

# From Linguistic Landscapes to the Status of English: A Conversation with David Graddol

*M. Martha Lengeling<sup>1</sup>, Universidad de Guanajuato*

*Irasema Mora Pablo<sup>2</sup>, Universidad de Guanajuato*

## Abstract

David Graddol is well known throughout the world for his work on applied linguistics, specifically on globalization, the future of English, and linguistic landscapes. This interview explores Graddol's book *The Future of English?* and his opinions on how education, learning English and the economy (especially the activities of large corporations) are intertwined. David also shared his views of technology and the 'flipped classroom'. Lastly he discussed how bilingualism in the Americas is becoming the norm rather than the exception based on the case of Brazil.

## Resumen

David Graddol es ampliamente conocido por su trabajo en lingüística aplicada, específicamente sobre globalización, el futuro del inglés y paisajes lingüísticos. La presente entrevista explora el libro de Graddol titulado "El futuro del inglés" y su opinión sobre cómo la educación, el aprendizaje del inglés y la economía (especialmente las actividades de las grandes corporaciones) están interrelacionados. David también compartió su punto de vista sobre la tecnología y el salón invertido (flipped classroom). Por último, habló sobre cómo el bilingüismo en América Latina se está convirtiendo en la norma más que en la excepción, basado en el caso de Brasil.

On a recent visit to Mexico, we had the pleasure to interview David Graddol who was visiting the offices of Cambridge English in Mexico City.

David is well known throughout the world for his work on applied linguistics, specifically on globalization and the future of English. Recently his work has focused on linguistic landscapes, an interest which has now brought him to Mexico.

What are linguistic landscapes? This refers to a growing area of research on the use of languages on signs and notices in public spaces within a specific community. For example, a restaurant menu may include several languages, perhaps the language of the country and another language of the food that is being served. Signs seen in streets may be 'official' or 'unofficial'. This distinction is:

*...between what is written by the authority (the names of roads, for instance, or traffic rules signs) and what is written by the citizens (the names of shops, graffiti, commercials, etc.). However, its variation can tell us more about how official and nonofficial signs converge in a community. There are two different ways of marking the territory, two inscriptions into the urban space. (Backhaus, p. 57, citing Calvet, 1990, p. 75, his translation)*

Graddol told us about a recent book he wrote for Cambridge English - *Profiling English in China: The Pearl River Delta (2013)*.

*The book explores both the status of English and the idea of language landscapes in the PRD. The research was revealing. I tracked news items about English, studied people's blogs, and examined the streetscape to understand better the implications of learning English.*

In the introduction, Saville mentions that this book is part of the series *Profiling English* and it makes use of an

<sup>1</sup> [lengeling@hotmail.com](mailto:lengeling@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> [imora@ugto.mx](mailto:imora@ugto.mx)

*'in context' research methodology—focusing on a defined geographical region in a limited timescale (12 to 18 months). The strength of this approach is that we can take a snapshot of the features which are influencing the linguistic landscape and creating the need for English language skills in society. (p.5)*

David closes the book with the observation that the use of linguistic landscape expands the methods researchers have when collecting information or data and that it provides us with the subtleties and complexities of how language is used within a context.

Another of David's research projects in this area was carried out in Mexico. Earlier this year, at the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) 2016 meeting in Birmingham, UK, David and Nick Saville gave a talk for Cambridge English which describes his latest project with English teachers in Mexico.

*Our project has shown, even in a pilot phase, which Mexican teachers of English can use linguistic landscapes as a way of motivating learners of all ages and get them excited about learning English. They told us [researchers] that the project had a remarkable effect on the students' use of spoken language in the classroom.*

In this interview we will explore a number of themes which came up during our talk with David. First we look at Graddol's book *The Future of English?*, which was published in 1997, and set the agenda for discussion. Then we explore his opinions on how education, learning English and the economy (especially the activities of large corporations) are intertwined. David also shared his views of technology and explained ideas such as the 'flipped classroom'. Lastly we look at how bilingualism in the Americas is becoming the norm rather than the exception, and Graddol explains this through the case of Brazil.

In relation to the future of English, Graddol is recognized as an outstanding author who has discussed the consequences of English as a global language and its impact on other languages and cultures. Looking back, he recalls how this interest began.

*You've got to remember that the background of *The Future of English?*, just before the millennium, was a period when everyone was looking ahead to the next millennium and doing a bit of futurology. It was also an opportunity to look back, to see where things come from, so that was the context in which it was commissioned by the British Council. At first I thought it was just going to be a chance for enjoyable research, but then I became more involved in the ideas and I realized that serious things could be said, particularly related to trends that were driven by a demographics, economic change, and globalization.*

This, of course, has had an impact upon the teaching of English. Graddol continues to reflect on the roles of large corporations and how they have influenced the way English is now seen as a basic skill and not as a foreign language.

*I think money is driving things so much. English has become seen as a kind of basic skill across the world rather than a foreign language, and one result, I think, is that it is suddenly attractive to big corporations. Large chunks of national budgets are given to education, and when there are large amounts of money, you can see the big corporations trying to work out how to be part of it. So I am rather sad about the turn of events in that respect that have taken place. In *The Future of English?*, I argued that there would be a shift away from 'economic rationalism' towards ideas of social justice, but I got that wrong. If you look at the rationale that is being used by governments across the world to introduce English into primary education, it's almost entirely economic.*

These economic forces, which have influenced the way English should be taught and how courses should be designed, have had an impact on the way teachers conduct their

classes on a daily basis. Another question we asked David was about how he sees the use of technology. He responded with this

*That's another big question. My take on that is there are two major discourses around EdTech in English teaching. One is all of the wonderful ways in which teachers can exploit technology to improve the quality of what they are doing, for example with their students, in teacher education, continuing professional development, like the role of distance education. The discourse is about how EdTech is good for teachers who often cannot get away for a year to do a master's course and things like that. But there is another discourse about EdTech which is growing in dominance, which is about big tech, big data, and big corporations, [and] which is really quite scary.*

Graddol, again, brings up the idea of how large corporations are situated in the educational arena and he questions this position critically.

*...EdTech provides opportunities for the big companies, as creators of platforms with very glossy materials, and this has several consequences. One is that their interest, the interest of the big corporations, is to push for some kind of standardized national curriculum... one of their big offers is not just materials and but also in adaptive testing, which is embedded within these platforms. They claim this can provide personalised learning...*

Large corporations offer packages of materials: textbooks, didactic material, exams, online activities, chat rooms, etc. All these materials become part of the classroom and it might be perceived that also become part of what being a teacher means nowadays. David continues to reflect upon the role of corporations and how the role of the English teacher has changed drastically.

*Another thing is that they move to the situation when they say: Well, actually you don't need a teacher. They are selling packages to the educational authorities saying: You know you have this problem with teachers. They are really expensive and difficult to find. But you actually don't really need highly qualified English teachers in the classrooms, you just really need learning managers. In the universities they are doing the same. You can employ PhD students as teaching assistants. The professional status of the teacher is being eroded and the position of English teachers especially is being eroded through the use of technology. Another thing I have seen is that companies are interested in selling curriculum across the board. They are not English specialists. English is just one of many subjects, and they want to sell a complete package. This is squeezing out the specialist English publishers and textbook writers.*

In this respect, Graddol believes that the role of the English teacher is altering considerably. He also voices his concern about the connections made between English and the economy. For example, one view often presented to people is how learning a language automatically provides a better economic future for the person who learns the language and the country itself.

*The more research that I do on the relationship of English and the economy, I find no one has managed to pin down that relationship. Yes, you can sometimes show a correlation, but it doesn't prove causality. It's likely that in the countries that are richer, people are spending more money on English learning, so you might expect there to be some relationship. But if you teach people English, will it make your country richer? This association is often really pushed and, in fact, I remind people that education—public education—has at least three major goals. One is developing a workforce that is helpful to the national economy, sure there is that element. But another issue is social justice, equity, and mobility, that society is made more equal. The third goal is about individual fulfilment and development. Now I think on that last one English scores very highly and that's giving individuals a chance to understand the*

*world and global issues. Individuals, whatever their social class, can use English to engage in a global dialogue.*

Besides the term linguistic landscapes, another topic which arose in our interview was "flipped classroom". David describes this in the following

*I talked at a conference in Taipei about the idea of the flipped classroom. Do people do that here? Well, it is supposedly a wonderful innovative idea. It's a flipped classroom in the sense that students are introduced to new material not in the classroom but as homework. Because they are connected online, they can do all kinds of exercise at home—such as watching videos online. Then in the classroom the teacher is able to do follow up work with individual students who are having trouble. The teacher then spends the time in a much more focused way, rather than providing a generic introduction for everyone. So that sounds quite a good idea. Except there are big problems about access. There may be differential access by students. Some students will have better internet access, for example, than others. Again technology is magnifying the differences between students with different backgrounds in terms of their learning opportunities.*

Technology has influenced the way we perceive teaching and learning. Years ago, the learning process was usually carried out in a language classroom. Currently, learners find their own contexts and means to learn. One example of this is the use of video games, as Graddol points out

*I saw an interesting study just a few weeks ago that was published on how boys in Sweden spend more time using English, and are exposed to more English, playing on computer games, than in class. As they play, they learn English.*

The use of technology includes videogames, online activities, smart phones, to name a few options. This use expands the opportunities that teachers and learners can tap into while learning or teaching a foreign language. These options of technology can be used in or outside the classroom but offer more exposure to the language in a number of forms.

Finally, we talked about the relationship between English and other languages. Reflecting on the situation within the Americas, Graddol emphasizes the ambivalent, yet close relationship, between English and Spanish and how these two languages co-exist, leading to bilingualism becoming the norm rather than the exception. However, an interesting situation exists in Brazil, where Portuguese is the national language.

*Spanish in Brazil potentially competes with English as the dominant foreign language taught, despite the fact that regionally Spanish-English is one of the biggest language pairs, often in the form of Spanish-English bilingualism. In Brazil there's a requirement in schools that kids learn a foreign language, but there is no requirement for it to be English. Indeed, there is a requirement that schools offer Spanish. Spanish seems easier for those kids who don't like learning a foreign language so it can be quite popular.*

Learning Spanish is easier for Brazilians than learning English so it is obvious that students will decide to study Spanish in order to pass their language requirement. Spanish is then a choice for learners and is growing in popularity. Graddol argues that Brazil clearly needs both languages, despite the fact that this creates some anomalies in the language education system.

*I was talking to a head of [an] English department in one of the big federal universities, who was explaining to me they have a bit of a problem because they require a very high score in the university entrance exam—it's very competitive to get into the English department—but most students realize that they get a higher exam score if they study Spanish, rather than*

*English, so most of the students arriving in the English department have actually not been studying English. They've been studying Spanish! It's a perverse kind of effect. But I think the whole situation is gradually changing. Brazil does need both English and Spanish.*

As Graddol pointed out, English teaching has changed in recent years, and the growing status of English as a global language has influenced these changes. He highlights a number of issues that we should consider and think about seriously.

*English teaching has become a complex area that requires us [English language professionals] to pay attention to issues, such as the economy, contexts where English is taught and learned, the use of technology, not only in the classroom but the access that learners have to it outside the school, and of course globalization.*

However, Graddol believes that despite recent advances in educational technology, professionally trained English teachers will play a central role in successful English teaching for a long time to come. For those of you who would like to know more about David Graddol's work, we have included these sites where you can download for free some of his books as pdfs:

Graddol, D. (1997). *The future of English? A guide to forecasting the popularity of the English language in the 21st century*. London: The British Council. <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/learning-elt-future.pdf>.

Graddol, D. (2006). *English next Why global English may mean the end of 'English as a Foreign Language'*. London: The British Council. <http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/sites/ec/files/books-english-next.pdf>.

Graddol, D. (2013). *Profiling English in China: The Pearl River Delta*. Cambridge: Cambridge English Language Assessment. <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/151564-profiling-english-in-china-dq.pdf>.

## References

Backhaus, P. (2006). Multilingualism in Tokyo: A look into the linguistic landscape. In D. Gorter (Ed.). *Linguistic landscape. A new approach to multilingualism* (pp.52-66). London: Multilingual Matters.

Graddol, D. & Saville, N. (2016). *Young learners as researchers: A language landscapes project in Mexico*. IATEFL presentation for Cambridge English. Retrieved at <http://courses.english.co.uk/talk-on-the-project-at-iatefl-2016>.