

The spread of English and ELT

Miguel Oré de los Santos. M. Ed. (*)

The impressive spread of English as of the end of the second World War, which has given birth to the concept of English as *the* world's language, has been frequently described, from a rather orthodox point of view, as a sociolinguistic phenomenon responding essentially to

- (a) the *naturalness* of English, that is, as a result of the distinctive, inherent linguistic features proper of the English language; alternative arguments on this so-called naturalness take it as the consequence of 'inevitable' global forces in which the status of this language and that of the leading English-speaking nations are thought to be paramount;
- (b) its *neutrality*, arguing that English is culturally, ethically and ideologically unencumbered; and
- (c) its *beneficiality*, in reference to the possibilities it offers to access broader sources of information, training and education that should translate, in the long run, in prosperity and development for all its potential users and learners.

While it may be true that the consistency of this orthodox view tends to be challenged in modern linguistic circles now more readily and overtly than in the past, my rationale to develop this argument departs from the factual consideration that, thus far, ELT as a professional field does not seem to have been able to make ordinary classroom teachers share the present linguistic perceptions of the spread of English nor make them understand the actual grounds of this spread or the rationale behind their promotion—and hence my belief in an existing gap between linguistics and ELT, and between ELT and the wider context. Overall, beyond linguistic perceptions, my assumption here is that, the arguments used to promote the more visible and 'often commercially motivated' ELT literature and methods (Kachru, 1986: 133) and the contents of typical teaching-training programs that have made applied linguistics and methodology 'the primary subject matter of language teacher education' (Freeman, 1989: 29) with neglect of 'the relationship between language teaching and the community' (Ashworth, 1985: 1) and the ways in which both are affected by broader, social, political and economic factors (Holliday, 1994), have played a decisive role as the sources that have helped foster the notions of a 'natural',

'neutral' and 'beneficial' spread. And it is to these sources to which classroom teachers seem to have more immediate access than to academic linguistic works.

1.1 The *naturalness* of the spread of English

Explanations that ground and justify the spread of English on mere linguistic facts, as a natural phenomenon based on the inherent linguistic features of the language, presuppose the pre-eminence of the English language over all others. Strevens (1980), for instance, whose view is pictured by Pennycook (1994) as a sort of twentieth-century belief based on nineteenth-century reminiscences of the 'superiority' of the English language and the 'worthiness' of its preeminence, makes this point by wondering why Portuguese, a language that was 'carried across the world in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by a dominant European nation ... and had the additional impetus of being spread with the crusading fire of the militant Catholic Church ... is now hardly used by peoples other than the Portuguese and Brazilians.' Arguing that 'exploration, trade, and conquest are not sufficient by themselves to ensure that a language becomes accepted', he draws the conclusion that English, differently from Portuguese, expanded because of crucial reasons essentially related to its linguistic nature, that is, its unthreatened 'purity' and syntactic richness and the fact the it is 'well adapted for development and change' and was as well 'the language ... in which has been conducted the genesis of the Second Industrial Revolution.' (p. 84-85). Beyond the appealing appearance of this rationale, though, Strevens seems to neglect the axiomatic linguistic principle that languages are not used or spread in a vacuum but are in themselves reflections of prevailing social, cultural and historical relations subject to economic and political forces that determine its use, change, development, spread, displacement, replacement ... or eventual extinction! In this direction Strevens's argument is at least contradicted by the evidence of the leading role of the USA and Britain in the areas of 'exploration, trade and conquest', with 'the additional impetus' of their economic and political influence in the contemporary scene and the causal influence of these activities in and for the spread of English in our times.

Along Strevens's view on the naturalness of the spread of English comes that of Barrow (1990)

and his assumption on the superiority of the English language on the grounds of its 'unsurpassed richness in terms of vocabulary, and hence in its scope for giving precise and detailed understanding of the world.' Beyond his view, it is also necessary to recall that English —like any other language— is but a mere component and expression of a specific culture in which the latter influences and shapes the former in terms of ('richness' of) the vocabulary necessary to understand the world. No language is known that imposes its users constraints to express whatever feelings, beliefs or emotions they need to express within the context of their cultural environment (Harrison, 1973: 14, Phillipson, 1992: 276). Conversely, no language is known to work as a unique tool that allows for 'truer', 'more subtle' or 'more realistic' perspectives of the world. The fact that 'particular communities may vary in what they think worth reasoning about and, as a consequence, fail to develop a language for reasoning about certain things' (Barrow, *ibid.*: 4) does not imply superiority of any kind but, simply and ultimately, an undisputed cultural preference for certain areas of interest —be it science or literature or whatever other their field of concern— and certain ways of doing things, and there seems to be no reason why different choices and alternative ways should be necessarily appraised as inferior. 'Cultural analysis'—like comparisons of this kind— 'have to begin with a microcultural analysis on the isolate level', bearing in mind that 'there is no experience independent of culture against which culture can be measured' (Hall, 1973: 192). Barrow's gross assumption that because members of a community with a higher scientific or technological culture are supposed to be generally more empowered to speak about those specific tokens of their culture and are hence superior and their language superior as well, fails to acknowledge the above contention.

Like Steverson's, Barrow's argument of attaching unnecessary value and relevance, or highlighting the 'inherent qualities' of English to explain its spread or justify the need to teach it is ultimately contradicted by the conclusive linguistic tenet that 'no language is intrinsically superior or inferior to any other,' as recalled by Phillipson (*ibid.*: 276). It follows from this, syllogistically, quoting Harrison (*ibid.*: 14), that 'English has no

intrinsic superiority over any other language'.

Descriptions of English as, again, 'well adapted for development and change' or 'unsurpassed' do not seem to suffice to explain the pretended naturalness of the spread of English and could be rightly and easily contested by speakers of other languages with the same or even bigger emphasis on the pretended virtues of their mother tongues. French people might (well?) pretend their mother tongue to be 'logical and subtle, rich by virtue of its aerated and very articulated syntax ...' (Haut Conseil de la francophonie, 1986: 343). As a native Spanish-speaker myself I could as well (rightly?) claim my mother tongue to be 'rich and naturally endowed for literary creation' (to try to prove which I would refer to the 'unsurpassable' works of Neruda, García Márquez u Octavio Paz, just to mention three of the greatest writers of all times in Spanish American literature) and 'expressive, interesting and natural.' Sheer subjective criteria indeed that, as rightly asserted by Roberts (1958), often reflect our judgements about our own language ... or about ourselves.¹

Different authors have advanced the alternative argument of the spread of English as a natural consequence of 'inevitable' global forces. Hindmarsh's (1978: 42) view, for instance, is that 'the world has opted for English, and the world knows what it wants, what will satisfy its needs.' Platt, Weber & Ho (1984: 1) have noted that 'many new nations which were once British colonies have realised the importance of English not only as a language of commerce, science and technology but also as an international language of communication.' Burchfield (1985: 160) has stated that 'English has become a lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English,' and Kachru (1986: 51) has emphasized that 'whatever the reasons for the earlier spread of English, we should now consider it a positive development in the twentieth-century world context.'

While most of the above arguments may sound commonsensical to the extent they seem to reflect the contemporary role of English and the world's present state of affairs, Phillipson (1992: 6) has remarked that their implicit rationale does not take account of 'the forces —economic, political, intellectual, and social— which have propelled English forward.' Along the same line,

(1) In order for the advocates of the naturalness of the spread of English to make an argument, Jespersen has frequently been quoted for his description of English as 'methodological, sober, rich, pliant, expressive and interesting.' Interestingly, though, as noted by Fishman & Conrad (1977:54), Jespersen (1938:233) actually 'attributed the phenomenal growth and spread of English to 'political ascendancy' rather than any intrinsic superiority in the language or cultural superiority in its speakers.'

Pennycook (1994: 12) has stressed that 'there is a failure to problematise the notion of choice, and therefore an assumption that individuals and countries are somehow free of economic, political and ideological constraints when they apparently freely opt for English.' Phillipson and Pennycook, in my opinion, highlight factors that have as a tradition been neglected in ELT. Whatever the present state of affairs of the world, it is surely the consequence of both former historical experiences—including conquests, colonisations and world's struggles for power—and contemporary efforts made by a number of agencies at different levels towards the promotion and spread of English. In the belief that, as noted by Phillipson, 'the spread of English has not been left to chance' (ibid.: 6), these factors should not be overlooked.

1.2 The *neutrality* of English

Central to the argument used to explain the neutrality of English has also been the concept of English as a tool for international communication whose use carries no political, economic or culture-specific connotations. This sense of 'neutrality', which presents the language as disconnected from its original political and socioeconomic context, was earlier developed by Fishman (1977: 118) in a pioneer study on the sociology of language that led him to assert that 'English is not ideologically encumbered.' This assertion, though, which Pennycook (1994: 10) euphemistically pictures as 'surprising', was contradictorily contested by Fishman & Conrad (1977: 55), attesting to the 'strong relationships between the growth of English in non-English-mother-tongue countries and the political and economic hegemony, past and present, of the English-speaking powers,' and revisited ten years later by Fishman (1987: 8) himself with the newer perception that 'Westernization, modernization, the spread of international youth culture, popular technology and consumerism are all ideologically encumbered and have ideological as well as behavioural and econotechnical consequences.' Willingly or not, Fishman's study has come to place the issue within the context of what dependency theories have referred to as 'cultural imperialism' (Galtung, 1980, and Schiller, 1976, for example), a sociopolitical perspective whose elements, from the English-speaking media to government-financed cultural diplomacy operations, all aim at promoting and securing the 'values and structure' of the dominant forces (Phillipson, 1992).

Beyond the line of Fishman's original assertion, numerous are the arguments that have been

advanced towards a reinterpretation of the neutrality of English. Pattanayak (1969: 46), for instance, had already observed how 'English serves as the distinguishing factor for those in executive authority [...] and acts as a convenient shield against the effective participation of the mass of the people in the governmental process' in the Indian context.' Likewise, Day (1985), in the context of the US-controlled North Marianas, where Chamorro was at some point being gradually replaced by English, formerly referred to the threat English poses to other languages to the extent it pushes them out of the way. Ngugi (1985: 115), in the context of Kenya's educational system, reports how English became 'the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education', causing a decline in the use of Swahili, the official language proscribed via humiliating punishments for its use. Tollefson (1986: 186), with his focus of interest in the Philippines, discusses the major role of English in 'creating and maintaining social divisions that serve an economy dominated by a small Philippine elite and foreign economic interests.' So much for the spread of English not being subject to political or economic forces. Concerning the spread of specific cultural contexts through English, Flaitz (1988), quoted by Pennycook (ibid.: 21), has also shown the effects of the 'Americanization of popular culture' in the French context and the threat it poses to the 'cultural hegemony of the French cultural elite.'

As a tradition, despite the conclusiveness of the foregoing reports, Pennycook has noted that 'sorely lacking from the predominant paradigm of investigation into English as an international language is a broad range of social, historical and political relationships' (ibid.: 12), and fewer ELT professionals have elaborated 'appropriate' pedagogical implications for the ELT classroom departing from this perspective. Phillipson's (1992) and Pennycook's (1994) contributions on the political and economic relevance of the issue—with the latter exploring tentatively on 'critical pedagogy'—, those of Hill (1978), Rogers (1982), Alptekin & Alptekin (1984), Raimes (1991) and Benesch (1993) are still but a few though highly stimulating works in the area. There seems to be by now as well a more consistent concern for the relevance of culture in ELT—issue quite akin to the so-called neutrality of English, as illustrated by Flaitz (ibid.)—, efforts that are reflected in the works of Paulston & Bruder (1976), Coady (1979), Hutchinson & Waters (1987) and Pattanayak (1996), and the illuminating study by the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign

Languages (1988) rightly calling for new 'inter-cultural' and 'intracultural' approaches in ELT.

1.3 The *beneficial* effects of English

Conventional arguments used to explain the spread of English deal with the hypothetical benefits that users or learners of the language may expect to get as an outcome of their using and learning it. Common descriptions of this type vary from the rationale that it allows access to modern science and technology (UNIN, 1981: 40, Crystal, 1987: 358)—on the grounds that not only are most scientific and technological research and advances made in the leading English-speaking nations but that these developments are basically accessible through English language sources—or to a literature which is 'itself the major product of a great civilisation' (Holloway, 1961: 45-46), to the more general assumption that 'English is a gateway to a higher standard of living' (Makerere Report, 1961: 47) and 'a vital key to development' (Fox, 1975: 36). While the foregoing rationale seems realistic enough and consistent with the present state of affairs in the world—that is, the largest mass of scientific and technological research and development in the world is indeed done and transmitted through English—it is obvious as well that, more frequently than not, the latter does not necessarily apply to the needs of a larger number of potential or hypothetical users or learners of English, nor does it always indeed *benefit* most of these potential users or learners, despite which fact it is ubiquitously and many times unrealistically promoted.

This analysis does not point to challenge the obvious: that English has become indeed, to a very impressive extent, the dominant international language (Phillipson, 1992: 4). This is a fact. But it does challenge, with a plausible regard for the explicit and covert implications for ELT, the arguments used to explain or justify its spread. It is evident that the ELT profession, one of the most

visible efforts for the spread of English in the world, 'is big business in Britain and America,' (Bowers, 1986) an enterprise that is generating 'an increasing, voracious demand for English all over the world' (British Council Web Page, retrieved on 15/06/98). This is also a fact. Therefore it is my contention as well that we, as ELT professionals, cannot and should not carry on neglecting to discuss this issue of beneficiality, nor the usual *unidirectionality* of this beneficiality. My concern is to do with the reality of the many who actually *benefit* from the spread of English—all of us, ELT professionals, publishers, bilingual secretaries, tourist guides, translators and the ordinary individual who do profit in one way or another with the actual teaching, use and learning of the language. But it regards as well the context of the many more for whom, because of their actual needs and dire material constraints, the spread of English has never spelled or will hardly ever spell *benefit*—the gateway to 'a higher standard of living'—but, more blatantly, frustration, waste of time and distraction of funds. It is in the line of this latter argument that, along with Rogers (1982), I also question the beneficial effect of the spread of English for the millions of school students in the world who, more often than not, *must* study it as a compulsory subject, for 'non obvious reasons' (Bowers, 1986) and limited chances of successful achievement, and for the so many socially and economically deprived people who, ironically, 'given the broader inequitable world relationships, have little choice but to demand access to English' (Pennycook, 1994).²

Departing from the arguments of the naturalness, neutrality and beneficiality discussed here, I think it may be safely inferred that they have overlooked the importance of the social, economic and political factors that have actually fostered the spread of English.

(4) Bowers has used the acronym *TENOR* — *Teaching English for Non Obvious Reasons* — to refer to the dramatic reality of the hundreds of school classrooms in which English is taught as a foreign language, and in which the goals for its learning are not that apparent. It is the typical situation of the school classroom in EFL contexts like that of our country, where English is taught as a compulsory subject, without any previous needs analysis, based on our students' future hypothetical needs and without regard for the conditions that may secure the achievement of concrete goals and independent from the actual outcome this effort produces.

(2) It is also arguable if the benefits of the spread of English may be sound for the few hundreds of millions of parents in the world upon whom the spread of English 'nurtures the illusion' (Judd, 1987) of having their little offsprings learn English even before their mother tongue. Crandall *et al*, quoted by Mckay (1992:65) report the case of Honduras, a Central American nation with one of the lowest educational budgets in the area and a traditionally quite poor ELT picture, as a place where, ironically, 'interest in English is so keen among wealthy Hondurans that they will register their children for certain private English schools at birth to assure them of the few covered places.'

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(*) The author is currently Academic Coordinator and professor of the TEFL Master's Program at Universidad Nacional de Educación Enrique Guzmán y Valle Graduate School, La Cantuta, in Lima, Peru, and an undergrad Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages at the same university. He holds a Master's degree in Education from the State University of New York at Buffalo, New York, and a Master's degree in TEFL from the University of Leeds, UK.