

English Hegemony Versus Cultural Sovereignty

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The dominance of the English language – and cultures associated with it – have pushed neocolonial educational standards on the rest of the world. In reference to Kachru's three concentric circles diagram, the expanding circle continues to grow with the pressure of adopting and understanding the English language to survive in our ever-globalizing world. With the increasing influence of the English language, many other languages are struggling to sustain themselves with the newer generations. This paper will discuss the impact of expanding English educational systems on Indigenous and minority cultures, particularly those in former colonies in the global South.

Globalization has contributed to the spread of cultures and languages across the world, with intercultural communication made far easier through the devices at our fingertips. Globalization, however, has not contributed to the promotion of all cultures and languages equally. In particular, English has come to dominate the industries of commerce, science, and technology. It is therefore promoted much more heavily in educational systems, which in turn has promoted neocolonial educational standards. In the face of this, Indigenous and minority cultures are struggling to maintain their languages and cultures. In this paper, I aim to answer the question of whether English language hegemony can exist without imposing on the sovereignty of minority cultures. Utilizing case studies from Malaysia and Kenya to examine educational policies and systems post-colonization, I argue that because of its associated history with colonization and domination, it is not possible to fully separate English from its frequently harmful influence. There are, however, ways to minimize that harm.

The Expansion of English

Indian linguist Braj Kachru created a diagram that demonstrates the influence of the English language. In the center, the inner circle, are countries like the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and English-speaking parts of Canada. This part of the diagram represents the countries where English really stems from, which are those places that spread their influence outwards. The outer circle represents countries where English was not a native tongue, but is now spoken widely (typically due to colonization). This includes places like India, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and Malaysia, which is what this presentation focuses on. The expanding circle is where English continues to gain influence, not due to any governmental or historical reasons, but because English is increasingly important for industries like commerce and technology. These are places like China, Russia, and Brazil. Regardless of where a country may fall in this diagram, it is clear that English's influence continues to grow due to the industries and other global activities English-speaking nations play a major part in (Rassool, 2012, p. 53).

English-Language Teaching (ELT) has become a popular industry as a result of globalization. English was once spread through British colonization. Today, English remains the language of commerce, technology, and other industries. This ever-growing influence contributes to the pressures put on countries that may not have been colonized, but must learn and use English in order to be successful in various global industries. According to Lam (1999), "the spread of English in the world has always been facilitated through instruction in the classroom" (p. 376). As it is, ELT results in the inevitable adoption of textbooks written by native English-speakers or English-educated locals and the incorporation of expatriates as teachers or teacher trainers and the adherence of Western academic culture. In turn, these factors end up promoting Western cultures and ideologies, predominantly those of the United States and Britain today (Lam, 1999).

In conjunction with ELT, foreign aid also plays a role in upholding the domination of English. Foreign aid is, in and of itself, a form of neocolonialism. Many times, foreign aid will result in dependency on foreign nations rather than the creation of sustainable development projects. Many aid programs will incorporate schools or programs that “use English as a medium of instruction or include English as a subject of study (Lam, 1999, p. 378). In addition, missionaries – who have had clear connections to colonization since it first began – have built and maintained churches that preach in English and put Western missionaries in these congregations. Missionary work therefore spreads both the English language and related culture, and specifically that associated with Christianity (Harries, 2012). (It should be noted that colonial powers did attempt to restrict access to English education, as they did not want colonized minorities to become too educated. Many times missionaries, were the source of knowledge. This carried its own weight in colonization.)

Case Studies

Malaysia

Malaysia was colonized by Britain in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. There was no concrete language policy under colonial rule, but rather just a passive introduction for a select group of people. Access to formal education was reserved for an elite minority of Malay and Chinese, which meant that education of the English language was not widespread and became associated with power and prosperity. English was taught (to some extent) in most schools prior to independence in 1957, but there was no set policy across the board to guarantee equal exposure. In 1963, the Malaysian government made Malay the national language in an attempt to create “a sense of national identity” (Hewing, 2012, p. 98). Still, English was taught in schools, since it was considered essential for success after formal schooling. Though Malay served as the language of instruction, mathematics and science were taught in English as part of a six-year experiment. Rural children in particular were unlikely to have

adequate access to books in English, and their parents were unlikely to have much, if any, knowledge of the language. Furthermore, “there were many who felt it was a return to the colonial times” (Hewing, 2012, p. 99).

This experiment resulted in lower test scores across the board, which eventually led to disdain and demonstrations from much of the population. Various factors were blamed for the general failure of this experiment, among those being the lack of properly trained teachers in English and the importance of learning at a primary level in one’s main language. In addition, some took the opportunity to “reiterate their opposition to English, the colonial language, and to express fears that it would lead to downgrading or eventual loss of the Malay language” (Hewing, 2012, p. 102). On the other hand, urban parents, students who already had extensive access and exposure to English, some higher education professionals, and many in the media and business industries supported the instruction of math and science in English. The Malaysian government ultimately decided to allow students to learn in whichever languages they preferred, while still placing an emphasis on English as a foreign language. Rather than a successful implementation, the emphasis on English in Malaysian educational institutions created more visible divisions between the elite and the lower classes, as well as dug up negative emotions associated with colonization (Hewing, 2012).

Kenya

Kenya was also colonized by Britain, though the colonial language policy that they implemented was rather eclectic. English was also associated with the elite and became seen as a “launching pad” for white collar jobs. Because of this, English grew in popularity. Eventually the colonizers became apprehensive about the spread of English, as those who did become educated in the English language were no longer willing to perform menial work for low wages. Essentially, the language policy of the colonizers would fluctuate depending on their needs at the time. Starting in 1953, the government

chose to make English a primary language of instruction and to drop Kiswahili from the curriculum in primary schools, aside from the areas where it was a mother tongue. After independence in 1963, Kiswahili became a co-official language alongside English. Currently, English is the official medium of instruction, although Kiswahili does remain the regional lingua franca, and code switching is incredibly prominent (Nabea, 2009).

Kiswahili remains an optional subject in school, and other lesser-known Indigenous tongues are essentially banned in schools. Students who are heard speaking indigenous languages in or even near schools may be punished, sometimes physically, and the languages are typically associated with underdevelopment or other negative issues. Most Indigenous languages in Kenya have “no written material, have never been standardised and have no orthography,” and are therefore in danger of dying off (Nabea, 2009, p. 127). Although English still comes with negative connotations as a colonial language, it still nevertheless dominates educational settings at the expense of heritage languages.

Recommendations

In an attempt to promote a less harmful form of English education that may potentially be less intrusive on minority cultures, I offer some suggestions on how to approach English education. It should be noted that there are a wide array of possibilities, but due to the length restriction on this particular paper, I will only discuss a small amount. The first suggestion would be a “de-culturization” of English, or promoting a more neutral, international version of English that would not be associated with places like Britain or the United States. The hope for this is that this version of English could potentially be detached from the stigma of cultural imperialism while still sharing the language with those interested in learning (Lam, 1999, p. 381). Another idea is the use of “provincialized English,” or instruction that is well aware of the implications of English’s colonial history and how it plays into its current existence (Hsu, 2017, p. 116). This is more of a recognition that English’s empirical and colonial history cannot be

fully separated from the tongue itself rather than attempting to ignore the connections. In addition, an “ideological recuperation of indigenous, alternative, and local knowledges” may prove effective (Hsu, 2017, p. 119). The incorporation of local practices legitimizes the knowledge from the community and can therefore promote a less Western ideology that typically comes with English. More than anything, it is incredibly vital that the educators themselves are aware of their position and how their own experiences and backgrounds may influence instruction. Reflective teacher practices may allow educators to listen to those who they are intending to educate and come up with alternative teaching methods that may not be as harmful as Western educational systems in the global South (Hsu, 2017).

As English education currently exists, there is little acknowledgement of the sovereignty of other cultures and nation-states in the outer and expanding circles of Kachru’s diagram. English education inherently promotes Western cultures and ideologies, while “othering” the cultures in which they are being taught. In the examples of Malaysia and Kenya both during colonization and after independence, the push of English created divisions in their communities and impeded on the sovereignty of Indigenous and minority cultures. To coexist with and promote and protect Indigenous and minority cultures, the cultural influences within English (particularly in reference to the United States and Britain) needs to be removed or made significantly less harmful. Though viable options do exist, it would take a lot of influence and power to detach English from its imperial and colonial influences.

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