What is language and why does this matter to English teachers?

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Abstract

In this reflective article, we critically analyse two definitions of language (i.e., language as a tool for communication and as a cultural artefact) along with arguments associated with them used to legitimise the teaching of English as a foreign language. We focus on some of the problems these definitions pose both from an educational, and a linguistic and scientific perspective. After defining language as a biological capacity all human beings share, we explain what the relevance of this conception of language is in ELT, although it is observed that it is not exempt from problems either.
Keywords: English as a foreign language, communication, culture, biological capacity

Resumen

En este artículo reflexivo, analizamos críticamente dos definiciones del lenguaje (i.e., el lenguaje como instrumento de comunicación y como artefacto cultural) junto con una serie de argumentos asociados a ellas empleados para legitimar la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. Nos focalizamos en algunos de los problemas que presentan estas definiciones tanto desde una perspectiva educativa como de una lingüística y científica. Luego de definir el lenguaje como una capacidad biológica común a todos los seres humanos, explicamos la relevancia de esta concepción del lenguaje en el ámbito de la enseñanza de inglés, aunque se advierte que esta visión no está exenta de problemas tampoco.
Palabras clave: Inglés como lengua extranjera, comunicación, cultura, capacidad biológica

Introduction

The present reflective article stems from my experience as a teacher trainer and EFL educator. Among some students and colleagues, I have frequently observed certain conceptions of what language is associated with arguments that legitimise the teaching of English as a foreign language which I believe should be analysed under more careful scrutiny, as they might be problematic from an educational and theoretical perspective. These conceptions and their corresponding arguments are summarised below:

1) *Language is an instrument of communication.*
   Associated argument: English is a tool which will enable students to communicate in a wide range of contexts giving them ample opportunities.
2) *Language is a cultural artefact.*
   Associated argument: English is the means through which students will gain access to other cultures. .

In what follows, I will critically examine each of these views by focusing on some of the dangers that might arise from them. I will then move on to present arguments in favour of why the divergent view that language is a biological capacity all human beings share can circumvent some

of the dangers of the two conceptions outlined above, although it will be argued that this conception must be complemented with other views, as it is not exempt from problems either.

Language and communication

The idea that everyone should learn English so as to communicate effectively in a globalized world has become a well-established one. The definition of language as a tool for communication has been highly influenced by the Saussurean social conception of language and, above all, by communicative language teaching [CLT, henceforth]. This view pervades official documents, textbooks and curricula, and is wide currency not only in ELT but also in language teaching as a whole (see Bosque & Gallego, 2018; Arias, 2019; and references therein). While communication plays a major role in learning foreign languages and counts as a valid and inescapable goal in ELT, an instrumentalised view of language, which solely conceives of it as a tool for communication, can have some serious negative effects upon careful examination.

One of the main reasons why English is taught at an international scale is that it is a commodity or '*neutral* instrument' (Phillipson, 2008) which allegedly enables students to communicate with other people around the globe, consume a wide range of products (music, literature, papers, etc.), opening up ample employment, career and social opportunities by virtue of its symbolic value. While some might indeed benefit from this, it is worth pondering whether English actually boosts all students' career prospects. Is this not an objective most likely to be pursued by those in a more privileged position? Or, as Pennycook puts it (1994, p.12), does this functional conception of language not act "as a crucial gatekeeper for social and economic progress" by exacerbating power relationships and rendering professional domains more inaccessible?

The belief according to which English is a tool which facilitates international communication is closely linked to the fact that English is the official or dominant language in more than 98 states (Moreno Cabrera, 2016) and has become a language spoken by more than two billion speakers (Crystal, 2019), approximately 25% of the world population. As is well known, the spread of English was by no means accomplished peacefully but through imperial and supremacist policies of cultural and economic domination.

Considering that English is an international language that promotes communication and cooperation can be traced back to the myth of the Tower of Babel, according to which linguistic diversity is a divine punishment inflicted upon humankind. Moreno Cabrera (2015) observes there is a prospective variant of this myth, which presupposes in the near future all human beings will speak a universal language (English, most probably).

The first problem posed by this myth lies in the fact that it is detrimental to linguistic diversity, since it stimulates monolingualism and *market bilingualism*, i.e., speaking one's mother tongue and a hegemonic language like English because of its popularity in the market. Other types of bilingualism are not only discouraged but also downgraded (e.g., speaking Spanish and a non-hegemonic language such as Quichua). The existence of a global language then contributes to *linguistic complacency* (Crystal, 2003), for it leads many people to ponder why they should learn other languages if English enables them to communicate with almost anyone in the world. This lack of interest in other languages is present not only in English native speakers, but also in non-natives, who are discouraged from learning languages other than English, influenced by the demands of the market and the ubiquity of English in the educational system, both public and private.

Kramsch (1998) describes this as *the Babel threat*, which alludes to "the monopoly of one language over others" based on the "belief that people are working for a common cause just because they speak a common language" (p.77). Speaking the same language does not necessarily guarantee mutual understanding and cooperation, nor does speaking different languages entail chaos and disruption. Although English is promoted as an international language which is said to ensure communication, it is surprising that the variety used in almost all the ELT industry turns

out to be an artificial standard variety of English (RP or GBE), a variety for which there are no native speakers (Moreno Cabrera, 2016).[1]

One of the negative consequences of the instrumental definition of the English language is the invisibilisation of other languages. According to UNESCO, more than half of the 6,000 languages spoken on Earth are condemned to disappear within the next hundred years, a very short period of time in evolutionary and geological terms. In view of this alarming situation, it appears to be imperative for English teachers to be acquainted with the fact that the proliferation of English as an international language is not fortuitous let alone innocuous; it is in fact one of the contributors to language death/murder. Consider, for example, governments' allocation of resources to English, which is usually disproportionate and to the detriment of other minoritised languages which are actually spoken by native communities in their territories (e.g., Mapudungun in Argentina).[2]

Another of the effects of highlighting the instrumental value of English is the vast number of students interested in learning the language to enlarge their cultural capital, all of which inevitably results in an increasing demand of resources as well as in the mass production of teachers, courses and materials ready to meet the needs of the market. English is regulated according to the forces of capitalism and is therefore treated as a commodity, traded by English institutes, schools, the British Council, universities, among other institutions.

It should be noted, nonetheless, that the business of ELT is not equally profitable for all. The exploitation of the language is in the hands of big corporations, publishing houses, universities and state-funded institutions such as the British Council. The profits generated by exams, certificates, language courses, textbooks and other language-related materials are substantial enough to compare English to oil and regard it an invaluable and steady source of income for the imperial powers.[3]

Most importantly, the mass manufacturing of English caused by the *language-communication* equation often "encourages a technical approach to ELT, divorced even from the wider educational issues", in that it "permits the English language to be exported as a standard product without the requirements of the local market being considered except in a superficial way" (Phillipson, 1992, p.67). If English is a commodity which societies yearn for, students are treated on a par with consumers and customers who have to be made happy and whose needs have to be satisfied. One of the effects of treating students this way and of the internationalization of English as a standard product detached from learners' specific needs and rights is the banalization of the object of study, i.e., the English language, which ends up being merely *a tool* that students have to learn to *use* in the most enjoyable manner regardless of the socio-political context in which they are immersed.

The close relation between ELT and consumerism has to be framed within broader educational trends and approaches, such as mindfulness or social and emotional learning, which are concerned with fostering capitalist and neoliberal values (see Purser, 2019 for a critical analysis of these trends). Although these approaches permeate other subjects, ELT is especially receptive

[1] For this author, standard languages are artificial because they are learnt mostly at school, and not naturally at home. In every region, there is a distinctive variety with unique phonological and lexical properties, strikingly different from the ones found in the English textbooks. In this sense, proposals such as Jenkins' (2000) *Lingua Franca Core*, according to which ELT should revolve around those common features which are crucial for an intelligible communication in English, might avoid the problem observed by Moreno Cabrera, even though finding some kind of commonality among the so many diverse Englishes appears to pose a range of significant challenges to this homogenising solution.

[2] It must be observed that other hegemonic languages like Spanish also contribute to linguistic erasure.

[3] The figures provided by the British Council during the COVID pandemic (April, 2020) to require financial help from the state are quite revealing about this. According to the motion presented at the House of Commons, in 2019 the council generated "£125 million for UK exam bodies" and in the last financial year the income "exceeded £1.25 billion," all of which makes the Council a "vital British organization." https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/56852/future-of-the-british-council

to them insofar as there are teachers' associations which offer their members Mindfulness Special Interest Groups (SIGs).[4]

Language and culture

When I ask my Linguistics students at the teaching training college what language is, some of them often reply it is a cultural phenomenon. Even though it is evident that there exists a close relation between language and culture, these are fundamentally distinct phenomena. In this section, I will advance a number of arguments against a cultural conception of language, which will ultimately lead us to expose some of its risks in ELT.

Language teaching has often had a cultural dimension, foreign language education being conceived of as a gateway to other cultures and worldviews which contribute to the development of students' interculturalism (see Kramsch, 2017; Risager, 2006). According to the cultural conception of human language, languages are "similar to other basic human institutions and traditions like tool-making or agriculture; [they are] the product of human imagination and development: created by humans, taught by humans, and learned by humans" (Larson, 2010, p.5).

Why can the *language-culture* alliance turn out to be potentially dangerous in ELT? First of all, as Mare & Silva Garcés (2018) warn, the belief that a language is *par excellence* the cultural expression and identity of a people has led to the exaltation of certain linguistic qualities of a speech community and the subsequent demotion of other social groups, reinforcing the *myth* that there are certain languages which are more complex and evolved than others, and thus justifying the subjugation of other languages (and peoples) regarded as inferior. Under this logic, if language is a cultural artefact and certain cultures are believed to be better, then it follows that the languages spoken by those who are considered to be uneducated or 'backward' are less evolved than the languages spoken by those cultures that are prestigious and venerated, all of which, most readers would agree, is not correct.

While it might be true that certain cultures happen to be coveted by virtue of their historical heritage or quality of life, there is no scientific evidence to prove that certain languages are better than others. All human languages are governed by the same principles and display common properties which make them equally complex and rich.

Based on this cultural definition of language, English is frequently presented as "civilizing, noble, a vehicle of the entire developing human tradition, well adapted for change and development" (Phillipson, 1992, p.276) and superior to other languages. English then acquires a symbolic value and becomes a cultural sentry that reinforces the asymmetries between those who know this language and those who do not.

The idea that language is a cultural artefact constitutes the logic upon which the *verbal deprivation theory* rests. This theory orbits around the notions of cultural and biological deficit, and states that those people who come from underprivileged groups–such as poor people or aboriginal communities–speak primitive languages (see Labov, 1972). According to this view, there is a relationship between a person's cultural and social background and their means of verbal expression. Said theory might stimulate the misconception that in order to become more educated, one has to learn the language of mainstream culture, English occupying a central role in the cultural menagerie.

The *language-culture* alliance and the ensuing cultural dimension of ELT frequently ends up being the excuse–or the *Trojan horse*, to use Cooke's metaphor (1988)– through which certain Cultures, mostly British and American, are reproduced and put on a pedestal to the detriment of others. The association of English with these cultures can be observed in many current practices of ELT: (i) the excessive focus on British and American authors (Shakespeare, Poe, etc.); (ii) the

[4] The Association of Teachers of English from Buenos Aires (APIBA) is one of them: https://apiba.org.ar/nuestra-asociacion/actividades/sigs/item/872-mindfulness

pervasiveness of national symbols, landmarks and traditions in advertising, textbooks and resources to teach English, e.g., the Union Jack, the Big Ben or Halloween; (iii) the use of Standard British/American English in books and (international) examinations, which means that students are forced to learn the varieties of the culturally powerful countries and not others. These practices often reassert the supremacy of these cultures and breed anglophile attitudes amongst learners.

On another note, the *language-culture* alliance is often based on the questionable assumption that to learn something about a culture different from one's own, one has to learn its language. Notice, for instance, that it is perfectly possible to learn about mythology and democracy in Ancient Greece without knowing anything about Greek.

Even when a multicultural position is adopted, one which embraces the diverse small cultures of the English-speaking world, the cultural conception of language is inevitably faced with a number of questions and challenges: Which varieties should the target cultures be bound to? If English is spoken by more than two billion speakers, whose cultures should be prioritised? How is it possible for English teachers to cater for the hybridity, diversity and complexity of cultures? If there exists a multiplicity of cultures, each of which exhibits its own variety, why are lessons taught in only one or two standardised dialects (British/American)? Although multiculturalism contends that all languages and cultures are equal, in practice it appears to be the case that some languages and cultures are more equal than others.

Language as a biological faculty

Until the 1960s, the idea that language was an array of habits or some kind of verbal behaviour was widely extended among scholars considerably influenced by behaviourists such as Skinner and Bloomfield. As is well known, it was Chomsky who challenged such a view by positing that language is not external to the mind nor a cultural artefact but rather a biological, internal faculty all human beings share (see 1965, and subsequent work). According to the Innateness Hypothesis, human beings are equipped with an innate language faculty–also known as *Universal Grammar* (UG)–that enables them to 'develop' a language, as long as they are exposed to it. Although formal instruction is required in ELT, learning English rests upon this more general capacity, which means that without it, it would become an impossible task.[5]

Drawing an analogy between language and other natural objects such as our hair or skin can cast light on the claim that language is a biological phenomenon different from culture. While it is possible for us to assert that our hair and skin colour might acquire social meanings by virtue of their interaction with cultural and historical systems, they are still an integral part of our nature. Certainly, the complex interplay between culture and skin, as an organ, and hair, as its derivative, can be studied from a social perspective. For instance, an anthropologist can explore how braid patterns are used in a specific community to indicate a person's age or religion, whereas a sociologist can study how different skin colours are associated with certain beliefs within racist societies. Likewise, a sociolinguist can study how language is used to reflect certain social variables, such as a speaker's education, gender identity or social class. That all these studies make valuable contributions to our understanding of human culture and to ELT is not to be questioned. Our concern is that the biological perspective is often *disregarded* by some language professionals, in spite of the evidence in favour of it and its relevance.

But what is the relevance of this conception of language, then? Let me summarise some of the reasons why I think it is important to be acquainted with it below:

[5] Notice that the two definitions of language discussed in the previous sections (language as a tool for communication and as a cultural artefact) adopt an externalist view of language, according to which language is said to belong to society. It is indeed possible to define language***s*** as something external, such as the English language as a whole, with its thousands of words and history, as the collection of utterances produced by a speech community. However, the existence of 'languages' depends on an internal cognitive capacity (UG or the language faculty).

a. If all languages and their varieties (e.g., Nigerian English, British English, and even the variety of English spoken by our students) are the result of a universal capacity and obey to the principles of UG regardless of the speakers' sociocultural background, ethnicity, etc., then the belief that certain languages (especially the ones spoken by those in power) are superior or more evolved than others is to be nullified. This in turn allows us to question the ensuing linguistic discrimination and inequality reproduced by some of the views in ELT that associate language with culture. The varieties spoken by our students and by native speakers of English stand on equal grounds then; they are different in the same way as two dogs are superficially different despite belonging to the same species. Just as no veterinarian would ever claim that a Labrador is better than a mongrel, no applied linguist should regard a variety of English–British English, for example– as superior to others.

b. Under this perspective, the Englishes spoken by our students respond to principles of UG and are a by-product of the language faculty. This ultimately means that the grammar mistakes they make are not illogical but most of the times in close connection with the languages they already know. In this sense, as pointed out by Chomsky (2016), when we learn a foreign language, we do not need to learn the semantics nor the principles of formation of sentences. For instance, when we explain the meaning of the word *chair,* what we are actually doing is teaching the pronunciation or the written representation (the signifier) of the meaning or concept (the signified) the student has already acquired when developing their L1. Learning a foreign language then comprises learning about the pronunciation, the Saussurean arbitrariness of the lexicon, the morphological paradigms, the word order; that is, the 'superficial' aspects of the language under study.
   Regarding the mistakes students make, most of the times they turn out to be of a phonological nature. When students, for example, say '*He sleep',* they know that they are assembling the root SLEEP and its corresponding meaning with a number of syntactic-semantic features: [masculine], [3rd person], [singular], [present]. What students sometimes fail to do is associate those features with the phoneme /s/, spelling them out as ø, as is the case with the rest of the non-third person singular pronouns.[6] Under this view, the apparent variety and mutability of language, which is attested in the so many diverse Englishes spoken by our students and the more than 6,000 languages spoken throughout the globe, are superficial, a reflex of the way the language faculty located in the brain is pronounced/externalised and an epi-phenomenon of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs.

c. Since all our students are grammatical geniuses of their mother tongue(s) irrespective of their class, education, culture, etc., it is possible for teachers to exploit their language proficiency in the learning process and draw comparisons with English. Our students' knowledge of their L1, albeit tacit, is incredibly rich and vast in scope but this is disregarded in ELT textbooks, which do not frequently make reference to their L1 due to the fact that they are designed in view of a homogenous international student whose needs are not usually considered, fuelled by the global-scale demands of the market, which is in the hands of a few publishing houses that appear to conceive of English only from a commercial perspective.

d. As proposed by Bosque & Gallego (2018), if language is a *faculty* and not a cultural artefact or tool for communication, it becomes an inherent capacity all students share, something that belongs to them. Therefore, it is not to be *acquired* as we learn a prayer or the constitution by heart; language is to be *developed*. Given the appropriate conditions, which when it comes to foreign languages range from motivation to quality of instruction, languages should blossom and grow. This conception definitely empowers students from a cognitive and linguistic perspective, recapturing the etymology of the word *education*[7]. Under this view,

[6] Technically speaking, this is known as the *Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis* (Prévost & White, 2000).

[7] I am referring to one of the Latin terms the word *education* is said to be derived from, i.e., *educere* ('to lead out') and not *educare* ('to train, mold').

when students study something about English, they are not learning something alien to them but something about themselves, something about their human nature. Bosque & Gallego (2018) observe that this conception contrasts with the pervasive view which presents language as something *external*, as if it were a penknife our students have to know to use, rather than as an object of study through and with which something can be discovered. Even though communication plays an important role in the process of learning a language and there are numerous benefits of having a lingua franca, one natural consequence of the instrumental perspective is that, if language is just a code or a set of conventions our students have to learn, there is very little room for discovery and learning the language basically equates to incorporating that code and employing it effectively in different contexts.

e. The conception of language as a natural capacity implies detaching oneself from the study of English just as a tool for communication. As language is internal and need not always be used to communicate, we can study it to embark on a scientific journey of discovery where its properties are explored. According to this non-utilitarian conception of education, English can become a means to reflect upon language and learn something about this cognitive capacity essentially unique to our species, based on the assumption that learning something about language can be an activity interesting in itself with potential heuristic value. The biological conception of human language is in tune with an inquiring perspective to learning, one which invites students to ask themselves why things are the way they are and encourages them to find an answer to their questions (see Chomsky & Gallego, 2020; Bosque & Gallego, 2018; Arias, 2019; etc.).

Now, is this perspective devoid of dangers? Absolutely not. Conceiving of language uniquely as a biological faculty might also lead educators to sever English from the socio-political contexts in which it is used and pay excessive attention to the formal and grammatical aspects of the foreign language under study. Despite being a biological faculty, language can and *should* be studied in connection with politics, discrimination, imperialism, power, language death, among other socio-political issues. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is by implementing a counter-cultural, decolonial and critical approach, one which revolves around those cultures which have been historically marginalised by the engines of power and which addresses the *darker side of applied linguistics* (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020), that is, the profound ties of colonial and neo-colonial projects to ELT. This entails encouraging our students to question the *status quo* as well as delving into socially relevant and countercultural projects.

Conclusions

In these pages, we have endeavoured to demonstrate that equating language with a cultural artefact and an instrument of communication can be potentially problematic in education, as, for example, an analysis of language in these terms might sustain the commodification and banalization of English as well as reinforce linguistic myths or misrepresentations (e.g., some languages and cultures are better than others). We have claimed that a biological conception of language, according to which all languages stand on the same platform, can provide the applied linguist with a solid argumentation against linguistic discrimination and inequity.

Given its multi-facetted nature, it is indeed possible to regard language as a natural object, while still studying it in relation to culture, communication, art, politics and the world. As Chomsky (2018) suggests, just as human biology is a core part of anthropology, history, the arts, and in fact any aspect of human life, so the biolinguistics approach belongs to the social sciences and humanities. However, we agree with Cook (1985) that Chomsky's theory of UG is not to be regarded as *uniquely* important for L2 learning, but as "an alternative that applied linguists should evaluate for themselves rather than reject out of hand" (p.16).

The lack of acknowledgement of a biological definition of language has to be framed within dominant trends in the social sciences which assert that the innate principles of biology play no

role whatsoever in our understanding of human behaviour, as if individuals were blank slates moulded only by the forces of culture and socialisation (see Pinker, 2003). The discussion held in this article has tried to demonstrate that this denial of our human nature is not innocent at all, inasmuch as the strong alliance between language, culture and communication is more often than not used as an alibi to spread the ideologies of those in power.

As Chomsky and Gallego (2020) observe, the biological perspective is by no means incompatible with others. Since language is a complex phenomenon intersected by social, political and artistic dimensions, it becomes crucial to study it from different angles, which include studying it in relation to literature and art as well as as a means of communication and artistic creation. These views, they argue, turn out to be limited in scope, though, and should hence be complemented with the biological dimension discussed in this article, which is equally important but barely explored in the basic levels of education.

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