Influence of English as a Powerful instrument of Communication in Thailand

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Abstract: This article discusses the influence of English on social and educational domains in Thailand where the TESOL industry has become a lucrative business in the last two decades. It then examines the concurrent role played by native English speaking countries over the other countries where English has the status of a second or a foreign language with specific attention to commercially produced ELT materials. Moreover, it reports the position of native speakers (not native speaking English teachers) seeking teaching positions currently in the Kingdom of Thailand. Finally, the article briefly suggests what local EFL teachers can do to resist the dominating position of English in their own territories.

Key Words: TESOL industry, co-existence, linguistic imperialism, native English speaking countries, international language

Introduction

The basic function of any human language is for communication which can take place between or among speakers in a given speech community using their first or an additional language mutually understood by the respective speakers. If a conversation occurs between two monolingual speakers, it is assumed that there can be no communication barrier between them. However, it is assumed that there can be a communication break down between and among monolingual speakers when they want to communicate in another language upon which they have no proficiency. Therefore, given the communication issues of monolingual speakers, it is required for monolingual speakers to be proficient in an international language like English which is in wider communication the world over in order to achieve their personal, educational, and career goals. In what follows is a brief overview of the emergence and spread of English as a dominant language across the length and breadth of the world.

English as an International Language

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) elaborate that the end of Second World War in 1945 paved the way for the expansion in scientific, technical and economic activities on an international scale.

This expansion demanded for an international language. For various reasons, especially the economic power of the USA in the post-war world, English became the key to international currencies of technology and commerce. Thus, English became the international language overpowering the rest of the world languages to a dominant position not because of its widespread as a native language in some European countries but because of its uncountable users who use it for communication all over the world. According to McKay (2002), an international language has a large number of native speakers who use it for communicative purposes both among individuals from different countries and between individuals from one country. Crystal (1997) has viewed that a language achieves global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country and that this special status can be achieved either by making it an official language of the country or giving special priority to English where its people are requested to study it as a second or a foreign language.

Reasons for the spread of English

Crystal (1997) has elaborated a number of reasons for the spread of English such as colonialism, speaker migration, new technology developed in English speaking countries, formation of international organizations, motion picture industries, popular music, expansion of tourism industry, publication of books and other literature mostly in English, various forms of communication (internet), and education. Because of those reasons stated above and for other reasons, the spread of English to every corner of the world occurred. According to the use of English in different countries, Kachru (1997) classified it into three concentric circles such as Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. The inner circle represents the native English speaking countries while the outer circle includes countries where English is not the native tongue, but is important for historical reasons and plays a part in the nation's institutions as an official language. The expanding circle consists of countries where English plays no historical or governmental role, but it is widely used as a foreign language. Moreover, Kachru (1997) has asserted that migration of English speakers has resulted in the spread of English in the Inner Circle while the spread of English in the Outer Circle has occurred due to colonization (e.g. India and Nigeria) and that the spread of English in the Expanding Circle is largely a result of foreign language learning within the countries.

Brutt-Griffler (2002) has come up with four central features which accompany the development of a world or international language. First, it is the product which includes the development of a world market and business community and the development of global scientific, cultural, and intellectual life. Second, it tends to establish itself alongside local languages in multicultural contexts composed of bilingual speakers. Third, it is not confined to the socio-economic elite but is learned by various levels of society. Finally, many individuals can acquire the language.

As indicated by McKay (2002) and Brutt-Griffler (2002), English has most of the features stated above to be regarded as an international language. Furthermore, due to the spread of English across the length and breadth of the world, more and more products from various countries tend to reach the global market, which can be viewed as an advantage in the world economic development. In addition, Crystal (1997) observes that English dominates in several important areas such as international relations, the mass media, international travel, safety, education and communication. As indicated above, when the spread of English in the Inner, Outer and the Expanding Circle countries occurred, different varieties of English originated in countries such as America, Britain, India and some African countries. A condition stated above led to heated debates among scholars and nationalities concerning the concept of World Englishes which I now turn to examine below.

World Englishes - Co-existence or segregation?

English has gained itself the status of a world language, an international language, or lingua franca (Crystal, 1997; Seidlhofer, 2001; Brutt-Griffler, 2002; McKay, 2002; Llurda, 2004), thus becoming dominant in all respects in non-English speaking countries where it has continued to play a significant role in their educational, religious, cultural, and socio-economic policies. The policies related to educational and socio-economic sectors of non-English speaking countries have already been either altered or reformed to meet the global demands that have come into existence due to the impact of globalization. However, a heated debate has grown among scholars and nationalities concerning the Centre English versus other Englishes because the Center English is still problematic and can still be used to discriminate against many of its users. Even though authors such as (Kachru, 1986; Brutt-Griffler, 2002) have argued for the co-existence of a family of 'Englishes', one may find that such a co-existence

has not happened yet. Different varieties of English such as American, British, Indian, Singaporean, and African do exist and there are no international norms and rules of the language set by all these varieties, nor even negotiated for a possible framework among them. Therefore, the users of the other varieties of English except the native speakers of English are constantly subject to various forms of linguistic and social discriminations especially when they seek educational or job opportunities in native English speaking countries. Phillipson (1992) and Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996) contend that the users of other varieties of English are subjected to social discrimination due to linguistic imperialism of which Phillipson (1992) provides the reader with a book-length account.

Linguistic Imperialism

Linguistic imperialism refers to "the dominance, supremacy and hegemony of one language over the other languages" (Isik, 2008, p. 124). Linguistic imperialism is such a broad concept that it ranges from the imposition of one language on other by conquest and occupation to the transmission of the values and modes of thinking of a particular culture via language education. Phillipson (1992) asserts that linguistic imperialism does not come into existence alone. It is a byproduct or natural outcome of social, cultural, military, economic, and political power. As a result, the factors described above create a linguistic power ready to invade and dominate all the other linguistic domains in relation to social, cultural, political, military, and economic power. Armed with these powers, a language competes with other languages and spreads its hegemony, which ranges from extinction of other languages to lexical invasion. Phillipson (1992) furthermore, states that linguistic imperialism both replaces and displaces other languages. In the case that it does not or can not replace other languages, it limits the functions of the dominated languages and creates linguistic inequality so that it fulfills almost all prestigious functions and lets the dominated languages only carry out some ordinary functions. Although one can not discern any harmful impact of linguistic imperialism on the surface, its dire consequences on a given speech community can not be neglected or belittled because of such linguistic inequality is likely to further creates cultural, social, economic, and political disparity in a given society, empowering its speakers with prestige, which in turn, allows them to control the society. Moreover, a condition which may be created by linguistic imperialism will influence the relationship between the language and national identity in such a way that it can threaten the

existence and the future of nations. There has been some evidence from the periphery countries to prove that English has created disparities among people in their respective societies. A good example for the condition described above can be cited from an ethnographic study conducted by Ramanathan (1999) in Gujarata, India. She states that certain institutional and teaching practices keep English unreachable to lower income and lower caste students especially Dalits (Dalits are a socially-disadvantaged group of people living in India). She further elaborates that some institutional practices such as tracking students into college-level streams, teaching English literature rather than English language and using grammar-translation method not only bar some students from English medium instruction but also inhibit the communicative competence of Dalit students, thus keeping them in their disadvantage position. The effects of linguistic imperialism can also be observed in Sri Lanka too where English is used to deprive of power and social position thus creating disparities among people in Sri Lankan society. Sri Lankan society is stratified into upper, middle and lower classes and the upper class who uses English as the first language has more access to power and privileges than the other two classes. In addition, the upper class uses English as an ornament to maintain its status and at the same time to distinguish them from the rest (Fernando, 1982). Phillipson (1992) reveals how discrimination and power distance have been exercised through English in Africa. He emphasizes that although English enjoys higher status in many areas of Africa, only a small group of elites can make access to it. Therefore, English remains a luxury of the powerful. This view is advocated by Chick (1992) who states that there are fewer than 20% of the people in Anglophone Africa who are able to speak English. As I have outlined the effects of linguistic imperialism on some countries and societies in general, I now turn to examine the effects of this particular phenomenon on Thai educational domain.

Linguistic imperialism and teaching of English in Thailand

As I indicated earlier, the native English speaking countries generally have become dominant in teaching English over the countries where English is taught as a foreign or a second language. A good example is that the native English speaking countries such as the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia play a key role in producing ELT materials and sending teachers and other ELT experts to periphery countries. Given such a crucial role of the native English speaking countries as described above, it can be assumed that they have overpowered the English using

countries in some way. Another example to cite here is the British Council that has been established to teach various British English courses to learners in the English using countries around the world. Given the nature of British Council language and cultural programs, one may tend to consider the British Council as an official agent representing the United Kingdom which specifies norms for teaching and learning English to speakers of other languages. With this background knowledge of linguistic imperialism, I now investigate the position of TESOL industry in Thailand.

TESOL industry has been a massive and lucrative business in the Kingdom of Thailand for the past few decades. A number of EFL private schools and Teacher Training Centers established throughout Thailand conduct various teacher training programs at different levels. Most of those language centers run 60/80 or 120- hour courses with 6 hours observed teaching practice. Concerning the quality or quantity of training conducted by those language schools is questionable on the ground how fast a native or a non-native speaker with no teaching background or knowledge can become an English teacher overnight. According to the websites of some Bangkok based TEFL training centers conduct ten courses of 6-week training per year. As is often the case with EFL needs in South East Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan, Thailand is not an exception. (See www.ajarn.com website for more information). Moreover, a close look at the web-based advertisements published by teacher-recruitment agencies operating in Thailand clearly indicate that they look for native speakers only to teach English in schools and universities. A condition such as the one stated above itself is a clear indication of discrimination against non-native EFL/ESL teachers.

In this discussion, I discuss why TESOL/TEFL industry has infiltrated into the educational and cultural domains in Thailand from several perspectives. First, Thailand has become one of the most interesting tourist attractions in the South East Asia with ample potential for economic development. With the new resurgence of economic development, the need for English as a communication tool has been widely felt. Therefore, Thai nationals now make strenuous efforts with a renewed interest to study English since it provides them with ways and means through which they can improve their country's economy. Second, gaining a proficiency in English help Thai graduates to find jobs in the private sector where they are generally paid higher salaries than the government sector do. Third, for pursing higher education in a local or a foreign university,

English is indispensable. Therefore, given the Thai learners linguistic needs, foreign language schools and TESOL/TEFL training centers are doing their business of teaching as successful business ventures in such a competitive manner that each institute claims to be the best in its service, quality and recognition. Most TESOL/TEFL training centers in Thailand promise the trainees to find employments as an English teacher in a private sector or a government school with a quite big salary.

Demand for native speakers to work as English teachers in private schools and universities remains high. Thailand has public schools administered by the government and private sector schools which are often run by companies or charitable organizations. Private sector schools come under the supervision of the Private Education Commission of the Ministry of Education, Thailand (more information available at http://www.moe.go.th/English/edu-act.htm). Another advantage is that a native speaker with a bachelor or a college degree in any field can find a teaching job in a school or a university easily. Therefore, native speakers belonging to various walks of life ranging form manual workers, waiters to retired army soldiers from countries like USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand come to Thailand to take advantage of its liberalized policies and booming tourism industry. The 120/ 80 hours TEFL/ TESOL courses offer them job opportunities and many have been successful in getting English teaching jobs in schools or universities. Most of these people are not professionals or certified teachers in their own countries. The view I have stated above is very well described by Brown in his comprehensive book *Teaching by Principles.* He (1994, p. 87) writes some of the questions that native speakers who were quite unaware of the language teaching field would ask him, "Since English is my native language, I won't have any problem teaching it, will I?" or "I would like to learn how to teach ESL. Can you recommend a good workshop?" Brown (1994) points out how absurd these questions are, as obviously the issues in language teaching cannot be covered in a weekend seminar or two. Brown's view concerning short-term EFL/ESL courses which are conducted to train teachers especially to work in Expanding Circle countries seems fair and more valid to the present than the 1990's. A number of studies on the L2 acquisition confirm that L2 acquisition is a very complex process involving a number of factors both internal and external to the learners. Clearly, teaching a second/foreign language is vast, and not something that can be undertaken without a reasonable period of study and training.

The role played by foreign EFL teachers in Thailand is well described by Lekawatana, (1975, p. 10) who writes, "Most of the foreign teachers are transient, and are more interested in gaining experience in this part of the world than teaching". As Lekawatana states once they get some experience in Thai classroom, their next stop will be Korea, Japan or China where they can find English teaching jobs same as they do in Thailand.

Concerning the present state of English education in Thailand, Wiriyachitra (2001) emphasizes that Thais' level of English proficiency is low in comparison with many countries in Asia (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore). Wiriyachitra's claim indicates that the outcomes of English education may not be satisfactory. Moreover, a report entitled "Let them eat tablets" published in *Economist* records that Thailand's scores on the PISA test (Program for International Student Assessment) have remained almost static since 2003, whereas Indonesia has been moving up from a lower base. Similarly, a recent competitiveness report on Global English Language Proficiency ranked Thailand 54th out of 56 countries, the second-lowest in Asia. This seems to be an alarming situation in terms of quality of education in Thailand which allocates 20% of the national budget on education (See this website http://www.economist.comlnode/21556940). Therefore, given the status quo of English education, it is incumbent upon the Thai government to go for a dramatic change in quality of English education. However, one should admit that such a big change in the whole set up of English education system cannot be brought about overnight. As a starting point in the long term process, it might be better if Thai EFL school teachers and university lecturers could in classroom emphasize more on local contexts than the global. For an example, it would be much better if Thai learners could first speak, read and write about their immediate surrounding rather than pushing them to do activities prescribed in commercially produced English books which have been written for a specific target group. In other words, Thai EFL students at the beginning should be exposed to conversational language or Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) as suggested by Cummins (1979) because Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills required in most social situations. EFL/ESL learners employ BICS skills when they are on the playground, in the canteen, at parties, playing sports and talking on the telephone. Therefore, our aim should be here is to make Thai learners proficient users of English. After they have mastered with Basic Interpersonal Communication skill, they can

gradually be introduced to complex tasks which are cognitively demanding. If commercially produced textbooks are used without adoption to suit the learners' linguistic needs in a given learner group, the expected outcomes from teaching will not be able to achieve. I have observed on many occasions that a majority of Thai university students with whom I worked for more than six years fail to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills at the end of their English courses.

As stated above, in my opinion, to bring about a change into the current practice of English teaching. Most essentially, Thai EFL teachers need to make a transition from orthodox teaching methods such as grammar translation and audio-lingual (Ausubel, 1964; Chastain, 1971) to more communication oriented activities where ESL/EFL learners are provided with more opportunities to interact with their peers and the teachers in communicative contexts (Nunan, 1987). Khamkhien, (2010) has noted that English teaching practices in the context of Thai English education do not necessarily cater for the learners' communicative needs. In the Thai classroom, reading and writing are emphasized while teachers tend to pay less attention to listening and speaking because oral and aural skills are not assessed in school based or public examinations. A typical Thai classroom has some constraints imposed by social and cultural values. This is to emphasize that Thais students have a high regard for their teachers and as a result, a majority of students tend to avoid asking questions from their teachers believing that it is disrespectful for teachers. However, when it comes to a language classroom, a behavior of this sort can have negative effects on learners' language acquisition. Therefore, realizing the consequences of such classroom constraints, EFL teachers required to be more concerned about their role as the prime agent of change. Rote memorization technique is another striking feature that has plagued the whole Thai education system. I have observed that most students both from schools and universities apply rote memorization technique in EFL class to improve language proficiency. I strongly believe that rote memorization technique should no longer be encouraged since it has no effect on language acquisition. Instead EFL teachers, depending on the skills they hope to teach, should draw wide variety of approaches and classroom techniques through which the students can be interacted with their peers and teachers. To this end, I believe that EFL teachers should not stick to a particular second language teaching method or an approach because every teaching context is different in that there are several factors that are responsible for L2 acquisition. In this

endeavor, Thai EFL teachers should prepare to take a risk provided that they want to become successful teachers who can help their learners become proficient users of English. Furthermore, it is suggested that Thai EFL teachers, instructors and lecturers currently engaged in teaching should pursue classroom-based research to be well informed of what actually goes on in an EFL classroom against of what theories of second language acquisition tells us ought to do (Long, 1983).

Dudly-Evans and St John, (1998) assert that ESL materials not only provide learners with a wide range of useful and fascinating information but can also play a part in enhancing learners' motivation- thus, facilitate their acquisition. Given the role that materials play in language acquisition, I now briefly examine the state of the ESL materials produced by the native English speaking countries and used by the English using countries in general and Thailand in particular below.

State of the ESL materials produced by the native English speaking countries

Before concluding this discussion concerning the influence of English as a powerful tool of communication, it must be emphasized that not only the EFL/ESL teachers and foreign experts who encroach on the pedagogical domain of English in the periphery countries under various forms and names, but many other things also follow with them. Among them, most notably are the commercially produced teaching and learning materials. As far as the English using countries are concerned, they heavily depend on commercially produced materials by the native English speaking countries regardless of their cultural or pedagogical appropriateness. Nowadays most schools and universities in Thailand use commercially produced English textbooks which generally come as a pack consisting of a Student's book, Teacher's manual and listening materials. Through a scrutiny of these textbooks, one can find that they are really written targeting at popularizing the western cultures among the students (young and adolescents) in the English using countries and to market western university education throughout Asian and African continents. Most probably, as I believe, this may be the agenda which lies hidden behind the content of such commercially-produced English textbooks.

If one tends to examine English teaching and learning materials used in schools or universities in Thailand, one may find that the whole English education system mostly depends on commercially-produced materials. As long as the so-called commercially produced materials

flood in the market of the Asian and South East Asian countries, EFL/ESL teachers become indolent and do not produce their own materials for their learners. On one hand, production and marketing of EFL/ESL material by the native English speaking countries to the English using countries is an indirect way of imposing linguistic imperialism in terms of material production. On the other hand, teachers who use ready-made materials in their classroom instruction never make an attempt to exploit their potential capacities in designing and producing teaching and learning materials. Perhaps, the teacher-made materials may be better and more effective than commercially produced materials because commercially-produced materials do not target a particular group of learners or   culture-specific and linguistic needs. Isik (2008) suggests that dealing with unfamiliar issues and content may bring cognitive burden and make the learning process more difficult for learners. Another drawback inherent in commercially produced materials is that they are contextually inappropriate to EFL/ESL learners in Asian context. Therefore, a description concerning contextual inappropriateness and its dire effects on learners is stated below.

Contextual inappropriateness

Although the commercially-produced English textbooks deal with universal themes and claim to follow the functional or interactive view of language, in reality, many of them do not. The contents in most English textbooks seem contextually inappropriate to learners who want to study English specifically for communicative purposes. Most conversational English textbooks carry situational conversations in which learners first tend to listen to a recorded conversation in line with the guidance given and then they practice the conversation with their peers. Finally, they produce the same version. Another important point I would like to raise here is that EFL/ESL learners trained in the classroom procedure described above may face with problems when they want to communicate in the real-world because the real-world situations are much more different and complex than the classroom. In real world, communication does not happen in the way a textbook prescribes. Therefore, using a commercially- produced textbook can sometimes have some negative effects on learners.

What one can exclusively observes in a commercially-produced English textbook are a few examples of grammar usage combined with written exercises and attractive colorful pictures depicting the social events of Westerners. The use of colorful pictures may be to attract learners'

attention to a particular lesson. However, the use of colorful pictures is better than black and white.

As indicated above, when selecting a commercially-produced English textbook to be used in an EFL classroom, teachers should think twice before they begin to use it with their learners who may have different linguistic needs than what a particular textbook offers. Furthermore, teachers working in EFL/ESL contexts should as much as possible attempt to produce their own teaching-learning materials for their students depending on their level of proficiency, areas of interests, and present and future language needs. To teach advanced skills such as reading and writing, a language teacher may need to exploit a carefully-chosen textbook to a certain degree. However, the common assumption is that English language teachers (native or non-native) should use authentic materials which are consistent with the real-world situations and classroom activities to improve their learners' oral proficiency in the target language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that being teachers of English, we have come to realize the nature of linguistic imperialism and its dire effects on English using countries and their learners. Therefore, it seems imperative that EFL/ESL teachers in English using countries should constantly attempt to equip their learners with more English in order to make them proficient enough to counter attack the adverse effects of linguistic imperialism. The world bears testimonies to prove that countries which have radically changed their language policies and adopted English in the recent past have made a tremendous economic development (For example, Singapore, India, Kenya, Malaysia, and Petro Rico). Chew (1991, p. 41) states that "Research has also shown that it is not so much numerical domination which is responsible for minority status but linguistic diversity. Countries with most linguistic diversities often have racial problems and a poor economy" Furthermore, he notes that bilingualism and biculturalism need not go hand in hand. It is because of this phenomenon that English language teachers need to convince their learners that English is the language of international communication and that they should master it with renewed interest and enthusiasm so as to gain their position in the global village. Learning an international language not only helps its learners to achieve their personal goals but also it helps the learners in a given speech community become sensitive and supportive in all possible ways to local development in their respective communities.

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