

# The “Worldiness” of English: EIL and EFL in the Era of Global Capitalism

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of English as an International Language (EIL) and the effects of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in South Korea within the current landscape of globalization. The paper begins by discussing the relationship of language in terms of the development and maintenance of society and culture before looking at the “worldiness” of English by exploring its neutral, imperialist and democratic functionalities. The author then examines the specific role of EIL and EFL in the context of South Korea before discussing the broader capitalist implications of EIL and EFL education. The paper concludes by acknowledging that though EIL is a site of struggle and a means of sustaining certain economic inequalities, it is also the tool with which to resist such inequalities by providing a common language to create a counter-discourse of opposition.

**Keywords:** English as an international language (EIL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Sociolinguistics, World Englishes, ‘English fever’, Globalization, Capitalism, Counter-discourse

## 1. Introduction

Language is the vehicle through which we interpret and interact with our human world. As Montgomery states, “as human beings in society, we talk our way through our lives” (1995: xxi). It is through this “talking” or engagement with (or in) language that societies and cultures are developed and maintained. However, when one language assumes a global role, surpassing all other languages as the language of business, education, technology, economics and international communication, what impact does this have on the societies and cultures for which this language is not the mother tongue?

That English is presently the dominant international language is generally accepted, though perhaps with varying degrees of enthusiasm, throughout the world, and it does not seem that its position is likely to change or be challenged anytime soon. Kachru and Nelson estimate that there are already three non-native users of English for every “old-country native user” (2001:14) while Wardaugh (2006) cites a British Council report from 2004 predicting that, “by 2050 there would be over 3 billion speakers of English in the world” (379). With the number of English users rapidly growing, what role does this international language come to play in the lives of those who learn and use it?

This paper aims to address these questions by first exploring the roles of language in society and culture and examining how it contributes to the maintenance and development of both. From there, the writer will comment on three dominant opinions in the literature in regards to the role of English as an International (or Global) Language before investigating the specific role English plays in South Korea. The author will finally propose that the current role of EIL is primarily a capitalist one in the present globalized economy, but that within EIL lays the potential for subversive counter-discourses to take place as a potential means of emancipation from oppressive structures.

## 2. Language, Society and Culture

The following section aims to first examine the ways in which language relates to society and culture before exploring how this relationship contributes the their respective maintenance and development.

### 2.1 *Society and Culture*

As Halliday states, “language and society is a unified conception, and needs to be investigated as a whole.... there can be no social man without language, and no language without social man” (1978: 12). Halliday goes on to define society as consisting not of participants “but of relations, and these relations define social roles” (Halliday 1978: 14). For Halliday, being a member of society implies occupying these social roles through the medium of language, a belief that is echoed by Montgomery who writes, “Learning one’s first language is intimately bound up with becoming a social being. Each of us becomes a full member of society only by learning its language” (1995: xxvi). It is through language, then, that we are given the means with which to enter and inhabit our roles in society.

However, we must not only have a means with which to participate in society, we must also

know how to function in a particular society. Wardaugh (2006) classifies this ‘know-how’ as culture and defines it as what “a person must possess to get through the task of daily living” (221). As per Halliday (1978), culture constitutes the modes of thought, beliefs, values and actions, a knowledge base about the world, shared and expressed by members of a society. In this way, “language expresses cultural reality” (Kramersch 1998:3). However, society members not only express their experiences, but they also create experiences through language. Kramersch writes, “The way in which people use the spoken, written, or visual medium itself creates meanings that are understandable to the group they belong to” (1998: 3). According to this view, “language embodies cultural reality” (Kramersch 1998:3). Additionally, language serves as a signifier of cultural identity as speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social selves. Thus, “language symbolizes cultural reality” (Kramersch 1998:3).

According to these views, language, society and culture are inextricably linked; each is an integral part of the other, but in what ways? Wardaugh (2006: 10) outlines four possible relationships between language and society, and by extension, culture, as follows:

- 1) Societal structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behavior.
- 2) Linguistic structure and/or behavior may either influence or determine social structure.
- 3) Language and society may influence each other in a bi-directional relationship.
- 4) There is no relationship at all between linguistic structure and social structure and that each is independent of the other.

Excluding the fourth possibility as it is an asocial linguistic approach and this paper is concerned with a sociolinguistic perspective, each of the preceding three possibilities implies an external relationship between language and society. They may influence or determine each other but only in an external capacity. Fairclough goes one step further to suggest that “language activity which goes on in social contexts is not merely a reflection or expression of social processes and practices, it is a part of those processes and practices” (Fairclough 1989: 22). In this sense, social structures not only determine discourse, they are also a product of discourse, which conversely determines and reproduces those same social structures (Fairclough 1989). It is for this reason that Fairclough claims that “there is not an external relationship ‘between’ language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship. Language is a part of society,” (1989: 23).

## *2.2 Maintenance and Development*

Viewing language as having an internal relationship to society, and thus culture, it becomes easier to see the role it plays in their maintenance and development. As discussed in the above section (2.2), how people use language is socially determined by the social roles they occupy and their cultural ‘know-how’. This dynamic is central to the maintenance of society and, as Fairclough (1989) and Pennycook (2001) point out, as a means of sustaining the position of the dominant class. According to Fairclough, this is achieved through the ideological workings of language, which functions as the primary medium of social control and the exercise of power through consent, in which people are “integrated into the apparatuses of control which they come to feel themselves to be a part of (e.g as consumers

or owners of shares in the ‘share-owning democracy’” (1989: 36).

However, the nature of language is not one that is fixed. As Montgomery notes:

[L]anguage is a system in flux. On the one hand – as an abstract system of signs, rules and relationships – it underpins our capacity to speak and guarantees our mutual intelligibility. On the other hand, those very acts of speaking, continuous and pervasive as they are, always bring pressure to bear on the shape of the abstract system, to mould and change it. (1995: xxvi)

It is precisely because of its continuous reshaping that both Pennycook (2001) and Fairclough (1989) identify language as a site of struggle. According to Pennycook, this struggle is concerned with the claiming and creating of new meanings in the political arenas of language and discourse as “meanings are always in flux and contention” (2001: 85). For Fairclough, language is the embodiment of a class struggle in which “those who exercise power through language must constantly be involved in the struggle with others to defend (or lose) their position” (1989: 35). Therefore, the relationship ‘between’ society, culture and language is a dialectical one, and it is through this continuing opposition of forces that is played out in language (or discourse) that society and culture develop and change.

### **3. The “Worldliness” of English: Neutral, Imperialist or Democratic?**

As illustrated in the above sections, language’s role in society and culture is significant, and as language continues to grow in terms of “the uses it is required to serve...the range of language varieties, and...the complexity of the language capacities that are expected of the modern citizen” (Fairclough 1989: 3), this dynamic will only increase in its relevance to the world’s citizenries. This concern is particularly germane when examining the role of English as an International Language (EIL). As Pennycook observes, “English is inextricably bound up with the world: English is in the world and the world is in English” (2001: 78). Therefore, it becomes vital to investigate what Pennycook terms the “worldliness of English” (2001: 78) in regards to its role as the predominant international language. The following sections will examine and comment on three central opinions in the literature, which view EIL as neutral, imperialist or democratic.

#### *3.1 English is Neutral*

To claim English is neutral is to suggest that it can be free of cultural and political influences. This neutrality is based on the assumption that “once English has in some sense become detached from its original cultural contexts...it is now a neutral and transparent medium of communication (Pennycook 1994: 9, cited in Sasaki et al 2006: 383). However, as Holland notes:

Even if the language were unusually ‘neutral’, even if one could completely excise the British Empire, Hollywood and MacDonald’s from it, Global English would still have a cultural loading, simply by virtue of being global. (2002: 20)

Moreover, Warschauer (2000) points out that to believe that English is completely neutral without weight of its own is in fact a naïve position to maintain. He cites Pennycook (1995)

as arguing that:

English carries a set of ideologies, values, and norms based on the history of its development and use. The spread of English thus privileges certain groups of people (including native speakers and nonnative elites who have the opportunity to master it) and may harm others who have less opportunity to learn it. (Cited in Warschauer 2000: 516)

Therefore, EIL, despite claims of its neutrality (Wardough 1987), carries with it some degree of cultural loading regardless of functionalist perspectives, which stress the choice and usefulness of English, suggesting that the global spread of English is natural, neutral and beneficial (Pennycook 2001). Though it is argued that English is pluricentric (Schneider 2003, cited in Wardough 2006: 380) and no longer belongs to any one culture (McKay 2002; Sharifian 2009), these views do not take into consideration the “human agency that shapes how English is used in different circumstances” (Warschauer 2000: 515). In other words, tools rarely remain neutral once put into use, and the uses of English are consequently shaped “by the social configuration into which it enters” (Holland 2002: 15), a social configuration that is itself loaded with ideologies, values and norms.

### 3.2 *English is Imperialist*

Phillipson’s definition of English linguistic imperialism hinges on “the establishment and continuous reconstruction of cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (1992: 47) to assert and maintain its dominance. In order to unpack this statement, it is helpful to view English dominance in terms of “linguistic capital”, a term coined by Bourdieu in which linguistic capital “is not unlike social capital, cultural capital, or economic capital” (Bourdieu 1976, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; cited in Sasaki *et al* 2006: 384). According to Bourdieu, “Linguistic exchange...is also an economic exchange... capable of procuring certain material or symbolic profit” (Bourdieu 1991: 480). In regards to English, these profits include “further education, employment, or social positions” (Pennycook 2001: 81), or, as Nunan asserts, students who can master English through supplementary instruction “will reap significant economic rewards” (2003: 608). In this sense, then, English as linguistic capital positions itself to have more ‘acquiring power’ than other languages, thus producing and reproducing the ‘cultural inequalities between English and other languages’ which Phillipson attributes to linguistic imperialism.

However, this account does not seem to take into consideration the growing number of established World Englishes (Yano 2001) nor the shift in economic power from West to East. As Crystal writes, “English is now spoken by more people (as a first, second, or foreign language) than any other language and is recognized by more countries as a desirable lingua franca than any other language” (2001: 54). Moreover, as Yano (2001) points out:

Graddol (1997: 2-3) predicted that within a decade or so, the number of people who speak English as a second language would exceed the number of native speakers, and, therefore, the center of authority regarding language would shift from native speakers. This numerical majority of “nonnative” has already been reached. (120)

Graddol goes on to estimate that “the share of world wealth in 2050...of the Big Three blocs [North America, the European Union and Japan] will drop to a mere 12 percent [from 55% in 1990]. In contrast, Asia will have 60 percent share and the rest 28 percent” (1997: 28, cited in Yano 2001: 121). Interestingly enough, Yano notes that international trading among Asian countries “is expected to rely on Asian varieties of English, rather than on Asian languages themselves” (2001: 121). This linguistic and economic shift will certainly alter English in terms of its linguistic capital and it will be interesting to see which variety of English will be associated with the most ‘acquiring power’ in the future.

### 3.3 *English is Democratic*

Crystal views language as “an immensely democratising institution” (2003: 172), but is this true of English? In terms of its appeal as a global language, he cites certain structural aspects, “such as the absence in English grammar of a system of coding social class differences” (2003: 8-9) as making the language appear more ‘democratic’ to speakers of more intricate class systems such as Javanese. However, this is not evidence enough to claim English is democratic, nor is that an argument Crystal (2003) is necessarily attempting to make as he later notes that international language dominance stems from the political, military and economic power of a nation, notions that would seem to contradict a democratic outlook of English.

Perhaps a more convincing appeal to the democratic potential of English is Crystal’s stance that to learn a language “is immediately to have rights in it. You may add to it, modify it, play with it, create in it, ignore bits of it, as you will” (2003: 172). In fact, it could be argued that this is precisely how World Englishes have developed and will come to influence English. As Crystal predicts:

[I]t is just as likely that the course of the English language is going to be influenced by those who speak it as a second or foreign language as by those who speak it as a mother-tongue. (2003: 172)

In this regard, English does seem to possess certain democratic attributes in the way of World Englishes with its “underlying philosophy... of inclusivity and pluricentricity” (Bolton 2006: 240). However, it should be noted that inherent in the distinction of World Englishes from English, or of one English variety from another, runs an undercurrent of something far less egalitarian in nature and is a point for further consideration when analyzing the democratic potential of English.

Additionally, Crystal cites English as “the medium of the world’s knowledge, especially in such areas as science and technology” (2003: 110). English, then, would allow anyone access to this knowledge which would appear to support the ‘English is democratic’ claim. However, what is notable is that the *producers* of this knowledge still largely reside in native speaking, or Inner Circle (see Kachru 1986, Kachru and Nelson 2001), countries. As Halliday writes, “Infotechnology seems still to be dominated by the English of the Inner Circle” (2006: 363). Therefore, until users of World Englishes are given more opportunities to contribute to this knowledge base and themselves be creators of meaning (Halliday 2006), English’s

relationship to knowledge will still be heavily one-sided and therefore undemocratic.

#### 4. English in South Korea

Having discussed the three predominant opinions regarding the role English plays as an international language, the following section will examine the specific nature of English in South Korea by first addressing the phenomenon of ‘English fever’. The writer will then investigate how this intense pursuit of English contributes to the maintenance of existing class inequalities through ideologies of merit, self-deprecation and the practice of self-subjectification.

##### 4.1 ‘English Fever’: An Overview

According to Song (2011), “English has been *the* most important foreign language in South Korea for the past six or so decades” (38). Evidence in support of this is found easily enough: English has been taught as a compulsory subject since 1997 (Song 2011); in 2009 Koreans spent over \$19 billion on English education (Jung 2010, cited in Lee *et al.* 2010) in addition to \$752 million on English proficiency tests (Guardian Weekly, 15 December 2006, cited in Song 2011); and South Korea is one of the largest markets for TOEFL in the world (Guardian Weekly, 15 December 2006, cited in Song 2011). According to Park, this intense pursuit of English education, often termed ‘English fever’, is rooted in Korea’s “so-called ‘education fever’, originating from the combination of the country’s long tradition of Confucianism and new egalitarian ideas from the West” (Park 2009: 55). Because of this, education, and particularly English education, is now seen as *the* means of social mobility and economic advancement in South Korea today (Park 2009).

##### 4.2 English as ‘Social Malady’

For Song, “South Korea’s ‘obsession with English’...is a social malady.... designed, under the cover of meritocracy, to conserve the established social order”(2011: 36). According to Song, English works as a ‘mechanism of elimination’, which, in the name of globalization, is used “to reproduce and rationalize the ‘hierarchy of power relations’ ” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, cited in Song 2011: 36). This is largely achieved through the medium of education working in conjunction with ideologies of merit, where academic success is viewed **as** a product of individual efforts. However, this meritocracy seems to be more illusory than real, as the educational system is based on a myriad of tests and examinations that give clear advantages to students who can afford to pay for private after-school lessons and tutoring compared to those who cannot (Park 2009; Song 2011). *Kwaoe*, or the practice of private tutoring or lessons, is not only a source of financial burden to lower and middle class families struggling to keep up with the privileged class (Park 2009; Song 2011), but it also undermines South Korea’s policy of “egalitarian access to education” (Seth 2002: 185, cited in Park 2009: 51). Thus, rather than hard work, commitment or academic ability acting as determinants of educational attainment, is, more importantly, the reach of parents’ wallets. In no other subject is this seen more than with English where lessons at private institutions or enrollment at costly ‘immersion schools’ are trumped by short-term overseas English courses or by the even more exclusive ‘early overseas education’, where school age children are sent

to the United States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand for instruction (Park 2009; Song 2011).

English's role in South Korea has gone beyond that of mere school subject to that of linguistic capital, and a demonstration of linguistic competence in English grants entrance to prestigious universities, employment and workplace success (Park and Ablemann 2002; Park 2009; Song 2011). Simultaneously, globalization, the impetus (or pretext) for 'English fever', is altering the South Korean identity. As Park and Ablemann suggest:

[T]he idea of what it means to be South Korean is transforming: increasingly, to be South Korean means to be South Korean 'in the world'—a prospect that calls for the mastery of English.... (2002: 650)

Working in tandem with this new identity is what Song calls the ideology of 'self-deprecation', which constantly reminds South Koreans that they are "bad speakers of English" (Song 2011: 48), thus prompting an increased investment in time and money on English instruction. As Song points out, "The more money and time South Koreans invest in learning English, the more important English becomes to them and the society as a whole" (2011: 48), a clear illustration of Fairclough's 'power through consent' (see 2.2). Furthermore, this process increases the value of English as linguistic capital and creates an even greater divide among those who can afford supplementary English instruction and those who cannot.

In this regard, it becomes clear how English in South Korea is a "Trojan horse...a language...of particular class interests" (Cooke 1988, cited in Pennycook 2001: 80) that creates "subject positions that contribute to their own subjectification" (Pennycook 2001: 85). Herein lies the malady: South Koreans 'contribute to their own subjectification' by investing vast quantities of time and money on English education while those same valuable resources "could be spent on serious social and political problems...such as poverty, ill-health, an aging population, unemployment, youth problems, North Korean refugees and North Korea" (Song 2011: 49). Thus, as 'English fever' continues to spread, so too will the existing social inequalities within South Korean society, as "the offspring of the privileged, with 'good [English] education', inherit their parents' high socio-economic positions" (Song 2011: 44) and continue to "(con)serve the interests" (Song 2011: 46) of the socio-economic elite.

## **5. Discussion: English as a Capitalist Tool**

As Bourdieu writes, "it is rare in everyday life for language to function as a pure instrument of communication" (1991: 480). This observation can easily be extended to include the role of English as an International Language. Though it is tempting to view it simply in terms of its functionality, English cannot be "so easily divorced from its historical roots and contemporary associations" (Holland 2002: 20) with modernism, capitalism and globalization. As Halliday asserts, "English is now acquiring a new identity as the global language of the late capitalist world" (2006: 349) and more specifically, as the medium through which multinational companies do business and disseminate their brand of discourse to the global market (Holland 2002). In other words, English can be seen as a capitalist tool used to

achieve a type of ‘global-state’ in which the dominance of the global capitalist class is maintained through a range of social institutions (Fairclough 1989), including that of English education as is seen in South Korea (see 4.2). It would seem that “the spread of global English is linked –perhaps inextricably – to that of global capitalism” (Holland 2002: 8). Following this, it is possible to conclude that English is no longer so much the language of the ‘imperialist’ Inner Circle, but rather the language of the multinational corporation who is ultimately nationless and, like English, “inextricably bound up with the world” (Pennycook 2001: 78).

However, it is important to note, that although English may be a vehicle of oppression and a tool employed to serve global capitalist class interests, it is also the means with which to oppose and resist these same forces as it has historically done before. As Pennycook notes:

Although English has been one of the major languages of colonialism and neo-colonialism...a language linked to oppression, racism, and cultural imperialism, it was also the language through which opposition to the colonizers was formed. (2001: 85)

In the face of the capitalist world order, English is the site of an immense struggle, one in which the English teacher stands at the front lines. As Pennycook suggests, “counter-discourses can indeed be formed in English and that one of the principal roles of English teachers is to help this formulation” (2001: 87). Indeed, the importance of the counter-discourse is great as “[counter] discourse has effects upon social structures and contributes to the achievement of social continuity or social change” (Fairclough 1989: 37). Therefore, as English teachers and applied linguists, we have a responsibility to be acutely aware of the implications of the global spread of English as we bring with us a critical pedagogical approach to our classrooms “to help the articulation of counter-discourses in English” (Pennycook 2001: 87).

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, English plays an ever-increasingly pervasive role in the lives of the world’s citizens. Because of this, scholars have come to view the role of English as neutral, imperialist, or democratic. However, as the nature of the global economic landscape shifts, so too does the role of EIL, as it increasingly becomes the linguistic embodiment of capitalism and globalization.

It cannot be denied that English plays a crucial role in creating, maintaining and sustaining social inequalities throughout the world. However, English is also the ammunition with which to oppose and fight against these inequalities through the articulation of counter-discourses aimed at “writing back to the centre” (Pennycook 2001: 85) and raising awareness of how English contributes to these global inequalities as, “consciousness is the first step towards emancipation (Fairclough 1989: 1). I agree with Halliday’s stance that, “if you want to resist the exploitative power of English, you have to use English to do it” (2006: 362). Therefore, it is up to teachers and applied linguists to engage in critical pedagogical projects that utilize English and counter-discourses as a basis for social emancipation.

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