

Appropriating English in Mexico⁸

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Abstract

In this article the author looks at the issues of linguisticism and culturism in EFL as well as the privileges afforded the native English speaker and asks how teachers of English in Mexico can 'appropriate' English to teach in a way that is more attuned to the context in which the teaching is taking place.

Introduction

Canagarajah argues that there are two "traditional extremes" (1999: 174) to how learning the English language is viewed. Firstly, learners can choose to reject learning the language outright by saying that it is encouraging linguistic imperialism to use it. It is not uncommon in Mexico for negative feelings towards English-speaking cultures and the language associated with them to be expressed as an unwillingness to learn English. The opposite extreme is to embrace and accept English for the benefits it can bring. This, too, is common in Mexico -- the growing number of schools that are using English as the medium of instruction provides evidence of this and schools are clearly capitalizing on the idea that proficient English users will have the edge in the future over those who don't know English.

Canagarajah insists that there needs to be a third way, namely that the English language can be 'appropriated' by English teachers and learners so that learners "use the language in their own terms according to their own aspirations, needs and values" (ibid: 176). It is this 'third way' that is the focus of this article. Firstly, the reasons why the spread of English is seen as dangerous will be outlined and the implications of this for English language teachers will be discussed. Finally, Canagarajah's third way will be discussed in the context of English language teaching in Mexico.

The dangers of English

There is no denying the figures when it comes to the number of speakers of English in the world, with the latest estimates at over 500 million who use English as a first or second language and over 1 billion who are learning English as a foreign language (Graddol, 2006). While recognising the spread of English, many dangers of a globally dominant language have been identified. Phillipson

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in 1992 first warned the profession of "linguistic imperialism" which he describes like this: "The dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (47). Pennycook continued on this theme that the "divorce of language from broader questions has had major implications for teaching practice and research" (1995: 39). The rapid spread of the English language and the way its dominance is encouraged and maintained is an important area of exploration. Pennycook, like Phillipson, points out that this dissipation of the language is not an accidental occurrence and that "it has been deliberate government policy in English-speaking countries to promote the worldwide use of English for economic and political purposes" (1995: 43).

Pennycook outlines two main dangers of the spread of English: firstly, he states that the dominance of English threatens the existence and status of other languages and secondly that knowledge of English is becoming a key to positions of power and prestige. As far as the first danger is concerned, this situation is especially relevant in Mexico if we consider the status of many of the indigenous languages. There are over 5 million speakers of over 80 indigenous languages. Some have over a million speakers, such as Nahuatl and Maya while others have but a few speakers and are dying out. Although it is Spanish that is directly taking over as the majority language, clearly the increasing importance of English will do nothing to help keep these languages alive (http://www.literacyonline.org/explorer/oax_back.html).

Linguicism

Pennycook's second danger refers to 'linguicism,' which Phillipson describes as the central issue in linguistic imperialism, the idea that one language is better than another, an idea that is used for economic and political gain. Robert Burchfield has put it like this: "Any literate, educated person on the face of the globe is deprived if he does not know English" (in McCrum et. al., 1986: 32). English has become the key to positions of prestige and power -- the 'gatekeeper.' This comment caused great indignation when we language teachers, in 1991, used it as the basis for a discussion essay in a private high school in Guadalajara during an English course about countries in the world where English is used. The students insisted that they knew many 'literate, educated' people who did not know English, but it was ironic that none of them was among them and that the school itself (one of the most prestigious school systems in Mexico) had just implemented a plan to introduce content area classes in English throughout its nationwide campuses and a policy which would insist on a 500 point TOEFL score as a prerequisite for graduation from the university!

Culturism.

As well as the danger of linguicism discussed here, I'd like to add a further threat that is particularly prevalent and dangerous to the field of ELT, namely

'culturism.' Holliday (2004) asserts that in the TESOL profession we constantly reduce other cultures and people from those cultures to stereotypes. This creates a 'them' (students from other cultures) and 'us' (native speaker teachers) situation with the assumption being that language teachers need to teach the English language using English language speaking cultural values and norms. Where does this leave the non-native English speaker teacher? Phillipson contends that one of the main tenets on which the ELT profession is based is that "the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker" (1992: 193) and Widdowson adds that "they [native speakers] not only have the patent on proper English, but on proper ways of teaching it as well" (1993: 18). It is interesting to note that Howatt (1984) documents this fundamental difference in methodology, when he says that using English only (no use of the mother tongue) was the "hallmark which set ELT apart from foreign language teaching in Britain" (212). I worked as a non-native speaking teacher of French and German in the UK, and the textbooks I used were written by British non-native speakers. It is also noteworthy that the students did not expect (nor particularly want) to have a native French or German speaker teacher. Compare this with the position of non-native English teachers in Mexico who are asked to use materials and pedagogies that are more often than not British or US American, as well as being in a "constant struggle with their own language deficiencies" (Medgyes, 1986: 112).

Let's now look more closely at how the dangers of linguicism and culturism affect English language teachers in Mexico.

Implications for English teachers

As Pennycook states, "At the very least, intimately involved as we are with the spread of English, we should be aware of the implications of this spread for the reproduction and production of global inequalities" (1995: 55). We need to be aware of the role of English and the potential dangers of a dominant world language. We need to show respect for and promote other languages and cultures. This is a very high ideal indeed and relies strongly on individual and institutional attitudes to what teaching and learning English means. This is also of course putting the native EFL teacher in a controversial position, suggesting that s/he oppose the very ideas that have put her/him in her/his position of privilege, 'bite the hand that feeds her/him,' fight English through English, but on a very local level it is clear that the EFL teacher in Mexico can help to dispel many of the myths and prejudices surrounding English-speaking cultures by exposing learners to different varieties of English and aspects of the society and, particularly in the case of teacher trainers, by explicitly exposing the way theorists and materials writers reinforce national and linguistic stereotypes.

This applies very directly to the Mexican situation and to the localisation of language teaching to particular contexts and the changing role of the native and non-native speaker teacher. There are far more speakers of English as a foreign

or second language than native speakers of English and the number of foreign language learners is the figure that is increasing most rapidly (set to reach about 2 billion in about 10 years time). This means that the probability of English learners speaking to a fellow English learner is higher than the probability of the English learner speaking to a native speaker. Graddol points out that of the 763 million international travellers in 2004, 74% of them were visitors from non-English speaking countries to other non-English speaking countries (Graddol, 2006: 29). For these travellers the use of English is often necessary, but for them the native speaker has become, in many ways, irrelevant.

In language teaching, then, the native speaker teacher is no longer automatically the expert or authority for the learner. Someone who understands the learner's context and English learning needs is far better qualified to teach that person English. This will more often than not be a non-native English speaker -- a teacher who has learnt English her/himself and who understands the problems and needs of the learner. Widdowson (1993) has spoken of 'appropriate' methodology for the context. He argues that the English language no longer belongs to native speakers, but rather to everyone who speaks it and uses it in their lives; with the growth of non-native speaker English language use in the world, this seems to be ever more important.

From appropriate to appropriation

So how does all this apply to Mexico? How can teachers help to make English 'appropriate' to their learners? I'd like to talk in practical terms about how this can happen in Mexican ELT classrooms.

The underused resource

Firstly, I'd like to discuss the use of the mother tongue. When I first arrived in Mexico in 1988 without knowing a word of Spanish, I was given beginner students to teach. I found it extremely difficult to establish rapport with this group of students and to really help them, particularly with their anxieties and problems. At the time it was accepted as good practice for monolingual native speaker teachers to work with beginners. It led to 'authentic communication,' a truly communicative experience for the learners. At the time I accepted this, but I no longer do. As Atkinson says, the mother tongue "has...a variety of roles to play which are at present consistently undervalued" (1987: 247). From my own experience as a language learner, teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer, I realise now that the mother tongue is essential in the learning of a new language and the language teacher who can help the learner to use the mother tongue effectively is not only helping the learner but also validating the importance and value of the mother tongue.

This is clearly a controversial issue which becomes obvious when one talks to teachers who have been trained in communicative methodology and it

certainly seems that the *monolingual fallacy* ("the belief that use of the learner's native language interferes with the learning of English" (Canagarajah, 1999: 126; from Phillipson, 1992)) and communicative methodology have become very much tied up together in teacher training. Communicative methodology states that we should be creating authentic opportunities for learners to communicate with each other, that learners should learn to communicate by communicating with each other and with the teacher in the second language. This fails to take into account everything that the learner brings with her/him in terms of knowledge about the first language and knowledge about how language works. A perfect example of this is in the teaching of, for example, the difference between first and second conditional structures. When trying to teach this difference wholly in English, the teacher finds her/himself looking at complex discussions of 'degree of probability' and often constructing elaborate contrived contexts to illustrate this, such as the difference in degree of probability between something going wrong when a girl goes to be an au pair for a year compared to the degree of probability of seeing a ghost (Soars and Soars, 1986:48). My point here is that there is a Spanish equivalent of the two structures and that by merely showing students how the first and second conditional structure is expressed in Spanish the learner can immediately understand differences in meaning by using her/his language awareness of her/his first language.

I am not suggesting that we return to some kind of grammar translation method, but calling for the use of common sense and thoughtful practice in the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. Instead of punishing students for using the mother tongue we should be helping students to use their existing knowledge of their first language to help them to learn the second language. Learning a new language can be an intimidating process for learners and instead of giving the knowledge that learners have already no status, or worse, undervaluing it, the use of the mother tongue for encouragement and help can go a long way towards putting the learner at ease and therefore creating a positive relationship between the learner, the teacher and the subject, not to mention the help that students can get in making connections between how their own language works and how the second language works.

Culture in ELT materials

The second way Canagarajah suggests teachers can appropriate English is on the question of culture. Instead of accepting and reinforcing cultural information and stereotypes presented in ELT materials, Canagarajah suggests we should look at them critically and compare and contrast and question what is presented within the learners' own reality. For example, if a textbook discusses music sales in the United States, this is a good time to look at music and the impact of music from other parts of the world on Mexican music and to look at controversial issues such as the use of English by Latin American musicians, the different occasions in which people listen to music in English and Mexican music, the stereotyping and prestige attached to different types of music (look at how

'cumbia' is viewed compared to rock music in English and what of the 'rock en tu idioma' movement?). The emphasis should be on not just accepting the information, but rather on bringing it to the student and their reality and world.

Most textbooks are written with a view to selling as many copies as possible in as many different countries in the world as possible; therefore, it should be clear that it is impossible for a textbook to be entirely appropriate to the situation it is being used in. One option, of course, is to abandon the textbook altogether and to use materials designed specifically for the context. There are two problems with this: firstly, the amount of time needed and resources available for the classroom teacher to be able to do this; it is clearly helpful for a teacher to have a set of material ready for her/him to use; secondly, the student, too, often likes and feels comfortable with a textbook that provides a record and lends authority to the course s/he is following. What Canagarajah suggests is that the teacher should not accept what is in the textbook, but rather use the textbook as a starting point for negotiating culture, for discussing similarities and differences between the culture discussed *in* or *between* the lines of the textbook and the culture of the country where the language is being learnt. Instead of reading and learning that Italian food is the most popular type of food in the US (Richards, Hull and Proctor, 1997: 80), students should be considering their own attitudes to foods and how this has changed or not and *why* certain foods are more or less popular in their reality. Canagarajah suggests taking this further and actually asking students to look at what the textbook is telling the learner, by problematizing the dialogues, conversations and other texts that appear in the textbook in order to look at deeper issues which involve critical reflection. For example, in a dialogue that shows two young men discussing where they are going to have dinner, look at the implications of this in a country where many people don't have enough food and *can't* choose between Indian food and Chinese food, but would be happy with *any* food. What does this say about the market for the book and who the intended audience is and what messages they are transmitting about attitudes to food and users of the English language?

Pedagogy

The third point I'd like to make about appropriating English refers to the teaching and learning styles which are implicit in the materials and methods used in English language teaching. Here again, 'culturism' rears its head. Canagarajah says that we should not accept the pedagogy offered to us by the textbook, but that we should negotiate with learners to find methods and activities that are acceptable and appropriate to the reality of the learner. Techniques such as role play, jigsaw learning and self-discovery grammar learning may not correspond to learners' previous experiences of learning. Materials writers assume a lot about how learners do and *ought to* learn in EFL textbooks and this often corresponds to classroom practices that are "not always transparent to people not brought up in this particular professional discourse" (Holliday, 2004: 121) and indeed may not even be practically possible in the

situation. For example, how viable is a 'walking dictation' in a class of 50 students who have limited space and who cannot create too much noise because of disturbing other classes in close vicinity? Holliday argues that "we must stop being culturist and learn to see through our own professionalism" (ibid: 116), particularly the native-speakerist perspectives that the profession upholds. Without accepting the methodology in our materials as the only way that English can be taught, teachers can instead look at *their* reality and situation and find methods that are suitable and appropriate for their learners. This does not mean resisting any form of change in the classroom that represents a different way of working from traditional practices, but rather "local teachers have to adopt creative and critical instructional practices in order to develop pedagogies suitable for their communities" (Canagarajah, 1999: 122).

Conclusion

Graddol argues that we are in a period of transition in which there is a new paradigm emerging which will include the "declining reverence of 'native speakers'" (2006: 66). In Mexico there is still a tendency to accept English wholeheartedly for the advantages it brings (and with it the importance of the native speaker) or a total rejection of it. It seems that it's time to look for the 'third way' that Canagarajah speaks of and for Mexican teachers to think about ways to 'appropriate' English in order to protect themselves and their students from the dangers of linguicism and culturism.

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