

CHAPTER 2

IDEOLOGY, LANGUAGE VARIETIES, AND ELT

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ABSTRACT

The question of which language variety should be used as a medium of instruction in ELT involves two different issues: the variety used by teachers and students in the classroom, and the target language of the learners. Both issues are usually framed as pedagogical: Which variety (or varieties) will best serve learners' educational needs? In contrast, a critical perspective views pedagogical rationales for alternative ELT policies and practices as mechanisms for justifying conventions of language teaching. Thus, critical ELT research explores the underlying ideological orientations of alternative policies and practices. This chapter summarizes research, describes current debates, and suggests future directions for research on the ideology of medium of instruction issues. It suggests that medium of instruction issues are often called into service of social agendas that determine which language groups enjoy particular economic, political, and social benefits.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of ideology, language varieties, and ELT involves two separate questions. The first is which variety or varieties should be used by teachers and students in their day-to-day teaching and learning activities. This question focuses on the value of exclusive use of the target language (English) versus a bilingual approach that permits some use of the students' native language. The second question is which variety of English should be the target language of learners in ELT classes. Most textbooks assume that the target language is one of the major standardized varieties, usually American or British English. Both questions are usually framed as fundamentally pedagogical; that is, their answers are assumed to depend upon decisions about which variety (or varieties) will best serve learners' educational needs. Thus, the best rationales for particular classroom practices are assumed to be pedagogical ones. For example, if English-only instruction is believed to be the most effective means for increasing English proficiency, then English-only instruction is justified. One example of this line of reasoning is Porter (1990), who claims that time-on-task (i.e. the time spent using English) is the key variable in determining success in English language learning, and therefore exclusive use of English is pedagogically justified. The central pedagogical issue is the validity of her claim about the effect of time on task. Similarly, if the use of Standard English rather than students' non-standard varieties is believed to more effectively aid students in learning the standard variety, then teachers are expected to speak the standard and to encourage students to do so as well. One example of this line of reasoning is Charpentier (1997), who argues against bilingual classroom language by claiming that classroom use of English and Bislama (a vernacular spoken in

Vanuatu) “seems to lead to social, psychological, and pedagogical blockage” because students “cannot seem to figure out the respective roles and characteristics of the two codes” (p. 236).

In contrast, a critical perspective toward these medium of instruction questions seeks answers not in narrow pedagogical terms, but rather by examining the underlying ideological orientation of pedagogical rationales for alternative policies and practices. Two key concepts—critical and ideological—require explanation. Though critical language studies entail a wide range of research methodologies, theories, and perspectives, in general it refers to work that is influenced by critical theory and that foregrounds the links between language, power, and inequality (e.g. see Fairclough, 1989; Forester, 1985; Foucault, 1972; Habermas, 1985; Pennycook, 1998; Tollefson, 1991). Critical analysis of language varieties in ELT investigates how dominant ethnolinguistic groups use particular medium of instruction policies to retain their system of privilege, as well as how social and economic hierarchies may be challenged by alternative policies that better serve the interests of subordinated language groups.

The term *ideology* in language studies refers to a shared body of commonsense notions about the nature of language, the nature and purpose of communication, and appropriate communicative behavior; these commonsense notions and assumptions are seen as expressions of a collective order (Woolard, 1992). This means that the ways human societies communicate both reflect and shape fundamental assumptions about individuals as members of collective identities. Though the term *ideology* is used in many ways in ELT, it is important to keep in mind what the term tries to capture: namely, the implicit, usually unconscious assumptions about language and language behavior that fundamentally determine how human beings interpret events.

Particularly important in a critical approach to medium of instruction questions is *standard language ideology*. Lippi-Green (1997) defines standard language ideology as “a bias toward an abstract, idealized homogenous spoken language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class” (p. 64). This definition foregrounds three key points. First, standard languages are in fact idealized constructs; the speech of speakers of Standard English includes significant variation that is largely ignored within ELT theory and practice. Second, though standard languages are usually considered to be politically neutral, equally accessible to everyone, and inherently superior to other varieties, in fact they are based upon whatever variety is spoken by the upper middle class. Third, educational institutions play a crucial role in imposing the standard, through systematic sanctions against those who do not speak the standard, and rewards (e.g. good grades in school) for those who do. An example of standard language ideology is the commonsense belief that communication is more efficient if everyone speaks a standard language variety. Another example is the belief that standard language varieties are uniform, typical, and normal.

A critical approach to ELT examines the impact of standard language ideology upon decisions about the pedagogical value of particular ELT practices. From a critical perspective, pedagogical rationales for medium of instruction policies are always viewed skeptically. In particular, second language acquisition (SLA) theory and formal teaching methods, which are major sources of pedagogical rationales for ELT practices, are viewed as a set of rules for determining the situated meaning of teaching acts. In an important analysis of the ideological function of SLA theory and

teaching methodology, Stephan (1999) argues that SLA theory and ELT methodology combine with sociocultural values, such as participation, student involvement, and individualism, to valorize certain policies and practices as “effective” or (to use a currently popular term) best practices. Thus, particular practices come to be seen as pedagogically sound, while other practices are sanctioned with labels such as *outdated* or *not theoretically justified*. In particular, approaches to ELT that foreground questions of ideology and inequality are often labeled *political* rather than *pedagogical*, and thus outside the core realm of SLA theory and ELT methodology (Phillipson, 1992). In contrast, a critical approach seeks to unpack the implicit assumptions about language learning and use that shape ELT theory and practice, and the ways in which those assumptions benefit some groups while creating disadvantage for others.

Using a critical approach, I explore in the remainder of this chapter the question of how medium of instruction debates in ELT are shaped by standard language ideology.

SELECTED RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following summary of selected critical research on ideology, language varieties, and ELT is divided into two sections. The first section examines issues raised by research on the question of which variety or varieties should be used by teachers and students in their daily classroom activities. The second section examines issues raised by selected research on the question of which variety should be the target language in ELT.

The Language of the Classroom

Critical research on the language of the classroom examines two key issues: the exclusive use of English compared to bilingual approaches in ELT classes, and the use of stigmatized, non-standard varieties.

English-only versus Bilingual Approaches to ELT

In a series of critical publications, Auerbach has explored the ideological nature of pedagogical practices, particularly the widely held assumption that excluding students’ primary languages from the classroom is the most efficient route to English proficiency (Auerbach, 1993, 2000; Auerbach et al. 1996). Auerbach points out that claims about the value of English-only instruction have virtually no research support, while literacy and schooling in the first language (L1) have long been associated with successful SLA (see Krashen, 1996). In adult literacy, though there is surprisingly little research comparing the value of initial first language literacy with English-only literacy, what research has been conducted suggests that initial L1 literacy has a beneficial effect on the acquisition of English literacy (Gillespie, 1994). Like Street (1984), Auerbach (2000) argues that instructional approaches that exclude varieties other than Standard English on pedagogical grounds reflect ideological assumptions with little support in research. Moreover, they serve to blind ELT professionals to the social, economic, and political consequences of English-only practices.

Other critics of English-only instruction have explored its impact on students. For example, Klassen (1991) found that English-only classes offered to Spanish-speaking immigrants in Toronto isolated students from one another and their teachers and were associated with high dropout rates. Snow (1990) examined the evidence that L1 use can significantly enhance the effectiveness of a wide range of language and educational programs. Particularly important is the growing body of “practitioner research” (Auerbach, 2000), namely, research conducted by teachers about their own students, classes, and programs. The rise of practitioner research is an important development in ELT: Much of this research suggests that English-only approaches in ELT are often detrimental to learners (see Gegeo, 1994; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1999, 2002; Strei, 1992; Watahomigie, 1995; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Moreover, practitioner research reflects an implicit critique of the traditional separation of practitioners from researchers, who are often working in university positions that do not include actual ELT instruction. For instance, Earl (1994) describes her dissatisfaction with SLA research that generally ignores the special problems facing students with minimal literacy. The traditional debasement of teachers’ judgment and experience as well as students’ voices in SLA research is now being challenged by critical practitioner researchers, who foreground questions such as the following: Whom is the research intended to help? Who decides what research questions should be asked? What should be the involvement of students and teachers in the research process?

In reviewing practitioner research, Auerbach (2000) found five major advantages to the judicious use of students’ home languages in ELT classes:

1. Using L1 opens classes to learners who know little English.
2. Using L1 attracts underserved populations, such as students who previously dropped out of classes.
3. Using L1 improves retention and progress in English.
4. Using L1 encourages communicative, learner-centered approaches.
5. Using L1 at school supports the cultures of families in which parents do not speak English.

Despite these advantages, English-only instruction continues to be widely advocated by policymakers and ELT professionals alike. In the final section of this chapter, I will consider the question of why research on medium of instruction has had so little impact upon medium of instruction policies.

Stigmatized Varieties in the ELT Class

The second important aspect of classroom language is the use of stigmatized varieties. Stigmatized varieties include social dialects marked as poor or working class, or as ethnic or “racial,” such as African American Vernacular English; regional varieties associated with economically impoverished areas, such as Appalachian varieties in the United States; and pidgins and creoles, such as Hawaiian Creole English. Medium of instruction policy in most ELT settings requires the use of standard varieties, which are in fact the varieties of the upper middle class that have come to be considered more precise, more scientific, and more expressive than other varieties. In contrast, stigmatized varieties are widely

considered to be unattractive, corrupted versions of the standard: Their use is widely believed to be responsible for the limited educational and employment opportunities of groups speaking them.

While there is ample evidence that negative attitudes towards stigmatized varieties are an expression of racism and other forms of bias (see Lippi-Green, 1997), their exclusion from ELT classrooms is usually justified on pedagogical grounds, namely, that they interfere with effective ELT instruction and restrict English language learning. In a review of research on such claims of interference, Siegel (1999) examines the use of stigmatized varieties in three types of educational programs that incorporate their use in systematic ways: instrumental programs, accommodation programs, and awareness programs. In instrumental programs, stigmatized varieties are used as medium of instruction for L1 literacy as well as subject content in mathematics, science, and other fields. In accommodation programs, stigmatized varieties are used by students for classroom activities, but not as medium of instruction. In awareness programs, stigmatized varieties are the focus of class discussion, often with contrastive analysis of stigmatized and standardized varieties. Siegel found overwhelming evidence in 22 separate research studies that the use of stigmatized varieties in all three types of programs has a positive effect on the acquisition of English and English literacy, as well as on students' participation, self-esteem, performance on standardized tests, and overall academic achievement. Particularly important is the finding that use of stigmatized varieties as medium of instruction does not restrict acquisition of English, but in many cases is associated with improved English language learning and use. Siegel concludes, "There is no basis for claims that using a stigmatized variety in the classroom increases interference or gets in the way of acquisition of the standard. On the contrary, research findings indicate that appropriate teaching methodology incorporating the students' vernacular may actually help them acquire the standard" (Siegel, p. 721). Despite these findings, most ELT programs preclude widespread use of stigmatized varieties. As was the case with research on L1 use in ELT, we find that research demonstrating the value of stigmatized varieties has limited impact upon ELT policy decisions.

Target Language in ELT

A second area of critical research on ELT classroom language explores the issue of which language variety should be the target language of language learners. A key component of standard language ideology is that language learners are (or should be) involved in the process of acquiring standard varieties. In most ELT textbooks and teachers' guides, the target of Standard English is depicted as fixed, consistent, and clear. For example, analyzing widely used books about teaching pronunciation, Tollefson (2000) found technical descriptions of an idealized version of Standard English, usually identified by terms that mask variability (e.g. *North American English*). Variability in English is acknowledged only narrowly, such as in general statements referring to British and American pronunciation. Completely ignored is the role of pronunciation in linguistic discrimination, and that the "target language" of many immigrants is a non-standard variety of English.

The belief in the fixity of Standard English entails what Cameron (1995) calls an "ideology of variation" that depicts variation as "deviant," the result of language users' "carelessness, idleness or incompetence" (p. 39). Indeed, grammar books,

dictionaries, and most ELT textbooks are instruments of standard language ideology: They present the illusion of a uniform target (standard) language, assuming, despite evidence to the contrary, that uniformity is the norm (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). In this sense, ELT is largely unaffected by sociolinguistics, as all sociolinguists agree that variation is normal, necessary, and intrinsic to all language varieties, including standard languages. In Labov's words: "heterogeneity is an integral part of the linguistic economy, necessary to satisfy the linguistic demands of everyday life" (1982, p. 17). As Lippi-Green (1997) shows, human beings recognize and exploit variation in order "to send a complex series of messages about ourselves and the way we position ourselves in the world" (p. 30). That is, individuals vary their language in order to mark social, geographical, and other forms of associations and identities. Despite its fundamental importance, variation is largely absent from teachers' guides, ELT textbooks, and prescriptions for methodology. One noteworthy result is that teachers may have an idealized notion of their own spoken language. For example, the deletion of the auxiliary *have* is typical in the informal speech of many speakers of Standard English (e.g. "I been playing all day"). Yet most ELT instructors insist that their students produce the full or contracted form, despite the fact that many of the teachers themselves no longer produce the form in many contexts.

The obsession with errors and error correction in ELT reflects a second key component of the ideology of variation: the widely held assumption that students' failure to learn is behind the non-standard forms that they produce. Indeed, the notion persists that learners can and should produce Standard English, despite overwhelming evidence that nearly all adult language learners produce non-standard forms of interlanguage, even after many years of instruction (see research on fossilization in interlanguage in Selinker, 1991). In other words, standard language ideology is manifest in the persistent belief that a realistic target for English language learners is some version of Standard English. Thus, for example, the teacher's *job* is to reduce learners' errors, and to thereby move language learners' speech closer and closer to the ideal standard. Viewed through the lens of standard language ideology, student output that differs from the ideal standard is an error and accepting these errors ultimately is bad teaching.

In research demonstrating the ideological nature of these beliefs, Peterson's (1998) study of the Vietnamese-American community in Portland, Oregon, found that language variation was a fundamental mechanism used within the community to express its complex social identities. In a powerful critique of standard language ideology (what he calls *linguistic monism*), Peterson documents the complexity of social identities in the community, in which a range of standard and non-standard varieties are linked with complex, shifting, and multidimensional identities. Particularly striking is the emergence of new varieties of Vietnamese-English. Though usually viewed by ELT professionals merely as collections of errors, in fact these varieties are not the result of failure to adequately learn Standard English. Rather, they are newly emerging varieties of language that are considered to be appropriate for particular uses within the Vietnamese-American community. Moreover, for many young people, an important target variety is African-American English rather than an upper-middle-class standard. Thus, the complex relationship between language variety and social identity means that learners within the Vietnamese-American community are constantly creating, learning, using, and managing a range of non-standard varieties. The suggestion that Standard English is

or should be the sole target language of this community reflects the simplistic and misleading assumptions of standard language ideology.

Other critical work on social identity also calls into question the key assumptions of standard language ideology. Norton (1997) argues that idealized visions of Standard English limit the “ownership” of English to white speakers of prestigious varieties of English. Leung, Harris, and Rampton (1997) argue that idealized notions of *native speaker* restrict employment opportunities for ethnolinguistic minorities in many professions, including ELT. Indeed, critical work has increasingly explored the ideological assumptions implicit in the concept of *native speaker* (Canagarajah, 1999).

The failure of ELT theory and practice to incorporate a notion of variation is particularly problematic because social and political agendas call ELT beliefs and practices into service (Stephan, 1999). In other words, social and political agendas, which allocate particular benefits and resources to different ethnolinguistic groups, exploit standard language ideology. One example in the United States is the use of standard language ideology to justify restrictions on language varieties other than Standard English in the public educational system. The exclusion of immigrants’ home languages, African-American vernacular English, and other stigmatized varieties of English is routinely justified by standard language ideology. For example, when the Oakland California School Board in 1996 proposed a new policy requiring teachers to take their students’ home language, African-American English, into account when teaching Standard English, there was a firestorm of protest that blocked this policy change (Baugh, 2000). Even this minimal effort to permit the schools to accommodate a stigmatized variety of American English was overwhelmed by the power of standard language ideology, which in this case was in the service of the social agenda of racism.

CURRENT DEBATES AND CONCERNS

Continuing critical work on ideology and language varieties in ELT focuses on four areas of concern. The first area is the relationship between language rights and medium of instruction. Critical work on language varieties in ELT has recently begun to explore widely held assumptions about the value of mother tongue education for ethnolinguistic minorities. Although many critical linguists support the right to education in the mother tongue (Phillipson, 2000), it is increasingly acknowledged that policies supporting mother tongue education can be part of strategies for maintaining the social, economic, and political advantages of dominant groups. Particularly important is analysis of language policies in South Africa, where mother tongue education was a key component of the apartheid system (Cluver, 1992), and more recently, mother tongue education has been constitutionally prescribed as part of a system to redistribute wealth and power (Blommaert, 1996; de Klerk, 2002). Thus, the impact of mother tongue promotion policies can vary significantly. In some instances, such policies are part of social and political agendas that have little to do with human rights, and instead are central to struggles for political power. (For detailed discussion of these issues, see Ricento, 2002.)

A second important area of current research is the economic and social value of standard varieties of English. Although standard language ideology entails an implicit belief in the value of learning Standard English, a growing body of research

suggests that one important variable determining the value of English is a pattern of linguistic discrimination. In research on the economic value of English in three Latino communities in the United States, García (1995) concluded that shifting to English offers no advantage for individuals, unless Spanish is viewed as a “suspicious” variety that “must be eradicated” (p. 156). In other words, only when the minority community faces systematic discrimination is it to the community’s advantage to shift to English. Obviously, the value of English will vary significantly from one context to another, but García’s research demonstrates that claims about the value of English need to be critically examined. In some contexts, learning English is valuable precisely because speakers of other varieties are subject to patterns of discriminatory exclusion in education and employment.

A third area of current concern is the critique of key concepts in ELT. Increasingly, scholars have begun to explore the implicit ideologies of such terms as *target language*, *native* and *nonnative speaker*, *Standard English*, *accent*, and *error*. Indeed, the term *English* itself deserves scrutiny, as its use in many contexts entails standard language ideology, including a denial of variation. Just as the term *nation* is understood to refer to an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983), the term *English* refers to an imagined, idealized construct (see Milroy & Milroy, 1985). Perhaps the most important area of research in this regard is the analysis of new varieties of English. Building on work by Kachru (1986, 1990), Lowenberg (1986), and Pride (1982), scholars have documented the diversity of new Englishes, as well as debates about the official status of new varieties (e.g. English in Singapore). One paradox of the spread of English as an international language is that it has become a “local” or “regional” language used for communication among speakers of languages other than English (e.g. in business in East Asia). As such, local use patterns become more common, regional varieties emerge, and American and British standards become less influential in ELT.

The fourth key area of concern is the link between language varieties in ELT and the processes of globalization. Indeed, language policies are increasingly affected by globalization. For example, global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have had major impact on language education in developing regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Mazrui, 2002). In many countries, programs of economic development include English language education (e.g. Vietnam, see Wright, 2002). Migration brought about by globalization (including economic migrants seeking employment, political refugees, and learners seeking training) is forcing changes in ELT policies in many contexts. Critical analyses of ELT and globalization continue to explore a range of topics, such as the institutions responsible for the spread of English internationally (Phillipson, 1992), the cultural politics of English as an international language (Pennycook, 1994), the dominance of British and American theories and practices in ELT (Canagarajah, 1999), and the loss of language diversity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While debates continue about appropriate medium of instruction policies in different ELT settings, wide agreement has been reached on two key points. First, acquisition of English in many contexts is crucial for educational and economic opportunities. Given ongoing discrimination against speakers of other languages, including stigmatized varieties of English, the ability to speak English is associated in many

settings with economic advantage. Yet, despite vast resources devoted to ELT worldwide, some groups have little access to effective English language instruction and therefore are cut off from its benefits. As different levels of access to English persist, English language proficiency (or lack of it) increasingly becomes a source of economic inequality. Therefore, a continuing concern of the ELT profession should be the question of access to English.

A second point of agreement is that maintaining the home language of many learners of English—particularly in immigrant communities—has enormous importance for individual and group identity. Research has shown that when learners shift to English monolingualism, there can be negative consequences for social identity and belonging (Fishman, 1991; Peterson, 1998). Thus, a central goal of medium of instruction policies should be to ensure maintenance of home languages and cultures, along with successful English language learning. Failure to adopt these dual goals will in many contexts increase the chance of economic inequality and sociopolitical conflict (see Tollefson, 2002). A central focus of the ELT profession should be to develop policies and programs that lead to both successful English learning and L1 maintenance.

In order to achieve this goal, it is helpful to examine programs that use English alongside learners' home languages. In recent years, methodologically sophisticated analyses of such programs have begun to accumulate. Particularly important is work by Cantoni (1996), Gegeo (1994), Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (1999, 2002), Kamana and Wilson (1996), McCarty (2002), Reyhner (1997), Roessel (1977), Watahomigie and McCarty (1994, 1996), Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1994, 1995), and Wilson (1998). These important studies examine a variety of programs that seek to integrate English language learning with L1 language and literacy. The success of these programs, not only in teaching language but also in helping to shape the broader social development of linguistic minority communities, demonstrates that complex medium of instruction policies can be adopted to ensure both effective English language instruction and L1 maintenance.

Yet a major barrier to adopting such policies persists: the continuing impact of standard language ideology upon medium of instruction debates. Indeed, research on medium of instruction has had remarkably little impact upon policy, particularly in the United States (McQuillan & Tse, 1996). For example, discussion of California Proposition 227 (the Unz Initiative to ban most bilingual education in the State) was carried out largely without regard to the overwhelming evidence showing the benefits of bilingual education. Similarly, in ELT, the popularity of English-only instruction is widespread, regardless of research demonstrating the value of bilingual approaches that include significant use of learners' first languages. In his analysis of the bilingual education debate in the United States, Cummins (1999) describes what he terms "the process of doublethink" (p. 13), in which public discourse on language is characterized by contradiction, inconsistency, and manipulation. After reviewing contradictions in the writings of prominent opponents of bilingual education (e.g. Baker, 1992; Porter, 1990), Cummins concludes that their success in generating heated opposition to bilingual education "represents a process of mobilizing public discourse in the service of coercive relations of power" (p. 16). From a similar perspective, Donahue (1995, 2002) examines the unprincipled public discourse of prominent supporters of constitutional amendments to declare English the official language in the United States. Donahue argues that "individuals seeking political leadership can promote emotional divisions, masking or diverting attention from

larger social problems” (2002, p. 137). English-only supporters “gain influence by crafting confusing and disputatious positions on such issues as...allegedly ‘common sense’ simplifications of educational policies” (p. 137). Both Cummins and Donahue call for a renewed focus on ethical issues in language policy, beginning with a concerted effort to undertake aggressive analysis of the ideological orientations of policy alternatives affecting medium of instruction. As long as standard language ideology continues to dominate the discourse of ELT, language policy, and the general public alike, research is likely to remain largely isolated from the policy making process. Therefore critical linguists have an ethical responsibility to identify and explore the underlying ideologies of alternative medium of instruction arguments, as well as the concrete economic, political, and social consequences of policy alternatives.

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