Ideology and the ELT practitioner

MARKO MODIANO
Gavle University, Sweden

This article addresses the relationship between linguistic imperialism and culture-specific educational standards for ELT in mainland Europe. Aspects of ideological literacy and ideological transfer are discussed, as well as the value systems associated with AmE and BrE, which are less expedient, it is argued, compared to English as an international language (EIL) when the goal of the instruction is to emphasize the role of English as a lingua franca. It is shown that students who aspire to learn the tongue because it is useful as a global cross-cultural communicative tool are better served by the conceptualization of EIL. One reason for this is that the cultural integrity of the learner is not negatively impacted upon to the same extent when an EIL perspective is the basis of ELT. Moreover, the ideologies which underpin globalization and the vision of cultural pluralism are more in tune with a lingua franca perspective as opposed to ELT platforms based on culture-specific varieties of English.

Conrad (1996), commenting on the pioneering work done by Robert Phillipson (1992, 1994), is doubtful of the underlying foundation of Phillipson’s theory of linguistic imperialism. In challenging the supposition that to “learn a language is to become ‘dominated’ by it”, which Conrad feels is a framework that “almost guarantees that the study will make empirical errors” (1996: 20), it is stated that “[l]anguage, per se, is not ideology, and those who think it is vastly underestimate both its significance and the unpredictability of its issue in the minds and histories of the learners” (1996: 21). Granted, Conrad is correct when he notes that language is not necessarily ideology. Nevertheless, language and ideology are intimately connected. Moreover, Phillipson, Pennycook (1994, 1998), and others are correct when they insist that parallels be drawn between the marketing of English as an export product, linguistic imperialism, and the ontological impact which foreign language learning has on the learner. While foreign-language learners may not necessarily become dominated by the acquired
tongue, they are most certainly influenced to a considerable extent (with this influence increasing in magnitude as the learner becomes more proficient). Phillipson, who feels that Conrad apparently wishes “that English can be analyzed as though aspects of power and ideology can be clinically excluded” (which in Phillipson’s view is impossible), is convinced that Conrad has misread him (1999b: 376). Regardless of the manner in which Conrad and others experience Phillipson’s work,1 or of how one perceives the relationship between language and ideology, it is evident that Phillipson’s contributions in this field have led to increased discussion of the cultural and political framework of the ELT enterprise, and that these deliberations have a bearing on the field of applied linguistics.

Linguistics, “science”, and culture

Kandiah has proposed that the field of linguistics, a discipline perhaps falsely perceived more as a science and less as a field of the humanities, would benefit from the advances which have been made in post-modernism and post-colonialism. Kandiah (1995: xv) notes that there is a need for

analyzing and interpreting the dynamic interrelations between language, individual action, social structure and culture, against a framework of general assumptions about humankind, society and nature, and with clear recognition of the ontological, epistemological, ideological and other such dimensions of the task.

It would appear that Kandiah and a number of other scholars, such as Nayar (1998) and Parakrama (1995), are convinced that the manner in which a researcher responds to the type of critical framework presented above has grave consequences for their perceptions of, for example, ‘proper English’, the ‘native speaker’, ‘standardization’, ‘correct usage’, and ‘prestige varieties’. The problem, naturally, is that traditional views of such terms contribute to the marginalization of EFL speakers. The very hegemony of the so-called educated native speaker of the prestige variety and the codified form of language that such individuals are said to represent and that is exported as the model which learners should mimic is taken as a given by many EFL instructors working in the EU. Moreover, the misconception that linguistics is a scientific endeavor, one which has no social, economic, or cultural agenda, is one in a long list of factors that situate language instructors who (un)intentionally provide students with instruction which in practice can be perceived as being illustrative of ethnocentric modes of thought.

Byram et al. (1994) attempt to come to a better understanding of the role of cultural studies in foreign language education. In the theoretical discussion, Littlewood is cited:

When we try to adopt new speech patterns, we are to some extent giving up markers of our own identity in order to adopt those of another cultural group. In some
respects, too, we are accepting another culture’s way of perceiving the world. If we are agreeable to this process, it can enrich us and liberate us. (Byram et al. 1994: 6, from Littlewood 1981: 110)

While Littlewood’s goal is apparently “seen as one of improved linguistic performance”, Littlewood nevertheless “applauds the value of cultural learning inherent in language learning itself” (Byram et al. 1994: 6). Here then, there is the assumption, which runs throughout Byram et al.’s work, that the study of the culture perceived to be the foundation of the target language befits the foreign language learning enterprise and, furthermore, can lead to higher levels of proficiency for the student. Case studies are then presented in the book, not only from Britain and Germany, but also based on “British studies in English language teaching”. Clearly, while I would not want to propose that Byram et al. are unaware of the potential pitfalls of a cultural studies dimension in foreign language learning, it is evident that the authors express sentiments which are taken as givens by many people involved in teaching English as a foreign language in mainland Europe – i.e. that British cultural studies, as an integral component of ELT, is appropriate for Europeans, that this enriches the language learning process, and even possibly liberates the student in the sense that such ability/knowledge makes it possible for students to participate in international exchanges of goods, services, information, employment, and social/cultural interaction.

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the text is there reference to American English, American cultural studies, or to the processes of Americanization which have made the cultural context of the English language as it is used in Europe far more complex than was the case in the past. Moreover, the functions of English as a lingua franca and the processes of globalization which have made a culture-specific conceptualization of English problematical are ignored. It would seem to be the case that Byram et al. are quite comfortable with their British-orientated and Eurocentric vision of English. However intriguing the theoretical discussion, it is inconceivable that a framework for culture, when one discusses the English language, is something which can be easily defined. With some languages, such as Icelandic, it is possible to discuss the distinct culture of the Icelandic-speaking people because this language is exclusively associated with one specific nation-state. With English, however, which in Kachru’s (1986) vision of ‘world Englishes’ is comprised of a vast number of native speaking, second-language speaking, and foreign-language speaking peoples, any attempt to define the cultural context of the language – and this is especially true for the foreign-language speaker – is inherently an attempt to promote one English speaking community’s culture at the expense of others. Thus, with English, because it has lingua franca status, because there are a number of nation-states which have large populations speaking the tongue, and because the cross-cultural dimension of English among foreign-language speakers can effectively exclude the native speaker as well as the cultural distinctiveness which the native speaker represents, it is illogical, surely, to talk of the
learning of English as a foreign language as an activity which is enriched through interjecting a cultural studies dimension defined as the history, society, culture, and institutions of the British. The cultural framework for English is global and as such is no longer situated in the legacy of one distinct culture.

Traditional practices

The traditional view of ELT activities in Europe (and also in many parts of the world) – i.e. the learning of British English with RP pronunciation, where the instructor speaks this variety and where the students are expected to study the prescriptive standard with integrative motivation, thus achieving near-native proficiency – is referred to in this article as traditional practices.\(^2\) Traditional practices based on a British English educational norm have come under attack for a number of reasons (Modiano 1996, 2000). Naturally, for those students who want to follow traditional practices in their English language studies, adequate opportunity to learn British English (or other culture-specific varieties) should be provided.\(^3\) The discussion carried out in this article addresses the needs and desires of those students (and their numbers are growing) who prefer to learn English as a tool for inter-cultural communication, and as a result seek competence through an international perspective on the language. Such students not only attempt to develop the ability to comprehend a wide range of varieties, but also strive to utilize language which has a high likelihood of being comprehensible among a broad cross-section of the peoples who comprise the English-using world. Such productive competence facilitates greater success in those multi-cultural forums where English is the language of wider communication. Moreover, the EFL teaching and learning strategies which target such competence\(^4\) are superior, in my view, when compared to the conventional integration-orientated practices associated with the learning of culture-specific varieties such as British English.

Ideology as engagement

One does not learn a language solely as a system of lexical usage, grammar, and pronunciation utilized to express meaning, but also as a vehicle for the conveying of ideologies which seek to define the individual, the world, and the social realities which frame human experience. In the process of learning a language, one is ontologically colonized by the ideologies which flourish in the acquired tongue. As speech communities develop ideologies which attempt to systematize, primarily through language, specific social and cultural structures and the values which are intimately linked to such ideologies and structures, the ontological foundation upon which our understanding of what can be perceived as culturally distinctive is laid. This is because social and cultural ideologies are developed, maintained, and promoted by and through language (see Stubbs
Tollefson (1995: 2) refers to “ideological power”, which he claims can be seen as “the ability to project one’s own practices and beliefs as universal and commonsense”. Reporting on the work carried out in this field by Fairclough, Acerbate (1995: 10) cites Fairclough’s view that

dominant classes exercise power in two basic ways – through coercion and through consent – either by forcing others to go along with them [tenets of ideological power] or by convincing them that it is in their best interest to do so. Consent, however, is not necessarily the result of conscious choice, but rather an unconscious acceptance of institutional practices.

The expected outcome is that students acquire the ability to exhibit an understanding of the assumptions which characterize the culture of the speech community which is perceived as being in possession of the variety upon which the educational standard is based. This ability to exhibit awareness of culture-specific ideological distinctiveness is referred to in this article as ideological literacy. In the educational setting, one goal of instruction is to train the learner to demonstrate awareness of that which underpins the cultural uniqueness of specific speech communities. The exhibition of such awareness can be perceived as being operative on both conscious as well as unconscious (subliminal) levels.

Thus, ideology can be seen to be a system or systems of ideas and practices that interpret and negotiate an individual’s position in social relations, with these ideologies operating within a culture in both overt and subliminal ways. Instead of verbalizing ideological distinctions verbatim, for example, the establishment and promotion of ideology is often realized through the use of inferred acceptance of supposed givens, an activity which inadvertently (or blatantly) impresses upon others a definition of the world.

As an example, a speaker of a culture-specific variety (or regional accent, dialect or class-based accent thereof) can impose upon the speaker of other accents, dialects, or varieties notions of linguistic supremacy and social stratification and thus of marginalization by acting out rituals of social convention. The use of unnecessarily formal speech and social protocol, titles, patronizing reference to an interlocutor, etc. can be put to use when an individual wants to indicate that others are socially inferior. In fact, and this is especially true with RP, accent in itself can establish unequal social relationships between individuals.

I would argue, moreover, that many individuals who speak British English with RP pronunciation are aware that their speech is often perceived as determining the social standing of both speaker and interlocutor. To take a more culturally neutral example, one which addresses the issue of register, it is commonplace in the English-using world that representatives of the legal profession, governmental officials, etc. have a proclivity to use unnecessarily esoteric terminology, something which often constructs comprehension barriers. In this way, knowledge can be withheld from the interlocutor, something which makes it possible for such professionals to maintain and protect their positions of power. Similar forms of marginalization are often operative in social interaction when speakers of standard English use language to establish “us” and
“them” relationships with individuals who speak what is perceived to be a devalued form of the tongue. In the use of language, a code of ideological literacy is expressed, one which initiates systems of membership/exclusion (and in the process invents the “other”), based on, for example, various forms of social, cultural, or economic status. Thus, as individuals define themselves through their behavior and their use of language, they indirectly define others in the process.

Some functions of ideology which are interwoven into the use of language (which come to inhabit the minds of the learners of English, like soldiers hiding in a Trojan horse) have a propensity to hinder the lingua franca from becoming a language of equality. Such ontological effects of language acquisition need to be addressed. Through language learning, individuals not only become subjected to “foreign” beliefs and ideologies, but also come to (re)define themselves and the world which they inhabit. Thus, as the learner’s mind is colonized through the acquisition of a foreign tongue, an ontological imperialism is given new territory to conquer.

If one is to assume that applied linguistics as a discipline has as one of its goals the construction of paradigms which can act as the basis for language policies that encourage democratic relations between individuals and, beyond that, which make some attempt to defend endangered languages from extinction in the wake of increasing use of English, it is logical to assume that one of the duties of applied linguists is to study the underlying ideological positionings which, like the hidden soldiers, enter the minds of learners of English. This is because ideologies become givens in the sense that learners, studying in traditional educational settings, are expected to be aware of such structures in order to be considered competent speakers of the tongue. To be ideologically literate is, in such contexts, to demonstrate awareness of the cultural beliefs and values underpinning the speech communities which are presumed to be in possession of the prestige varieties, since culture-specific varieties, in the traditionalist context, are the basis of educational standards.

British English and American English

What is of interest here is the ideological literacies inherent in two varieties of English – American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) – and the determination of educational standards for the teaching of EFL in mainland Europe. The largest variety, AmE, which is the domain of approximately 70% of all native speakers, competes in the EU with BrE as the educational standard. If one assumes that English is destined to become the global language, and that some type of norm is needed for the teaching and learning of the language for international communicative purposes (see Graddol 1997; Modiano 1999a), it is relevant to the EFL enterprise in mainland Europe, I think, to investigate whether these two varieties promote ideological literacies suited for a lingua franca.
IDEOLOGY AND BELONGING
Systems of ideological literacy are rooted in social and cultural phenomena. While over-simplification inevitably takes place when disregarding distinctions between local and national literacies (or urban/rural), we can nevertheless generalize and assume that there are a number of features which characterize an ideological literacy for English language speakers who define themselves as British. A broad range of associations constitute membership in this speech community and is traceable in the BrE speaking peoples’ linguistic behavior. If we restrict our discussion to the use of lexical items, it is evident that notions such as the Commonwealth, the British Empire, the monarchy, proper English, etc. have different connotations for British people in general compared to the manner in which Americans, for example, use and perceive such designations. This is because such loaded terms are intimately associated with the sense of cultural identity, and thus ideology, of the British. Individuals with roots in other cultures and languages who settle in the UK invariably learn not only BrE but also the value systems which frame the British experience, and in the process buy into (or oppose) the set British definitions of the terminology above. Regardless of their position on such matters, however, they are expected to be aware of what such terms mean in the British cultural context.

In the US, English language studies are often pursued not only with communicative competency goals in mind, but also because speaking English signals to others a willingness to become American. Many learners of English in the US quickly embrace not only the language of their new country, but also the tenets of the American political vision. As a result, for such learners the meaning of various lexical items takes on a distinct American connotation (e.g. terms like liberty, democracy, freedom).

Learners of EFL living in non-English-speaking countries, however, have little need to exhibit an awareness of such culture-specific language usage. To assume that the demonstration of this type of ideological positioning is in the interests of EFL learners is to actively pursue a political agenda. As a result, a distinction must be made between domestic language teaching and learning practices in Britain and the USA, for example, and the ELT activities of instructors working in regions such as mainland Europe where English is not the majority language.

When comparing the US and the UK on the issue of cultural identity, it is clear that Americans do not belong so much to a blood-line as to a political position. Americans do not acquire their sense of cultural identity solely through looking backward at history and tradition, but also look forward to a world where membership is not excluded but is accessible through allegiance to a political conviction. Moreover, speakers of English in the US belong to a speech community comprised of people with divergent cultural backgrounds. The notions, however problematical, of cultural pluralism and diversity (and integration), as well as a vision of inclusion, are commonplace in the ongoing discussions about US society. For Americans, the English language is seen as a common denominator which brings people together, which establishes a space where communication can take place. Language is a tool, something which changes
and adapts to new realities. In the UK, a sense of national belonging and adherence to the ideologies of British society can be traced in attitudes towards the language itself. For the British, for example, language is something which encapsulates pride and identification, which defines the individual within social constraints (i.e. class structures), and which invokes the protecting and upholding of standards, actions which are called for in order to stop the language, and thus the culture, from being “corrupted” by outside influences and/or destroyed from within because of negligence.  

ACCENT AND IDEOLOGY

The general position among those who maintain the superiority of BrE with RP pronunciation can be observed in statements made by scholars such as Honey (1997), Görlach and Schröder (1985), and others whose books and articles on the English language are read by students throughout the world. In the introduction to An English Pronouncing Dictionary, for example, Daniel Jones ([1917] 1950: x) informed his readers of the merits of RP, stating that

> Even in the United States, where so many varieties of pronunciation are to be heard, it seems that this pronunciation [RP] is fairly universally understood without difficulty – a curious fact considering that American speech is not by any means understood in England.

Here, it is apparent that Jones felt that the ability of Americans to understand BrE with RP pronunciation is an indication of the clarity of the accent. Furthermore, the reader is also informed that America is a speech community comprised of many divergent accents. Without saying it outright, Jones implied that BrE was the going currency among speakers of the language, and that AmE, which was actually a melting pot of disparate linguistic features, was incomprehensible to people outside of North America. When pressed, people who take this position often refer to regional accents in the US which they assume sound uneducated, even ignorant, not only to the British, but to others as well. The superior position of BrE with RP pronunciation is taken for granted while other varieties, such as Australian or American English, are written off as inferior products of the former colonies.

What is most extraordinary about this position is not the ideological literacy of linguistic superiority, but the incorrectness of the observation. There are far fewer regional accents and dialects in the USA in comparison to the UK, and no real class-based accent. On the other hand, the number of people who speak with regional accents and dialects in the USA in comparison to the UK, and no real class-based accent. On the other hand, the number of people who speak with regional accents and dialects constitute a majority of the population in the UK. In fact, there are literally hundreds of local accents and dialects in the UK which have features that are often difficult for outsiders to understand, as well as an established accent for the minority upper classes, which Rossiter, a lecturer in English at Cambridge, claimed “is not the accent of a class but the accent of the class-conscious” (Fowler 1981: 505). It is now the case that AmE, as it is spoken by the majority of Americans, is readily understood by people.
from all walks of life throughout the UK. Americans, on the other hand, understand both marked and unmarked RP, but have always had difficulty understanding British people who have strong regional accents and dialects.

It should be noted that establishing class superiority through the use of accent is a foreign concept in American culture and when encountered is considered by many Americans to be fatuous. Upholding RP, or indeed BrE, as superior because it is “clearer” or “easier to understand” is a notorious method of gaining the upper hand through definition (in this case a definition which has no empirical credibility). The uncritical masses in the UK and elsewhere accept the linguistic superiority of BrE as an integral part of the British cultural heritage. The assumptions which have been held to be apparently true in the UK as to the perfection and clarity of BrE are intertwined into the discourse on language which we hear daily in the UK. This assumed linguistic superiority then joins a long line of givens which are called on when the British are in need of celebrating their distinct cultural identity. Moreover, this ideological positioning as to the prestige of BrE with RP pronunciation is then ingrained in the hearts and minds of many language instructors working with EFL learners in regions where English is not the majority language (and as a result occupies the minds of students).

Thus, it is clear that interwoven into the ideological literacies of BrE we find one of the most prevalent assumptions to be the superiority of the BrE accent. Such sentiments can be traced backwards in time to notions such as noblesse oblige and the “white mans’ burden”, when the British, engaged in imperialistic missions, rationalized their efforts by referring to their historic obligation to “civilize” the world. Spurred on by their scientific advances, their military prowess, and the flamboyance of the monarchy and the aristocracy, the British mindset constituted frames of reference which projected self-images of cultural, economic, scientific, and linguistic excellence, especially in the 19th century, when, with the decline of French, the British began celebrating their distinct language and literature to a much greater extent.

Naturally, this belief in the superiority of things British came under attack in the 20th century with the growing awareness that the British Empire was dissolving. After the independence of India in 1948 and the accelerated granting of home rule to a host of developing nations, Britain suffered a further blow to its self-esteem through the processes of Americanization which were taking place in all walks of life. Suddenly, a new world-order had emerged, one which no longer celebrated the values authenticated by the privileged British. At the same time, for example, systems of class stratification and/or marginalization which are promulgated by distinctions such as aristocracy/commoner, private boarding school (BrE = public school)/publicly funded school, RP/regional accent or dialect, BrE/all other varieties, etc. became outmoded. What is most peculiar here is that while the British seem to be aware of the implications of historical change in most respects, they cling desperately to their notions of linguistic superiority, something very apparent when viewing the ongoing discussion in the UK over the “deterioration” or “Americanization” of BrE.
In Milroy’s 1999 article “Standard English and language ideology in Britain and the United States”, she presents what is perhaps the most provocative discourse on the issue of ideology in the context of AmE and BrE. The deliberation provided there attempts to come to terms with the manner in which members of the AmE and BrE speech communities perceive not only their own accents, dialects, and standard variety, but also how systems of marginalization evolve. Milroy attempts to define mainstream AmE speakers as a social group that constructs systems of marginalization on the basis of race, while the BrE counterpart is more class-oriented. Offering elaborate argumentation, and in the process quoting interracial marriage statistics which can be perceived as flattering to speakers of BrE, Milroy brings her readers back to the slave-trade era in her attempt to find historical evidence for the dichotomy which is at the foundation of her theory. We are even presented with evidence that racial discrimination was far less resolute in Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries compared to the inherent racism in the US at that time.

I find this line of reasoning to be problematical. For instance, a comparison of present-day forms of racism in the US and the UK would no doubt baffle even the most perspicacious researcher. Moreover, while some social and regional accents and dialects in the US have come to be associated with specific economically disenfranchised groups of ‘people of color’, it is evident that discrimination emanating from the mainstream is also operative when Americans with a Caucasian/European heritage speak in such a manner. Thus, I would argue that in the USA, systems of devaluing others based on the way in which they speak English are intrinsically socioeconomic. People from all walks of life and from all social groups speak ‘non-standard English’ in the US and experience discrimination as a result. On the other hand, those who speak forms of AmE which are perceived as representing mainstream values, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, are more easily assimilated into American society.

While language ideology within Britain and the United States is a fascinating subject of study, it would be interesting to investigate the manner in which the culture-specific ideologies of varieties of the English language utilized as educational standards are assimilated and promoted by language instructors living in countries where English is a foreign language. As I see it, the AmE standard in EFL learning settings in Europe is usually presented in a straightforward manner, without reflection on the value or the prestige of the variety, while BrE is almost always presented as ‘prestigious’, ‘proper’, and ‘correct’. Furthermore, while proponents of AmE usually have little to say about BrE, many EFL practitioners who are adamant in their support of BrE often make a point of instilling in the minds of learners the notion that AmE is less valued. This is done by the simple act of assuming that BrE is the most expedient standard, a practice which, by default, establishes AmE as a less appropriate choice. The historical structures which have resulted in this phenomena are indicative of an aspect of language ideology relevant to the ELT enterprise, and further study is surely required if we are to devise educational practices which do not situate the English language as the domain of a specific nation-state variety but instead
conceptualize the tongue as having communicative currency in a more culturally pluralistic context.

As AmE and BrE are most often the standards which are deployed in the teaching of English in mainland Europe, these standards have far-reaching consequences for the manner in which foreign language speakers of the tongue interact with others when speaking English. Unfortunately, there is much in the ideological foundation of AmE and BrE which causes me to doubt their suitability. British English promotes systems of exclusion and marginalization, of class stratification and the preserving of traditional ways of living and thinking, while American English represents a New World hegemony insensitive to how US mass-produced culture and aggressive multi-national corporate programs impact on both developed and developing nations. (Granted, America does not have a monopoly on such activities, but because of the success of American enterprise, the US is perceived as being the bulwark of such practices.) The divergent ideological positions of AmE and BrE, furthermore, can be compared to the spirit of internationalization which is fast becoming the agenda not only for Europe but also for people worldwide.

The lingua franca and a critical ELT

A long list of underlying ideological positioning can be attributed to speakers of AmE and BrE. This can be compared to the ideologies developing in the international movement, where equality, human rights, fair play, democracy, free speech, freedom of the press, humanitarianism, and cultural and linguistic pluralism are key concepts. It is apparent that the value systems operative in BrE are often in opposition to the positions inherent in an international perspective, while the American positions, with some reservations, are more closely related to those values which are promoted in the international movement. Two deductions can be drawn from this observation. First of all, it is evident that traditional ELT practices, when rooted in the teaching of BrE with RP pronunciation, impose ideological literacies which are in opposition to the values emerging in the global village upon those students who do not want to learn BrE. Secondly, the rejection of BrE on such grounds would lead to the establishment of AmE as a global educational standard.

Such a development is not necessarily conducive to the aims set forward when viewing the language as a lingua franca. That is to say, if we look to English as a tool in cross-cultural communication, it is apparent that the learning of a culture-specific variety is less expedient, for some, as a tool when compared to the use of English as an International Language (EIL). The learning of AmE potentially threatens to impose a number of ideologies upon learners, some of which are equally as regrettable as those values found in BrE. While AmE is more attuned to the globalization efforts, I argue that any culture-specific variety forces the EFL speaker to assume more pronounced multiple identities, and that such behavior impacts negatively upon the individual’s sense
of cultural identity. A lingua franca should be a mode of communication which allows people to interact with others without aligning themselves to ideological positioning indicative of a specific mother-tongue speech community. EFL speakers should be provided with a space where they can attempt to be culturally, politically, and socially neutral. EIL, as a strategy for inter-cultural communication, potentially provides such a space. For those students who reject traditional practices, EIL is an alternative, one which can act as the gateway to a global sense of community.

Rethinking educational practices

The manner in which educational standards are established needs to be rethought. Many practitioners are critical of an EIL educational standard because of what they perceive to be a lack of adequate prescriptive norms, and instead prefer the prescriptive grammars and practices deployed in the teaching and learning of one of the major varieties (AmE or BrE, but increasingly other varieties such as Australian English). The problem with supporting a traditional view of educational practices is that such positioning supports the promotion of a questionable ideological program. EIL, on the other hand, better accommodates the EFL speaker who primarily needs the language for cross-cultural communication (which most often, for such people, takes place with other non-native speakers). For these reasons, it is evident that a descriptive model of EIL needs to be codified, legitimized, and standardized. As a core target, EIL can be viewed as a practical awareness of those attributes of the language which are readily comprehensible to a wide range of native and non-native speakers. Moreover, the cultural context in which EIL is taught and learned is not dominated by the ideological literacies of AmE and BrE, but is international in scope and takes into consideration the linguistic characteristics and cultural traits of a wide range of native and non-native English-speaking peoples.

Conclusion

It is evident that many ELT practitioners utilize traditionalist pedagogical practices, and in so doing perceive themselves as cultural ambassadors, exposing students to the language and the culture much like a museum curate provides philanthropists with a personal tour. Proud of achievements in literature, the arts, and science, purveyors of traditional ELT practices find no controversy in their efforts to provide students with an opportunity to receive instruction in British and/or American studies as a way to support the achievement of near-native proficiency in the English language. But since the student’s sense of cultural identity is affected by such practices, practitioners will want to become more aware of the consequences of their acts. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that cultural and linguistic imperialism go hand in hand. For some students, this process could very well be desirable. The question which begs to be
asked, however, is whether this imposition is conducive to the preservation of cultural pluralism (and the integrity and survival of endangered languages) and, beyond that, to the integrity of the student who prefers to learn English with a more global perspective.

EIL, a potential standard capable of acting as the basis of language education for a wide range of English-language users, native as well as non-native speaking, is one of the few tools through which we can attempt to establish a democratic basis for cross-cultural communication. The first step in such an endeavor is to locate and analyze those language teaching and learning practices which have a propensity to disenfranchise the learner. In this way, both instructors and students, through a critical investigation of such practices, can establish a better foundation for foreign language teaching and learning. A critical awareness, moreover, of the ideological imposition of traditional ELT practices will open up opportunities for the development of a lingua franca which is better suited to accommodate the needs and desires of the culturally diverse peoples who use the English language. If ideological transfer – the soldiers who pop out of the Trojan horse once they are safely inside the learner’s head – is an unavoidable result of the language-learning process, applied linguists, practitioners, as well as policy makers have a responsibility to the student to provide language instruction which, as far as humanly possible, is the vehicle of values, norms, beliefs, rites, and so on which are in harmony with the spirit of the international movement.

Notes

1. For a critique of Phillipson’s work, as well as the political undertones of Linguistic Imperialism, see Berns et al. (1998, 1999) and in reply Phillipson (1999a).

2. It is interesting to note that in Preisler’s work on EFL in Denmark, it is explicitly stated that despite the fact that AmE, and other varieties, “have been making inroads” into the language usage of Europeans, “the European tradition in the teaching of English is still largely based on Standard British English and Received Pronunciation” (1999: 239). With the acceleration of Americanization throughout Europe, it is evident that the supremacy of BrE as the educational norm in the EU can now be questioned.

3. In the context of this article, students who want to follow traditional practices strive for near-native proficiency in BrE and welcome studies and instruction in the literature, culture, etc. of Britain.

4. A teaching and learning strategy, with competence in cross-cultural communication as the goal of the instruction, rejects the exclusive targeting of so-called mother-tongue prestige varieties and their cultures and literatures, and instead situates English as a language which has communicative currency in a wide range of cultural contexts. With the study of literature, for example, instead of exploring the literary legacies of the British Isles or the USA at the expense of other canons, an international approach would perceive “literatures in English” to include the literary output from a broad cross-section of nation-states and cultures.

5. Kingsley Amis, author of The King’s English (1997) and self-appointed champion of the English language, argues that without books which offer guidance, “the language might be in even worse state than it is” (p. ix). He further consolidates his position
by arguing that “no Englishman readily allows linguistic equality to an American or anyone else born outside these shores” (p. 9).

6. Examples, among others, are the role of the monarchy and the aristocracy in government and in everyday life in the UK, the preservation of a class accent (RP), and class stratification as an integral component of social life.

7. EIL (see Modiano 1999b; Jenkins 2000) is a conceptualization of those core features of English which are readily recognized by users of English. The “international context” of this variety, the “cultural distinctiveness”, is characterized by the multicultural nature of English language usage among non-native speakers. Much advertising, popular music, music-video production, computer games, film and television etc. produced in English has this “international” quality. Thus, with “youth culture” we are finding that cultural artefacts produced in the English language sometimes obtain “international” or “global” distinctiveness and as such are not necessarily perceived as being products of a specific nation-state culture. Thus EIL as a linguistic phenomena is intimately connected with globalization and cultural integration.

References


— (1999b) Standard English(es) and educational practices for the world’s lingua franca. English Today 15.4: 3–13.


[Received 18/5/99; revised 21/10/00]

Marko Modiano
Norrlands gatan 25C
752 29 Uppsala
Sweden
e-mail: mmo@hig.se

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2001