

## Teaching and Learning English: From Ideology to Empowerment

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### Abstract

*Some see the learning of English as the key to the future. Others see the teaching of English as cultural imperialism. In order to serve our students, we need to get beyond ideology and teach English in a way that empowers and does not impose. One way to do this is to think about language and its learning in a wholly different light.*

### Three caveats

Before I speak on the theme of this year's NELTA Conference, "English and Social Mobility: Empowerment or Marginalisation?" I need to make three points about my comments.

First, I am an outsider. I cannot advise you Nepalese language educators on matters of language policy and the education of your youth. It would be arrogant of me to think that I could or that I should say anything that would be contextually appropriate for you. Whatever I do say, therefore, you must carefully consider in light of your own situation.

Second, I am not a critical linguist. That is not to say that I do not seek to understand power and its imbalance. Nor does it mean that I ignore matters of social justice. Quite the contrary, I do try hard to act in a responsible way in my life when it comes to issues of social equity. For instance, I was recently involved in starting a program for teachers of English language learners in the United States. As you probably know, the United States is a land of immigrants. Due to changing demographics in the United States, the immigrant population has become increasingly geographically dispersed. As a result, sometimes children of immigrants are placed with teachers who mean well, but who are untrained when it comes to working with English language learners. Our program is designed to assist teachers to help their students learn English and therefore succeed in getting an education without losing their heritage language and culture.

Third, changing the whole socio-political dynamics of language use and abuse is beyond any one person's energy to alter. Whatever the reason, the socio-economic-political climate currently favours English as the international language of communication, technology, commerce, science. The future may favour another language—Chinese or Urdu

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for example. Recently there was an article in *The London Observer* (February 4, 2007) announcing that schools in England and Wales will soon be able to replace French and German with Mandarin and Urdu. The article goes on to say that for the first time, English and Welsh educators will not be forced to offer only European languages to children. Instead, children will be able to choose from a list of languages that are thought to be “economically useful.”

So who knows what lies ahead? I do know that I did not decide to give English its unique status in the world, and I will not be around to anoint its successor. Perhaps because of my age, I choose to work on what I can do, not what is beyond my power to do. However, I have been asked by you, my hosts, to speak on the theme of your conference for this key speech, and so I shall.

### The growth of English

Let me begin by speaking of the situation in general. All over the world, we are witnessing a tremendous increase in demand for English—not only due to different changing demographics, such as the type that I have just mentioned, but also because of the trend towards globalization, which is, of course, now a fact, no longer a speculation.

One relevant consequence of globalization is that more and more governments are mandating that second/foreign language instruction be required of younger and younger students. Within the last decade in Thailand and Egypt, for instance, a new constituency for English as a foreign language came into being when their Ministries of Education announced that English language instruction would now begin in the lower primary grades.

Nunan (2003) notes that the emergence of English as a global language has also had a major influence on the government of Taiwan’s thinking. Taiwan aims to be a major economic global player and sees the economic imperative as a major impetus for promoting the learning of English. Thus, in September 2001, English was introduced in Grade 5 (in which learners are 10-11 years of age), but this was then lowered to Grade 1 in 2002.

A recently published document on the English curriculum (cited in Nunan, 2003) sets out the official government line on principles underpinning the curriculum (Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2000).

The objective of the elementary/junior high school curriculum should be to instil a basic communicative ability, to prepare students to take a global perspective, and to give individuals confidence in communicating in the global area (“thus improving the nation’s competitiveness”).

Indeed, according to Graddol (2006), on whose book I have based a lot of this article, a massive increase in the number of people learning English has already begun, and is likely to reach a peak of around 2 billion in the next 10–15 years. On the one hand, he notes, “the availability of English as a global language is accelerating globalization. On the other, the globalization is accelerating the use of English.” In an opinion column in a recent edition of the *Times of India*, the editor wrote;

The National Knowledge Commission's recommendation to include English compulsorily in school curricula across the country from Class I could not have come a moment too soon. Government must implement it right away if India is to realise its potential as a knowledge economy. As things stand, Indian professionals are much sought after globally because of the linguistic edge they are equipped with, but a majority still does not have access to English.

The article continues,

The handicap is brought into relief when school-leavers seek higher education where English is, almost exclusively, the medium of instruction. It is further accentuated at the workplace where it is the preferred language of transaction. Alarm bells are already being sounded about the lack of skilled graduates the Indian education system is churning out. It is simply not in step with the requirements of the global marketplace.... [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/OPINION/Editorial/Mind\\_YourLanguage/article-show/1230140.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/OPINION/Editorial/Mind_YourLanguage/article-show/1230140.cms).

Interestingly, Seidlhofer et al. (2006) observe that in Europe, English is not only studied because of “top-down” educational policies of governments.

Instead, individuals themselves are motivated to learn English on their own because of their interest in popular music, dance, sports, or computers... Indeed, “[p]art of the explanation for the strength of the popularity of English in this synergy between top-down [government] and bottom-up [individual] processes” (Phillipson, 2003: 89).

For many people, though, learning English is more than supporting a hobby. Indeed, English is a necessary skill for many guest workers, who leave their home countries in search of better-paying jobs elsewhere. For example, in 2003, Malaysia made basic proficiency in English a requirement for all foreign employees, just as Bangladesh signed an agreement to send 200,000 workers to Malaysia (Graddol, 2006).

In many countries, the money that foreign workers make and send to their families back home is a significant contribution to the national economy of their home countries. Even so, Graddol (2006) notes that “studies in individual countries, such as Nepal, indicate that the actual flow may be 10 times or more than [recognized]. In many countries, such as sub-Saharan African countries, there may be no official statistics actually collected. In any event, English is widely regarded as a gateway to wealth for national economies, organisations, and individuals. If that is correct, the distribution of poverty in future will be closely linked to the distribution of English.”

### **Problems with the increasing spread of English**

Knowing English is therefore key to employment in a globalized economy. There are, however, those who find problems with the increasing spread of English.

One concern is that the growth of English will lead to the decline, even the death, of other languages. Krauss (1992) estimated that as few as 600 of the 6-7000 languages on earth today will remain healthy through the next century. Then, too, a report written for the European Commission in 1995 warns of dire consequences for the 48 minority language groups of the European Union. The report argues

that given “the shift in thinking about the value of economic development and European integration, attention must be given to sustaining the existing pool of diversity within the EU.”

There is no question, but that the number of languages in the world has been falling throughout modern times, and the decline may be accelerating. However, according to Graddol (2006), the spread of global English is not the direct cause of language endangerment. The downward trend in language diversity began before the rise of English as a global lingua franca. English has had greater impact on national languages, rather than regional languages spoken more locally.

In support of this observation, a recent article in the *International Herald Tribune* (October 23, 2006), entitled “Globalization: Saving Thailand’s Other Languages,” made a similar point. “Thailand is home to a colourful patchwork of ethno-linguistic groups, making up some 14% of its 64 million people. But some are in an especially bad way: 14 of the country’s 70 or so languages are “imminently endangered” and could die out in the next 50 to 100 years, say linguists. The danger is not from English, however. As speakers of these less commonly spoken languages “bump up against the forces of modernity and the dominant, unifying Thai culture, the[se] languages may face a slow death.” In other words, it is the national language, Thai, that threatens the local languages, not English.

In fact, “in terms of native-speaker rankings, English is [actually] falling in the world league tables. Only 50 years ago it was clearly in second place, after Mandarin. It is likely that Spanish, Hindi-Urdu and English all have broadly similar numbers of first-language speakers. Some commentators have suggested that English has slipped to fourth place, where its position will become challenged by Arabic in the middle of this century” (Graddol, 2006).

What is clear is that the world language system is being transformed. However, English is not the main reason for global language loss. The impact of English is mainly on the status of other big national languages. Then, as I mentioned earlier, who knows

what the future holds? It could be that Mandarin will replace English as the language of the global economy. Certainly, interest in studying Chinese is growing. In Portland, Oregon, USA, there is, for example, a public school, where English-speaking children are immersed in Chinese all day long.

A second objection to the spread of English is because English is a colonial language. Some are bothered by the fact that it is the language of one-time imperialists that is so valued today. Others, though, do not find this fact troubling. Instead, they feel fortunate if they are a former colony because they can exploit this heritage. We saw this earlier in the editorial from the *Times of India*. India is only one of many countries in South and South-East Asia to now exploit its English-speaking colonial heritage, which connects it to the global economy.

Malaysia, a former British colony, once had a large English-speaking population. Prior to independence, standards of English were high. However, in the interest of promoting a national language, the government stopped investing in the teaching of English. As a result, there has been a deterioration in the standards of English in the country, and such deterioration is seen as a major obstacle to the aspiration that Malaysia be declared a developed nation by 2020 (Nunan, 2003).

As a result, these days, the Malaysian government is investing considerable sums of money in the teaching of English. The Ministry of Education is working on reintroducing English as a medium of instruction in science and technical subjects at school and university in order to restore the high English standards it once enjoyed.

### Responding to the spread of English

Some countries have tried to legislate against the spread of English. For instance, in 1994, the Toubon Law was passed in France. The law prohibits companies from using English in their advertisements. So, for example, a restaurant in France that promotes “Le Sandwich” can be fined. Other countries have also attempted to ban the use of English. However, such efforts are futile. The back

and forth switching between and among languages is a very natural process (Graddol, 2006).

Indeed, it should be acknowledged that English is not itself a pure language. It has been influenced by many languages over the course of its history. It has borrowed words from a number of the world’s languages. Indeed, English is one of the most hybrid and rapidly changing languages in the world. You yourselves have experienced this in Nenglish where “cold store” has come to mean “corner shop.”

English has never had a state-controlled regulatory authority for the language, equivalent, for example, to the Académie française in France. Whatever the level of purity, “It’s a lost cause to try to fight against the tide,” said Jacques Levy, who studies globalism at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne and who is a native French speaker. English, he added, is just the latest in a line of global tongues. It could have been another language; it was Greek, then Latin, French, now it is English” (*New York Times*, August 6, 2006).

Another response to the dominance of English is not to legislate against it, but to appropriate it. Seidlhofer, Breitender and Pitzi (2006), for example, recognize that a common language is needed for a sense of community, but they also recognize that a common language can be a threat to multilingualism. Their answer to have both a unified community and equal rights for all community languages is to no longer consider English as a possession of native speakers of English. Seidlhofer et al. (2006) have called for the teaching and using of English as a lingua franca (ELF), an independent concept whose linguacultural norms are not controlled by native speakers.

Because ELF is primarily used by non-native speakers of English, it has been suggested that what is important is intelligibility, not perfection in pronunciation, or even in grammar. Thus, for example, proponents of ELF suggest that teaching English interdental fricatives and the third person singular present tense marker is unnecessary. Both of these (and others) are difficult to learn and their absence in language use does not interfere with intelligibil-

ity. Thus, the target model is not the native speaker of English, but a fluent bilingual speaker, who can negotiate meaning with other non-native speakers. Another move along these lines is to teach a reduced form of English for communicative purposes. Jean-Paul Nerriere, a retired vice president of IBM, advocates the teaching of “Globish,” a combination of “globe” and “English.” Globish uses a limited vocabulary of 1,500 words, taken from the Voice of America, among other sources, which can be put together to express more complicated thoughts. For example, “a kitchen is the room in which you cook food.” Or “a nephew is the son of my brother/sister.” In an article in the *New York Times* (August 6, 2006), Mr. Nerriere, a non-native speaker of English himself, is quoted as saying that he got the idea for Globish from his travels in Asia while he was working for IBM. “I observed that my communication with my Japanese or Korean colleagues was much easier, much more efficient and much less inhibited than what I could observe between them and the American associates traveling with me.” In fact, Globish is something that a native speaker of English would have to learn. In any case, “Globish is not a language, it will never have a literature, it does not aim at conveying culture or values. Globish is just a tool, practical, efficient, limited on purpose,” Mr. Nerriere wrote in an e-mail message (*New York Times*, August 6, 2006).

A third response to the dominance of English is to recognize that knowing English is not sufficient in today’s world. English has provided a significant competitive advantage to its speakers over the last few decades, but many are already discovering that they need to know other languages, in addition to English. Graddol (2006) observes that it is not surprising that demand for languages courses at Indian universities is increasing. When CIEFL (Central Institute for English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad) advertised a course in Spanish in 2005, it was apparently sold out within an hour. There is a renaissance in foreign language learning driven by such economic realities.

Evidence of this renaissance exists in other parts of the world as well. For instance, there is a move in the United States to preserve the languages spoken by immigrants, which are called “heritage languages.” The impetus comes variously from students, their families, and their communities. There are numerous heritage language programs springing up all over the country.

According to newly released data from the U.S. Census Bureau (a census is conducted every 10 years, so the data were gathered in 2000), the number of people who speak a language other than English at home has grown exponentially. A headline in my hometown newspaper, the *Ann Arbor News* (October 9, 2003) declared “Multilingualism grows. In 2000, nearly 800,000 state of Michigan residents aged 5 and older spoke a language other than English at home.” The reporter noted that this reflected a growth rate of some 40% since the 1990 census. As large as this figure is, it is actually more modest than the growth rate in other states in the country. In fact nationally, nearly 47 million people are not native English speakers—almost a 50% jump from 1990.

The increasing number of immigrants, particularly those with sufficient numbers to make commercial interests take notice, has led to a number of businesses competing to serve the new arrivals. Recently, America Online (the largest private internet service provider in the U.S.) launched its AOL Latino service, targeting homes where Spanish is mostly or exclusively spoken. Also recently, Ford Motor Company began to advertise a particular pickup truck, aimed at Spanish speakers and Asian-Americans. Further, appliance retailers report that more and more customers are asking for satellite dishes that pick up Arabic programming. (Southeastern Michigan has the highest concentration of speakers of Arabic living outside of the Middle East). As Wallraff (2000, in Nunan 2003) argues, the spread of Spanish [and other languages] in the United States indicates that English is not sweeping away all before it.

## English for empowerment

What, then, about Nepal? The peace accord holds the promise of a new beginning for Nepal. Perhaps soon, Nepal can more fully exploit its comparative advantage in sectors such as hydropower and tourism, both of which benefit from personnel with a knowledge of English. The government aspires to make all Nepalese literate to ensure their access to the fruits of development. It is my understanding that knowledge of the English language is a top educational goal for the Nepalese government, and students and their parents. It is recognized that English language skills provide better job opportunities and greater information access, and promote civic involvement. No knowledge of English can mean marginalization. Whether we agree politically or not, English is important in empowering Nepalese. How, then, can educators in Nepal move from ideology to empowerment in English language education? I will suggest two ways here, but leave it up to you to discover others.

One way it seems to me is to avoid feeling victimized by globalization and instead to accept it and make it work for you. One example of this is the recent coining of the term “glocalization,” which combines globalization with localization. It therefore includes both universalizing and particularizing tendencies. An example of glocalization is the creation of products that are intended for the global market, but that are customized to meet local conditions as well. Another example is the use of global technologies, such as the internet, to promote local services.

A second way, it seems to me to move from ideology to empowerment is to teach English in a way that empowers and does not impose. This might be accomplished if we think about language and its learning in a wholly different light than what is customary.

One customary way of thinking about language is thinking of it as knowledge. It is seen to be the teacher’s job to transmit to the student the knowledge about English that the teacher has learned. From this knowledge transmission perspective, good teaching requires that the teacher be knowledgeable about

English and possess effective ways of packaging and delivering this knowledge. It is the students’ job to learn the knowledge that they are given.

However, a little reflection shows that a knowledge transmission model of education does not work especially well for language. Knowing all there is to know about English will not prove especially helpful if students cannot somehow apply or use this knowledge, a problem I have referred to as the “inert knowledge problem” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). In order to speak a new language, students need to develop the capacity to utilize what they know about a language, but also to create language anew.

Good teaching in this capacity-building approach to language education involves teachers not only in being competent in using the language themselves, but also in their ability to manage the learning process (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), including organizing the learning process to fit students’ current level of development. It also requires teachers to be sensitive to their students’ native language and identity. The students’ role involves a willingness to be open to something new, to practice this newness and to keep trying and failing, and trying again. When successful, this kind of learning results in the attainment of a skill—learning to speak another language without undermining one’s identity as a speaker of another language.

You see learning does not take place when people are taught. It takes place when people mobilize themselves. What I need to do as a teacher is to create conditions which enable students to teach themselves and to know that they are the authors of their own learning process (S. Gattegno, personal communication, 1996). No one can teach the whole of the language. No one can teach English. It is too vast, fluid, mutable, and variable. So I have to ask what I can give my students [a skill] that will make them independent learners. Whatever I give them, I wish it to be a tool or instrument that allows them to learn as autonomous human beings, to rely on themselves instead of me.

Language is not as a target to be replicated, but as a process in which to be engaged. A process view

of language may, in part, provide the foundation for knowing how to think about the subject matter in terms of student learning. For language teachers do not only teach language, they teach students. The English that is taught is constantly being redefined. If this were not so, every course and every lesson in it would be like every other one, beginning and ending at the same points (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, forthcoming).

Language learning is not about conformity to uniformity; it is about empowering students to make meaning and to present themselves to the world as they so choose. Students' developing the capacity to do this is not much aided when teachers conceive of their role as transmitting a static product, when they should instead be thinking of it as truly shaping a dynamic system within their students. Nor is it the case that dynamic system-shaping within students will be well-served if teachers and researchers presume that the units of linguists are psychologically real for learners. This is not to deny the value of a well-constructed syllabus or textbook. But both of these provide, at best, convenient launching pads. Students still operate within whole linguistic systems of their own creation, which may bear little resemblance to what has been launched. It remains of utmost importance, therefore, to recognize that what teachers teach needs to respond to what it is students show teachers that they need. The development of subject matter capacity thus proceeds in a much more negotiated and holistic way than an atomistic and predetermined one (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

We have reached such a moment in relation to the status of global English: the world has changed and will never be the same again. As ever increasing numbers of people learn English around the world, it is not just "more of the same." There is a new model. English is no longer being learned as a foreign language, in recognition of the hegemonic power of native English speakers. Instead, it can be taught in an empowering way—where students do not just learn facts (e.g., grammatical rules), nor do they simply emulate a model. Instead, they [acquire the skill to] enact a dynamic system

and put it to the purposes they wish—whether it is to travel, to understand the lyrics to pop music, to learn about another culture, to study abroad, to advance oneself economically. But this takes a special teacher—who sees his or her job in a special way. One who sees the learning of language as empowering—sees giving students choices rather than conformity to uniformity. This teacher is truly a manager of learning. So long as English is seen as merely an elite's lot, English education will remain shaky. In contrast, students in Nepal need to see how English can benefit them in their context, how it can transform their lives, what promises it holds for them.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that English is here to stay as a language of international communication, at least for a while. If we accept it as a tool, a key to success, that does not mean that we have to risk local languages or that we have to accept a monolingual/ monocultural view of the world. We might, instead, think of glocalization—of how to adapt global trends to meet local needs and adjust to local conditions. Furthermore, in the best of all worlds, any language would be taught as an additional language—to add rather than to subtract from students' language repertoires. We recognize that such an approach will not only prepare our students for the economic and political realities of today's world, but will do so in a way that helps them to grow and expand as human beings. And finally, I have suggested one way to do this is to help students learn how to make choices in how they use their language resources. This will be best accomplished when teachers see themselves as managers of learning, rather than as transmitters of knowledge.

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