

English for Colonization, Neo-Colonization, and Globalization in the Philippines: Challenging Marginalization in the Profession

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Abstract

This paper argues that the English Language Teaching profession in the Philippines has been both a hapless victim and eager perpetuator of political ideologies that have legitimized forms of oppression, pacification and control. Inferring from insights imparted by the movements of the profession in history, the review proceeds by presenting the existing structural and ideological forms of inequality that continues to challenge the profession. Finally, this paper proposes several ways of challenging marginalization in educational institutions and society.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, English language teaching, politics of education

Introduction

The English language teaching (ELT) profession in the Philippines has evolved due to different socio-political influences since the start of the 20th century. Interpreted as a tool for progress, the need for excellent English language skills has become a priority among Filipinos as a means for social mobility (Lazaro & Medalla, 2004). As Gonzalez (1992) reports, the role of the English language in Philippine society cannot be ignored as it has been used as a language of wider communication in the controlling domains of society. For instance, government has opted to use English in official transactions and drafting of laws. On the other hand, education has placed a premium on English language competence by expanding the scope of curricular offerings to equip students with the necessary skills to cope with the demands of real life. For instance, the growing call center industry that services international clients in the Philippines has been booming due to the perceived competence of Filipinos in the English language (Friginal, 2007). Such demands pose a great challenge for the English language teaching profession as it is charged to lead and train the citizenry towards the achievement of the nation's goals.

However, the profession remains to be marginalized as evidenced by the widespread belief that teachers are ill-equipped in facilitating effective language training among students (Sibayan, 2000). Similar to experiences of others in the profession, different sectors of society have conveniently placed the blame on the profession with regard to the continuing deterioration of English in the Philippines. Moreover, some have challenged the rationale for offering English language courses that entail great costs. Much worse, some have even questioned the capacity and competence of English language teachers in enhancing the poor proficiency of students (Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1988). Such sweeping statements may be valid but do not consider the history of the profession-history which resulted from a culture rich in realities, struggles, ideologies,

and misconceptions (Pennycook, 1994). Moreover, Auerbach (1991) believes that in history, English language teaching has also been responsible in setting norms for stratification due to its focus on skills-acquired by people who fill gaps in different sectors of the nation.

A common adage in studying history is that it helps make sense of the present. In this regard, to prove that the English teaching profession in the Philippines is marginalized, one needs to look at history because “whether we like it or not we are both products and makers of our own history. In [understanding the present], we need to remember” (Tupas, 2003, p.1).

In this regard, this review examines the history of the ELT profession in the Philippines in the context of the socio-political movements that have shaped its development. It then proceeds with examining the role of ELT as a tool for colonization, neo-colonization and globalization. Finally, this review imparts reflections on challenging marginalization and future directions for development in Philippine education.

English Language Teaching for Colonization, Neo-Colonization, and Globalization in the Philippine Context

English as a Tool for Colonization

Brought by the American colonizers in the early 20th century as a tool for educating the masses in a common language, public education (and the teaching of the English language) was believed to be a social equalizer for Filipinos (Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1996). Ravaged by Spanish colonization, the Filipino people believed that learning to read and write in English provided a means for them to learn concepts, access knowledge and participate in decision making (Taschner, 1996, Tope, 1998). Through different methodological approaches in the early part of the 20th century such as the grammar translation method, Horn method, and audiolingual approach, the Philippine educational system was a fertile testing ground for methods which reflected the dominant views of language teaching and learning (Mindó, 2003). Ideologically, however, the implementation of different approaches reflects the colonizers’ intention of maintaining an English-only policy in the country. Though the Philippines attained its independence in 1935, moves to include other Philippine languages have been met with resistance. For instance, the continuous dominance of English language teaching materials in public education, the allocation of budget for improving teaching methods, and importation of English language testing systems shows that there is an ideological bias towards the use of English in a domain responsible for shaping the future generation for the growing demands of society (Mindó, 2003). Similar to Phillipson’s (1992) observations on the promotion of the English language in periphery states by centre nations, the American system of education clearly used English to promote favorable values not only for the progress of the Philippines but also the continuing development of docile Filipinos willing to accept colonial rule.

English for Neo-Colonization

Beginning in the 60’s, the Filipino’s search for identity has been marked with moves to replace English totally with Filipino through the implementation of laws and educational reforms. Tupas (2007) believes that the tension between pro-English and

pro-Filipino groups resulted in a compromise in the form of the bilingual education policy (BEP) that appropriates the two languages in teaching the content areas. These efforts have ideologically represented the Filipino's need for a language of identity through Filipino and the continued recognition of English as a language of progress (Gonzalez, 1981, 1999; Sibayan, 1999; Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1996; Tupas, 2007). In the belief that, in order to be globally competitive without compromising identity, the educational system adopted the notions of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) assuming that the Filipino may be competent in Filipino and English. This eventually led to the communicative language teaching movement in the Philippines. One major pitfall in adopting communicative competence as one of the theoretical underpinnings of the BEP is that the theory in itself was at its infancy, making it pedagogically unclear (Castillo, 1999; Valdez, 2008). Likewise, aside from the policy's compromising feature, it is also what Canagarajah (2005) calls "a top-down method of language planning to socially engineer models of instruction" (p.197) that is destined to fail.

Hence, the emphasis on the teaching of language as a functional tool for communication over grammatical form has led to misinterpretation among different sectors of society. Schools had varying degrees of implementation of the BEP; parents and other concerned groups have commented on the 'deterioration' of education due to the perceived lag in performance of educational standards and the emergence of a Filipino-English code switched variety used among students and teachers (Gonzalez, 1999; Sibayan, 1999; Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1988). The growing concern among different sectors of society prompted Sibayan and Gonzalez (1988) to conduct a nationwide evaluation of the bilingual education policy that led to the conclusion that the use of Filipino and English did not directly cause the apparent deterioration of education but rather the school's socio-economic conditions.

Due to the problematic allocation of English and Filipino in teaching content areas and the growing unease of teachers engaging in TENOR (Teaching English for No Obvious Reason, Johns, 1992), the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) movement had paved its way as the latest approach to be invested on by educators. As a result of the global spread of English (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991), the growing demand for labor in different countries (Tupas, 2001; Pennycook, 1994) and need for development in science and technology in the Philippines, ESP provided an ideal means to address these concerns. Moreover, this approach has led scholars to believe that ESP provides an approach that is "culture-free" (Gonzalez, 1981, p. 144) and "scientific" (Strevens, 1988, p. 1) - an approach that fits the utilitarian purposes of government, educational institutions, and the Filipino people (Sinha, 1985). Indeed, with financial help of local and international organizations such as the Asia Foundation and British Council, ESP was cultivated through conferences and workshops, training grants, materials production, curriculum design and establishment of a graduate degree specialization in coordination with a foreign university (Bautista, 1985; Carreon, 1988; Luzares, 1983).

However, the seemingly scientific and apolitical tenets of ESP were questioned and may be traced to the growing political tensions during the Marcos regime. Former ESP supporter Lucero (1984) interrogates the assumptions of ESP by claiming that the approach is assimilative to the Western's intention of continuous dependence on their technology and knowledge. Similar to Galtung's (1971) analysis of imperialist modes of domination between Center and Periphery states, the consumption of ESP as a language teaching commodity - in Pennycook's (1994) terms - does not only provide economic rewards for foreign promoters of the approach but also guarantees control over the regulation of knowledge, standardization of labor practices, and domination of the global economy. The promotion of ESP in the Philippines is similar to

descriptions of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) which assures a hegemonic relationship between Center and Periphery on the basis of language. Even during the post-Marcos era, ESP had faced criticism among educators and has been claimed not only to curtail critical thinking (Lucero, 1984) but also was a form of cultural and scientific imperialism (Carreon, 1988). Through the years, the approach's popularity had waned in terms of financial support and research interest but its influence in materials design continues.

Summing up the salient points of this movement, it seems that the nation had been made to believe that in order to become progressive and globally competitive, the adoption of English language teaching approaches are needed. However, these same approaches advocated by different international institutions still come from Centre states. Due to the need for centre states to maintain its economic and political dominance, promotion of these ELT approaches are part of assuring that these purposes are achieved (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992).

English for Globalization

After the ESP movement, some scholars have focused on various methodological approaches and have implemented them in their own or different settings. Some approaches mentioned in the literature are Cognitive Approach to Language Learning (Pascasio, 2002), Cognitive Approach-Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CACALLA) espoused by Castillo (1999), and Student-Centered Approach (Vilches, 2007). By far, there seems no national or widespread promotion of a particular approach to language teaching. Though government has consistently appealed to educators to improve the teaching of English (cf. Martin, 2005; Tupas, 2007), institutions (especially in the private sector) have independently implemented their own schemes.

The emergence of globalization has placed the learning of the English language as one key priority for progress in the Philippines. Block and Cameron (1992) state that due to the rapid development in technology, the vast application of the Internet and ever expanding social relations between and among cultures, competence in the English language has become a highly sought out commodity in different sectors in society.

At present, the great demand for workers with excellent English language skills may be attributed to the emergence of the overseas worker and call center industry

For instance, the growing demand for domestic helpers is a result of a dearth in a cheap labor force unavailable in more progressive and industrialized states. Since the Philippines is unable to offer jobs to Filipinos, they opt to go abroad in the hope of gaining better earning opportunities. Therefore, competence in the English language is often mentioned as a advantageous skill among these workers in the hope of boosting their chances of getting work (Lorente & Tupas, 2002).

Further, the rise of business process outsourcing (BPO) companies setting up in developing countries has in turn placed great demands for call center agents possessing excellent English language skill since they are tasked to handle foreign clients. Likewise, Philippine government has emphasized the importance of the BPO industry due to its great contribution to Philippine economy (Friginal, 2007).

Whether Filipinos opt to go abroad or otherwise, it can be said that the era of globalization has brought about labor demands from centre states which can be filled by developing countries. Also, competence in the English language has further made the commodification of Filipino labor more competitive among other developing states (Gonzalez, 1992).

Synthesis

In synthesizing the events in the history of ELT in the Philippine context, two generalizations are apparent. First, the language teaching methodologies and materials used reflected dominant views of language and language learning during those particular times. This can be rooted on the results of research done mostly by western scholars. Consequently, the shifts on approaches and materials can be traced to linguistics' (and applied linguistics') need for legitimacy as a 'scientific' discipline (Crystal, 1992, p. 12). Although it is important to translate research findings which eventually become theories and later on into practices, it appears that ELT in the Philippines have become a singular solution in addressing multidimensional problems and issues concerning language.

Van Valin's (personal communication, May 27, 2004) observation is useful in describing this practice. Similar to theoretical linguistics, he points out that linguists tend to treat emerging theoretical advances as screwdrivers in describing and analyzing languages. This may be problematic because a screwdriver can only be used to insert screws and not nails. Therefore, this tendency leads to fixing problems using inappropriate tools.

This screwdriver syndrome reflects the educational system's continuing adherence to deficiency oriented approaches to language teaching which leads to the second generalization-the ELT profession has not recognized the politics it has subjected itself to and has imposed on others. The successive movements of language teaching in the Philippines may have been informed by scientific processes in linguistics and other disciplines but from an ideological perspective, the profession has been an instrument of pacification, control and imperialism (Tope, 1998) - assuring the past colonizers and present elites control over society. Contrary to Sibayan and Gonzalez' (1996) belief that "linguistic imperialism is a thing of the past" (p. 165), the language teaching profession has always been subjected to foreign and local elite influence and has been an effective tool in realizing the school system's implementation of a 'globally competitive curriculum' that "serves an implicit sorting function" (Auerbach, 1991, p.3). Amidst attempts of improving proficiency, fluency, and comprehension in English, the profession has engaged itself in preparing students to be servants of globalization. Moreover, enchanted by discourses of English as an economic asset (Lorente & Tupas, 2002), the profession has (un)consciously become "the very instruments of socio-economic stratification" (Sibayan, 1999, p. 9) - ultimately contributing to the "further skewing of distribution of English language competence in a society that is already sharply even in the distribution of wealth to the detriment of the poor and underprivileged (Sibayan & Gonzalez, 1996, p. 159).

Challenging Marginalization and Future Directions

As established in the socio-political history of ELT in the Philippines, it may be counter-productive to point a blaming finger on government or other parties because schools are very much responsible for the profession's marginalization. If the profession wants to liberate itself from the bonds of colonial, (neo)colonial and global conditioning, it must first recognize its purpose within the context of the realities of pedagogy (Benesch, 1993). Therefore, one should accept the fact that schools are sites of stratification themselves, and policies and practices implemented are never neutral (Auerbach, 1991; Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Benesch, 1993, 1996; Pennycook, 1994,

1999, 2004). Hiding behind the rhetoric of ‘competitiveness’ ‘accountability’, ‘transparency’ and ‘professionalism’, the system conveniently ‘silences’ voices to maintain the “normative [and oppressive] status quo” (Benesch, 1993, p. 707) or “vulgar pragmatism” (Pennycook, 1997, p. 253). For instance, policies and practices related to hiring, acceptance, non-acceptance, and promotion of faculty, accreditation, accountability, research, teaching, and extension are rich fields for contestation as they traditionally have “become a tool for differentiation, to maintain the status of a few and preserve a hierarchical system” (Auerbach, 1991, p. 6).

Facing a great challenge of teaching language to students who themselves bring rich histories, struggles, and views in the classroom, the profession is greatly hampered by the system’s inattentiveness of improving school conditions. How can language teaching be effective if school systems continue to have large numbers of students in classes, inadequate materials, ineffective screening/grouping of students (Canagarajah, 1996; 1999; Pennycook, 1994)? How can teachers be focused if much of their time is relegated to paraprofessional activities (Rionda, 1996)? How can the profession improve if the system continuously engages in dubious procedures related to finances (Freedom from Debt Coalition, 2006)? How can the curriculum be negotiated manageably if schools continue to add more skills, topics and subject matter to be integrated in teaching when students oftentimes are underemployed or could not even get a job?

Therefore, the ELT profession needs to engage in a new set of politics. Not the whimsical endless jousting for key positions in administration for self-development and vested interest but rather a politics that promotes critical pragmatism (Pennycook, 1997), politics that does not simply embrace educational/teaching principles or approaches as dogmatic principles (Kachru, 1985) but critical stance that both recognizes the limitations of pedagogy and challenges the existing system (Benesch, 1996). More importantly, this entails political connectedness (Phillipson, 1992) among fellow educators (in the content areas), administrators and students in terms of seeing potential resources available (whether it be abstract or material) to promote learning. Learning that entails not only problem solving but challenging the social structures that have continuously oppressed the nation.

It is believed that by connecting the ELT profession politically, language teachers should be engaged not only in improving themselves as professionals but also looking at possibilities for using language teaching to improve learning in other subject areas and promoting social awareness in their immediate community and eventually society. To exemplify, language teachers may want to look at how curricular offerings contextualize critical language awareness (Lin, 2000) in other subject areas. Also, engaging in community service projects with local government and non-government units can help make language teachers’ work relevant in the in terms of social, political and cultural development in the country.

Through this, the profession can now challenge the notions of access to English as a class issue (Tupas, 2007). From language as a tool for stratification, the profession can proceed with redirecting English language teaching in contributing to nation-building (Martin, 2005).

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