the spread of English around the globe will be briefly explored, with reference to views that present this spread, on one end of the scale, as a form of 'linguistic imperialism' (Phillipson: 1992), and on the other as neutral and natural (Crystal: 1997). Secondly, given the large number of non-native speakers (NNSs) who use English it is pertinent to consider the place of NNS varieties of English both inside and outside the classroom and question the authority native speakers (NSs) have long held in the global context. Holliday's (2006) arguments regarding native-speakerism will be drawn upon in this section. Finally, practical outcomes for classrooms will be explored, based on the New London Group's Multiliteracies pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis: 2000). The pedagogy's macro-categories Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing and Transformed Practice will be defined and exemplified, with emphasis given to activities that lead students towards creating communities that can help them reach the goal of effective communication in English with both NSs and other NNSs.

1

The Spread of English

Conservative figures estimate that there are well over 700 million English speakers worldwide, a dramatic increase since the estimated 4 million in 1500 (Pennycook: 1994). Colonial expansion, development aid policies and the international free market have been instrumental factors in this spread (Pennycook: 1994). Further to this, technological progress in the 20th century, aggressive marketing by organizations such as the British Council and interest in music and films recorded in English have also played an important part in disseminating English throughout the world.

For some, the spread of English is something to be celebrated, as it brings the world closer to having a true lingua franca, one which can be used by all. In his book *English as a Global Language* (1997) Crystal depicts the spread as neutral and natural, focusing on the advantages of having a language that can be used worldwide. After outlining the ways he believes international languages can be defined, he claims English is the only language that can meet all criteria. Rather than seeing English as posing an imposition on the non-English speaking world, he sees it as a language that could be used as a means to bring the world together linguistically, maintaining that it is possible to have both a globally common language and preserve local languages, which by extension preserve cultural identities.

Others take a more resistant stance toward the spread of English. Phillipson (1999: 265) rebukes Crystal for 'seeing English as symbiotically linked to progress' and ignoring the links 'between global English and the processes and structures that it is involved in.' In his much-cited book *Linguistic Imperialism* Phillipson (1992) argues that dominance is asserted and maintained by establishing and continuously reconstituting structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. He rejects Crystal's notion of English being a neutral language that can be used for common global good, claiming factors such as neo-colonialism and cultural hegemony prevent this. Pennycook's *Worldliness of English* theory (1994) echoes Phillipson's rejection of English as neutral, urging for cultural, political, economical and social implications to be considered before one concludes that a nation or an individual has chosen English.

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Non-native Speakers and Native-speakerism

As the number of NNSs of English continues to rise, so too will the fragmentation and the linguistic diversity of the language. Some believe that that we should be speaking of Englishes in the plural, as promoted by journals such as *World Englishes*, while others seek to maintain the current advantages gained by being a native speaker and hence an 'owner' of English, singular. Those who reject the authority and rights of NNSs

may be guilty of native-speakerism.

Native-speakerism Defined

Holliday (2005: 6) defines native-speakerism as the “established belief that ‘native-speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology.” He warns NS ELT professionals away from creating a situation in which ‘we’, the NS ELT providers, pressure ‘them’, the NNSs to think like ‘us’ and criticizes the devaluation of NNS ELT professionals. His support of different varieties of English, NNS ELT professionals and the adaptation of materials to embrace local values is a step in the opposite direction of organizations such as the British Council, which have worked hard to keep NSs at the top of the hierarchy, with English ownership and its associated benefits firmly in their hands. Holliday proposes we move away from English ownership, and towards acceptance.

According to Holliday (2005), native-speakerism is evidenced through employment policies, ELT materials, work cultures and cultural stereo-typing. He believes that there is a common underlying tendency for students and colleagues who are not from the English-speaking West to be seen as ‘other’, which often involves negatively contrasting the ‘other’ with the positive ‘self’. My experience in a British English ‘eikaiwa’, which translates to English conversation school, corresponds with this, with employment policies that excluded NNS ELT professionals in the name of grammatical correctness and pronunciation. Only after exposure to wider reading have I realized I worked for a company that participated in elitist control of both language and employment. As is often the case, one’s own culture and work culture can often remove the capacity to critically evaluate the most common practices.

The How and Why of Native-speakerism

Native-speakerism is embedded in some of the most powerful, long-established ELT bodies, which means it is far reaching and deeply-entrenched. One such body, by no means the only one, is the British Council. In his British Council commissioned book ‘English Next’ (2006) Graddol suggests that there are a number of trends that will impact upon NSs and ELT professionals in the near future. As with many British Council publications, the emphasis was on what NSs would lose rather than the advantages NNSs would enjoy. As readers, Wallace (1992:15) implores us to question how and why a topic is being written about and consider other ways it could be presented. As a reader, I believe headings such as ‘Irrelevance of Native Speakers’, ‘The Doom of Monolingualism’ and ‘The Economic Advantage Is Ebbing Away’ (Graddol: 2006, 14-15)

have been chosen to create a certain level of fear among monolingual NSs, particularly those in ELT. There is power in division and there is a lot at stake for organizations such as the British Council should NS ELT professionals embrace their NNS counterparts. In addition to the advantages gained by English being a key language in financial markets and businesses throughout the world, countries such as the UK, America and Australia gain a great deal of money and power through being able to export ELT materials and the expertise of NS ELT providers throughout the world. Native-speakerism serves to protect these privileges.

In a sectioned titled 'The Native Speaker Problem' Graddol (2006) suggests NSs may lose their privileged place in the ELT market as Asian countries choose NNSs, claiming that 'the teaching of English is becoming a service which is no more specialized than that of, say, chip design or legal research' (p. 115). He makes his point by citing a decision in China in the 1990's to use Belgian teacher trainers and the definition of NS teachers being relaxed to included teachers from India and Singapore. The link between 'no more specialized than' and the increasing use of NNS ELT providers is a clear message that the author sees ELT being downgraded by the integration of NNS professionals, and as this report was commissioned and published by the British Council, one must keep this in mind when considering the role of the British Council in English education.

Rejecting Native-speakerism

The British Council's use of rhetoric as a tool to promote English is countered by others such as Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2001) who suggest that speakers who plan to use English for international communication should receive training regardless of whether they come from NS or NNS backgrounds, as English functions differently across cultures and without training, miscommunication is more likely. They place responsibility upon NSs, citing Smith and Rafiqzad's (1989) earlier work, which found that NSs have difficulty understanding spoken English in the international context. Further, despite the fact that a small-scale study found two-thirds of NNS academics feel they are at a disadvantage to their NS counterparts when publishing (Flowerdue: 2001), NNSs are starting to accept their own English as good English, and as a result Ostler (2006) predicts that in the future there will be less reliance upon the UK, America and Australia not only in the ELT world, but also as cultural leaders. As Jenkins noted (1998) almost a decade ago, most learners no longer believe the acquisition of a native-like accent is their ultimate goal, which is part of a shift in the goals of NNSs. Although I still have students who say they want to improve their pronunciation or have a 'native-speaker accent', these goals are outweighed by a stronger desire to

understand and be understood. The next section looks at how ELT professionals can help students achieve these goals.

Practical Steps for ELT Providers and Students

In this culturally-diverse, technologically saturated world that we live in, we are presented with knowledge in multiple modes – visual, audio, gestural, spatial, linguistic – and are expected to be able to understand and use them to meet our goals. The New London Group (NLG) addresses these modes of meaning, with emphasis on Multimodal Meaning, in their ground-breaking Multiliteracies Project (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This project moves beyond measuring literacy in a linguistic sense, expanding the definition to encompass the ways one deciphers and transforms knowledge obtained from an unlimited range of sources, which can include anything from the internet to shopping mall architecture. They encourage educators to engage learners in activities that not only immerse learners in the target skill but also explore it from different angles, critique it then respond in a way that takes into account both that which has been learnt and the learners own social background and goals. In order to assist educators, four macro-categories, which may occur simultaneously or independently, have been devised. Abridged definitions taken from Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000: 33-35) are given in the following section.

Macro-categories of Multiliteracies Pedagogy Defined

Situated Practice

Learners are immersed in meaningful practice within a community that includes experts, who have mastered a practice, expert novices, who are experts at learning new domains and other learners. This community serves as a group of mentors, using both the learners' experiences and non-school communities to enhance the learners' understanding and motivation.

Overt Instruction

This component aims to build learners' conscious control and understanding, which in time allows them to manipulate the skills learnt for their own purposes. It lends itself to the scaffolding of learning activities, allowing learners to reach higher than they could alone, by drawing attention to the key features of their experiences and activities at beneficial points. Mentors collaborate with learners, supporting them toward a higher level of achievement and a conscious awareness of how that achievement was made. Metalanguages are introduced to allow learners to articulate what they have learnt.

Critical Framing

This component seeks to allow learners to take what they have learnt and examine it from a wide variety of other perspectives, which could include historical, cultural and social perspectives. Learners are required to distance themselves from what they have learnt and view it from different angles.

Transformed Practice

This is, in effect, an opportunity for learners to recycle Situated Practice after reflection on what they have learnt to date. Learners have the opportunity to incorporate their growing knowledge into new practices that reflect their own goals and values.

Macro-categories of Multiliteracies in Practice

I would like to explore these four categories from the perspective of a NS ELT professional in Tokyo teaching students that have very limited exposure to English beyond their classrooms. A common complaint received from students is that they understand their teachers but on the rare occasions they use English with NSs and NNSs outside of class they have difficulty. When questioned on the links they have in their everyday lives it becomes apparent that for many their only regular access to English comes from their scheduled English lessons.

Drawing upon the Multiliteracies framework, it is recommended such students be introduced to some accessible English communities, as this would help them improve their English communication skills. This would need to be attempted with reference to Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing and Transformed Practice. A possible way to do so, which encompasses functional literacy (using computers as a tool) and critical literacy (computers as cultural artifacts), is outlined below.

Situated Practice

Although this component generally aims to draw on communities of experts, students may not have or acknowledge their links to such a community, so the initial goal is to discover or create such communities for the student. As such, the teacher initially acts as a mentor and guides the learners to reflect on their experiences. Students should start by discussing their current and past English use in non-educational contexts with their classmates. Those who have English-speakers that they communicate with regularly would tell the rest of the class how they met. The class would then make a list of possible ways to find English-speakers to communicate with. If it doesn't come up, the teacher should introduce web-based pen pals, message boards and chat lounges.

Overt Instruction

After looking over a few websites I found Lingo Zone (www.lingozone.com), which connects people from around the world who are looking to exchange ideas and languages, to be a suitable site for students to connect with an English speaking community. When choosing a pen pal, you can specify (or leave blank) both the native language of your pen pal and the language they are studying, so students could choose either a NS or NNS. There are message board sections where members can express themselves to the whole Lingo Zone community and read what others have written. Two message boards seem particularly relevant, those being 'Countries and Culture' and 'Looking for Friends'.

Depending on their background knowledge, students will need varying amounts of support with registration, log in, negotiating drop bars and clickable text, exploiting search fields and posting their messages. The key terms would be defined here and the goal would be for students to post a message in response to messages that interested them on each of the message boards or alternatively, respond to a request for a pen pal.

Critical Framing

Students discuss the messages they read and those they wrote with their classmates. They re-examine their initial expression regarding the difficulty of finding English-speakers to interact with, questioning it from a technological perspective (Do I have access to a computer? Do I have the skills to use Lingo Zone and other such sites?) as well as a personal one (Do I want to communicate through a computer? Are there other modes of communication better suited to my needs?).

Transferred Practice

Students decide on whether to post their own message on a message board, request a pen pal, respond to other posts or reject this method of communication. The students who want to post a message do so, while those who do not want to be involved help their partner to create a message or browse through message boards reading topics of interest. This stage gives the learners control of a new means to communicate, with the flexibility to choose the topics, people and even sites that appeal to them most.

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An Alternative Set of Tasks

In addition to pen pal sites, which draw on visual and linguistic modes of meaning, learners could also be introduced to avenues that make use of gestural, spatial, linguistic, audio and visual modes. One approach would be the introduction of chat lounges which can found be all over Tokyo and can be a good place to meet people from around

the world. I have been to one such place, Mickey House, many times and have met people from well over 20 countries there. Students could be introduced to this type of environment in a similar way to that used for Lingo Zone, with Situated Practice following the same pattern as that for pen pals and Overt Instruction focusing on web searches for local chat lounges, the setting of targets for a visit (for example, a set of questions or discussion points to tackle) and the actual trip to a chat lounge. Critical Framing would involve regrouping, sharing their experiences, examining such factors as the music played (aural), layout (spatial) and lighting (visual) which contributed to the atmosphere, the types of people they met there, the price and distance from their home then decide whether or not they would like to attend again, either at the same chat lounge or a different one. Transformed Practice would result in them forming an opinion on chat lounges that resulted in them re-attending, recommending them to others or rejecting them.

Conclusion

English is not only a powerful language tool, it is also a means of access or denial to social and economic opportunities. As NNS varieties of English continue to gain prominence on the world stage, there will be a shift, already in evidence, in the goals of English language students and ELT professionals. These shifts will create new challenges that warrant attention now. In addition, both currently and in the years ahead, NSs and NNSs alike will need to adapt to and negotiate a range of changes as technology, shifting attitudes and swings in market powers impact upon the world. Amid this explosion of change, ELT professionals and learners will need to embrace the advantages, work to surmount the difficulties and develop the range of skills one needs for the 21st century in order to prosper in the challenging times ahead.

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