

Relevance of Cultural Imperialism in the context of ESL materials in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In Bangladesh, students share a British colonial heritage that has left its legacy some levels of familiarity with English and Anglophone educational traditions, and that legacy has allowed to some extent the growth of another form of imperialism.

With the end of the British colonial rule in the Subcontinent, the dominance of English as a language and the English culture has not diminished at all in this part of the world. Metaphorically it can be said that '...once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them'.

The proposed paper will explore how English has apparently got shifted from its imperial status with its base in Britain to an international language repositioning itself with its divergence in different parts of this globalized world, but has continued speeding its cultural hues. In its exploration, the paper will also highlight how English cultural elements/aspects are being infiltrated silently in Bangladeshi culture through the EsL materials used here, causing erosion to local culture.

Keywords: Imperialism, ESL materials, Culture, Bangladesh, Globalization and internationalization and higher education.

The Indo-Pak-Bangladesh subcontinent, because of the British colonial heritage, enjoys some kind of Familiarity with English, the Anglophone education system and also English culture. The journey of the English language in the undivided British India started with Lord Macaulay's 1835 decree that sought to justify theoretically that the British Government should promote, 'European literature and science', and asserted that 'English could do for India what Greek and Latin were assumed to have done for western Europe' (Phillipson 1992: 110). But in reality, the introduction of English language in the British India was rather a bridging program. In the pretext of modernizing the people of undivided India, the British colonial power introduced teaching English 'to educate a class of Indians who could function as interpreters between the colonial power and the millions of Indians the governed, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Phillipson 1992:110)

with the cessation of colonial rule in the Subcontinent, it was expected that the imperial influences would be reduced—more specifically in Bangladesh, a country born out of a liberation war sparked by its language movement. But in reality, what we notice is that the English imperialism has continued to being increasingly imposed on its people, us, however through a different medium, in a different form. The medium is English language and culture (could also be economic) and the form is neo-imperialism. The fact that English is the 'most widely taught, read and spoken language that the world has ever know' (Kachru & Nelson 2001:9) and enjoys a privileged status that has resulted from the once-sprawling empire of its native speakers, Britannia and the economic and military power the nation used to hold or it is holding till now. In his exploration as

to why English language dominates, Crystal (1997:7-8) referred to the historical patronage between the Latin and Roman Empires and noted that the success of English as an international language could be traced back through the ‘successful expeditions of its soldier/sailor speakers’. He further argued that international language dominance is not solely the results of military might. It may take a militarily powerful nation to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it. ...And English ... has been no exception’ in this regard.

As the title suggests, three key concepts — English language, culture and imperialism — and the context of Bangladesh, around which the paper evolves, we will start by providing an overview of the context e.g. the context of teaching ESL / FFL and the theoretical notions and then relate them to the context of Bangladesh.

The invasion of English language and culture has been influenced by two phenomena—globalization and internationalization of education. The landscape of education, particularly, higher education has also been reshaped by these two ongoing phenomena. Though the two notions — globalization and internationalization are sometimes used synonymously in higher education, they bear subtle differences.

On the one hand, globalization, which Knight (2004) views as a process of worldwide transformation, and refers to Knight & de Wit’s (1997) definition of globalization that holds globalization as the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values and ideas across borders and emphasizes that it affects each country in different ways due to each nation’s individual history, traditions, culture and priorities. Drawing attention to various perceptions of globalization as a process or processes – of the world getting smaller or/and of increased connectivity – Modelski (2008:13) considers globalization as a historical process of ‘emergence of institutions of planetary scope’. He views the resulting outcomes of globalization,

connectivity and openness, both as causes and as consequences. According to him, globalization, connectivity and openness, both as causes and as consequences. According to him, globalization, has led the institutions through which people relate to each other, to go through transformation at all levels: planetary, national and local. Furthermore, Modelski (2008) argues that globalization is multidimensional, and prioritizes four dimensions: economic, political, cultural and intellectual. While Mok (2005:290-92) has highlighted the divergent views of three schools of sociologists of globalization — the strong globalists, the skeptics and the transformation lists— his analysis similarly emphasizes the radical changes on a number of levels resulting from globalization.

one the other hand, the internationalization of education has been fuelled by the multidimensional processes of globalization. Whilst the meanings of internationalization are diverse, ‘contested’ and dependent on the particular context in which they are experienced (Mok 2005:290), Knight (2004) has reaffirmed her earlier formulation (Knight 2003) that defines internationalization of higher education as ‘the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education’ (Knight 2003 in Knight 2004:11). She argues that internationalization of higher education is best understood “as a response to globalization”. in terms of: the growth and increasing influence ok knowledge-base societies; information and communication technologies (ICTs) and systems; market-based societies; ‘trade liberalisation’ and new supra-national systems of governance in areas such as quality assurance, accreditation and students mobility (Knight 2004:6-4). She aptly draws an intertwining linkage between the two notions: “Internationalization is changing the world of higher education, and globalization is changing the world of internationalization” (Knight 2004:5). Yang (2003), like skeptics such as Mok (2005), has viewed the impact of globalization on the

internationalization to higher education with cynicism, and claims that economically and commercially motivated higher education creates more challenges than opportunities for non-western developing countries, even though it may bring about some positive outcomes, at least for individuals.

Another construct of the paper is Culture. Culture, as an inconclusively defined concept, is as old as human society, and the notion of culture has undergone continuous evolution. In course of this evolution, it has sometimes been conceived as whatever human beings have started creating and doing at the threshold point where their natural inheritance ends. From this perspective, culture is seen as an oppositional term to the idea of nature. Over time, the notion has been viewed in different ways by various researchers, intellectuals and social scientists. For example, in the eighteenth century, culture was synonymous with civilization (Ulin 2001), whereas in the nineteenth, Matthew Arnold (1994 [1869], English litterateur and critic, organized his perception of culture qualitatively along a binary opposition - culture and anarchy – and views culture as “the best that has been thought and said in the world ... and inward spiritual activity, having for its characters increased sweetness, increased light, increased life. increased sympathy” (pp.33-44). While the notion of culture has at different points of its history, been employed aesthetically, ideologically and socio-anthropologically, Williams (1994:56) sums up the perceptual changes in the notion of culture under three major classifications. To him the first one is ‘ideal’ in which culture is a state or process of perfection in terms of some universal values, with reference to the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development of an individual, group or society. This notion, as per Arnold, is value-laden, and tends to designate someone cultured or uncultured (Arnold 1994). The second approach is ‘documentary’ in “which culture is the body of intellectual and

imaginative work in which human thought and experience is recorded” (Williams 1994:56). In a sense this usage of culture is synonymous with ‘the Arts’. According to Williams’ third category, which reflects sociological hues, culture is a description of a particular way of life, which “expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior” (Williams 1994:56). Culture, in this sense, designates the entire way of life, activities, beliefs and customs of people, groups or society, in general.

Looking back at this brief discussion of the concept of culture — from its earliest perception to the present, the historical shifts from a neutral point of view to an elitist, value-laden one , and then again to value neutral, non-elitist anthropological and sociological approaches — it is difficult to predict its ultimate direction, it is interesting to note that another trend which looks at the notion from a cross-disciplinary point of view has been in the horizon. For example, Hofstede (2001), using a sense of cognition and acknowledging contemporary computer-sensitivity, defines culture as:

the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another ... Mind stands for head, heart and hands, which in turn represent thinking, feeling and acting respectively (pp.9-10).

And Denning (2004), referring to 366 discursive definitions of culture he went through, adds his won—the 367th — and draws a line between culture and living:

Culture is talk. Living is story. (p.226)

We delimit our discussion about culture by saying that this paper will use culture as a ‘collective programming of mind’ (Hofstede 2005:4)

to examine how the transfusion of the sets of programming of the native speakers of English embedded in English teaching materials is causing erosion to Bangladesh set of 'programming of mind' — in other words, our culture.

The third construct for this paper, imperialism, as observed by Phillipson (1992) with a 19th century perception of the term, is primarily a political system in which colonies are governed from an empirical centre, for economic and also for other reasons held to be important' (Phillipson, 1992:45). If this is the case, then with the subsequent grant of freedom or autonomy of self governance to such colonies should cease imperialism.

But unfortunately, another form of imperialism has emerged, often referred to as neo-imperialism, which minimizes political interests and is manifested through the penetration and control of economic potential, and infiltration into cultural and linguistic entities of weak nations often labeled as the third world or former colonies. Our today's concern is the latter one — cultural and linguistic imperialism.

In spite of the fact that cultural reflection constitutes an integral part of any language, the imposition of English both as language and a culture on its users in the 'outer circle' is enormous. As the paper goes on unfolding the nature of and extent to which English language teaching materials are impacting negatively on the local cultures of the outer circle, we would like to briefly highlight the pessimism associated with the language. While the present dominance of the English language is well acknowledged, the future of English is not free from skepticism. Referring to 1500 years' journey of English as a language within its home and abroad, Graddol (2000) disagrees to

remain to be as confident as Crystal once was that English would continue to be the only lingua franca of the world (Crystal 1997:139). Graddol (2000:3) apprehends that the English language will lose its one standard variety and become 'complex and hybrid and pluralistic'. Referring to detonation of varieties of English in the Internet, Crystal (2006) within a period of less than a decade admits that the English language would have pluralistic features. Because of linguistic and cultural diversity of the users of English in the non-English speaking parts of the world, English language is embracing the hues of local languages and cultures and that admixture has led to the creation of 'world Englishes', which are 'linguistically identifiable, geographically definable ... non-native models of English' (Kachru 1992:66-67).

With this world scenario of English, there is a strong resistance among the learners in the 'outer circle' in accepting the target culture while learning English. Jahan and Roger (2006) in their qualitative study note that South East Asian learners of English put resistance to English cultural elements while learning English as a language.

The cynicism about the imperialism of English language is no more confined to the former British colonies, it has extended its claws on other developed non-English European countries. Referring to the expansion of European Union, with the inclusion of more and more non-English speaking countries, it might appear that there are operations of more languages, but in reality, English is enjoying the privilege of monopolizing. Phillipson (2004) notes with concern that, 'NGOs in several countries are worried about the way English is invading territory traditionally occupied by French, German and other languages'.

In the context of Bangladesh, English language has experienced highs and lows during a span of almost four decades. In post 1972 Bangladesh, strong pro-nationalist, pro-Bangla sentiment diminished the status of English in this country and consequently demotivated the learning of English language. The enactment of Bengali Implementation Act 1987 further marginalized the state of English in Bangladesh. But the paradox of such enactment is that Bangla as a language did not flourish as it was anticipated, rather both the languages suffered a kind of setback.

Later when the teaching and learning of English was encouraged and different English teaching projects were adopted and implemented, English cultural elements both benign and malignant started infiltrating into Bangladeshi culture. Though Banu (2005) claimed that the enactment of Bengali Implementation Act – 1987, was no direct threat for Bengali as language but there is a camouflaged threat against Bengali language and culture, which have been highlighted in the following section of the paper.

At the English medium schools in Bangladesh, where they use the British ESL/ EFL materials, it has been observed that students there become more inclined to English culture rather than becoming proficient in the language itself, and show indifference to local culture.

In the widely used English teaching/ learning materials mostly produced in the UK and the USA, there is huge injection of English cultural elements in those reading, listening and visual materials, and many of them are in conflict with the set of programming of the local mind. This type of cultural infiltration is causing slow but detrimental erosion to the local cultural heritage. The following excerpts are just a few examples:

The picture of the flags of the selected English speaking countries	R Ref: New Headway–Pre Intermediate- Student Book p.4	See Appendix for details
The picture of the Statue of Liberty	Ref: New Headway–Pre Intermediate- Student Book p 18	
The picture of Hollywood Kids	Ref: New Headway–Pre Intermediate- Student Book p 42	
The picture and text about Hamburger	Ref: New Headway–Pre Intermediate- Student Book p 88	
The picture and text about English food	Ref: New Headway–Intermediate- Student Book pp 60-61	
The text from David Copperfield	Ref: New Headway–Pre Intermediate- Student Book , p 42	
The text: Matching questions and answers	Ref: Headway–Pre Intermediate- Student Book p 8	

Even in secondary ESL/ EFL materials, there lot of attempts to expose learners to western themes and thought. (eg. **Nasim goes to New York**. *English for Today* for class seven).

Economically powerful cultures enjoy the privilege of imposing their cultures on the peoples of weaker economy. For example, the call centers in India, which has already been attributed with a variety of English — Indian English — , as well as from other parts of the third world have been asked to learn and use American accent, and be familiar with and respectful to American culture and manner. This is a pre requisite condition for getting a job at the call centers.

In the backdrop of this scenario, what can we do to safeguard local cultures — particularly our rich Bengali culture? While we cannot stop teaching and learning English causing isolation in the globalized and internationalized world, and also cannot let our traditions and culture grind down, we may think of two types of measures — long term approach and short term action — to preserve our culture. The long term approach would include preparation of ESL materials locally reflecting the cultural hues of our own. The long term approach would also allow us to assess the extent of linguistic needs of the target language, English, and also the range of target culture, which is inseparable from and indispensable for the effective communication in the target language. While in a globalized world, cultures are not confined to their homelands, and any attempt to

compartmentalize a specific culture within its original domain would be futile, a long term approach would enable us to make judicious judgments as to what to filter and what not.

As production of ESL materials of our own, which involves a long process of needs assessment, materials writing, editing and pilot testing requiring a lengthy process, we may opt for some short term, interim actions to adapt the available ESL materials. This may not stop infiltration of alien contraband cultural elements fully, but would certainly reduce the rate and volume of permeation of undesired cultural components.

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