

Effects of Imperialism and Cultural Hegemony on Learners of English as a Second or Foreign Language

Nadia Rahman*

Abstract: Imperialism and hegemony are very much related terms when we talk about second or foreign language acquisition. Culture also plays an important role in language learning. So, all these come into consideration to determine the learners' level and pace of proficiency. This paper will try to find out whether learning English as a second or foreign language gets affected by imperialism and cultural hegemony, and the kind of affect it has on Bangladeshi learners.

Learning English as a foreign or second language has always been a difficult task for the learners. The difficulty lies with the interference of mother tongue, cultural conflict, the learning materials, method of learning, etc. Interference results from the fact that old habits (the first language) must be unlearned before new habits (the second language) can be mastered (Dulay and Burt, 1982). The important question is whether in learning a second or foreign language a person inevitably uses first language or not and whether error results from the interference of the first language. When we teach a foreign language, we see that learners tend to use their first language whenever they come across any hurdles. Also they take native speakers as idealized model for achieving the proficiency when they want to learn something which is foreign to them. To accelerate the learning process, they rely a lot on the foreign materials at hand, i.e. books written by foreign authors or audio visual materials with foreign contexts. The materials seem difficult when they are hard to understand or identify with. Especially at the higher secondary and undergraduate level, the books that Bangladeshi learners find are all written by English, American or non-English writers producing English text books. The learners always think that these books are far more superior to our own. The imperialist power has left us more than half a century ago, but the impact is long lasting and we are still under the influence of it even under a sovereign sky. As a teacher of English Language at the undergraduate level for more than seven years, I have seen how students struggle with these foreign materials and still prefer it as medium of learning. Here I feel that English Language being at the top in the language hierarchy and language imperialism is responsible for instilling this driving force in the learners. This

* Nadia Rahman, Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), Dhaka.

paper will focus on the effects of imperialism in language learning on the Bangladeshi learners.

English is today the world's most widely studied foreign/second language. It is the dominant international language in science and technology, business, entertainment, diplomacy and communication. This language is learnt by millions of people around the world and with its global status growing every day, it is gradually being established as an international language in many countries. The spread of English started around the time of the British Colonial Empire which established English as lingua franca among the people they colonized. When they came to colonize these areas, the language that they brought with them, i.e., English, cast its spell centuries ago and is still influencing us. We are not only awed by their presence but also so much influenced by it that we fail to see whether the things taught by them are really necessary and can be implemented in the current education system or not. Hence we find foreign language trainers or instructors coming from Europe or America trying to teach us methods and materials with which our language teachers and students are unfamiliar and find it strange to work with. As a result, in the class room, both the participants and teachers get uncomfortable in the process and teaching and learning is affected. Alarmed by these kinds of effects, certain countries have made it mandatory to use native material in classrooms. But still in our countries, we hardly come across any educational institution which has a large stock of Bangladeshi writers' books! Is it because of linguistic imperialism and cultural hegemony? Both these terms are connected as linguistic imperialism shaped itself out of political hegemony, which maybe the means of establishing a particular country as the universal superpower in the world.

Before we know how political hegemony is related to linguistic imperialism, it is important to understand the very term linguistic imperialism. English language has become a universal language and is being spread all over the world. More and more countries are accepting it as either as a foreign language or as the second language by choice or force which in turn is increasing the acceptability of this language as being on the top of the language hierarchy. It is necessary to look into the definition of linguistic imperialism to decide whether English language is spread to other countries because of linguistic imperialism. It is as defined by Phillipson: "a theoretical construct, devised to account for linguistic hierarchisation, to address issues of why some languages come to be used more and others less, what structures and ideologies come to be used more and others less, what structures and ideologies facilitate such processes, and the role of language professionals." (238-239) Phillipson further employs the term linguistic imperialism to scrutinize how a language can give access to power legally within a society and sometimes control cultural, economic and political activities. As a result, a country that welcomes the imperial language to be established as second or foreign language within that country, in a way helps to establish that as the

dominant language, which starts to control the habits, values, behavior of the people with beautiful, attractive, easy way of life. This gradually results in a thorough change in economic and sometimes political activities in the country. It is not that the imperial power comes and takes a country's sovereignty, rather the country in question willfully accepts that dominance of the imperial power as they feel helpless or inferior compared to the imperialists. They think their culture, value, behavior, and language is less sophisticated and difficult to follow.

In the linguistic hierarchy, language that dominates or as Phillipson says 'the linguistic power' ensures hegemonic dominance. To spread this dominance, language transfer, or in Knowles's term, transfer of 'dominant languages' to other countries occurs and with it cultures are spread. The imperial power has left us but they have left behind their culture which they established during the colonial period as symbol of high class aristocracy and created class differentiation. This class distinction is determined with the aristocratic section with good command of the foreign language being at the top. Now, these cultures can be accepted by the people of those countries because of the "high status, perceived beauty and linguistic dominance it enjoys in relation to the minority group language." (Holmes, 64) That means people willfully accept the imperial language's culture to increase their status within the society. The imperial language's cultural spirit gets subtly filtered into the learners' minds so that they begin to think the English culture as the most sophisticated one and must be attained. As a result, the desire to achieve native-like pronunciation, style and fluency becomes much more important than learning the language for practical use. The learners in their eagerness to gain native-like proficiency prefer institutions that guarantee proficiency within a very short time, which actually teach them heavily accented but mutilated language. As we find in Bangladesh, there are various institutions that guarantee to make learners proficient in English within four months which is quite impossible to achieve! The only thing that they learn is a few heavily accented words which they try to use everywhere without even understanding their meaning sometimes. Whereas the other South Asian countries have recuperated or transcended out of it, we are still under the influence of it. That's why we still feel awed when taught by a foreign language instructor and follow books which have strange names and strange situations. The students do not know whether Stanton is a male or female name, whether lasagna is a food or a place's name and ask whether corduroy is a person!

However, the question is not whether learners should observe native linguistic patterns but whether they should adopt every behavior and attitude of native speakers while they learn the foreign language. The learners should rather represent their values, culture, beliefs to the global community. It is very important that language teachers try to understand the culture, the comprehension level of the learners and modulate their language materials accordingly. In my language classes I have seen that learners learn faster when books and contexts

match with their surroundings and also when they can identify themselves with the situations described in the materials that they are using in their class and later can do similar activities by themselves. But that doesn't mean that it should only reflect countryside situations that we find represented in the books of secondary level, rather cities, small town, sea ports areas, all should get a place. Students find it strange when they listen to audio tapes describing different workplaces like twenty four hours super market, call center, chemists, because we do not have such things in our country. We have to select situations from those tapes that learners will understand. Otherwise, they remain busy finding the meaning of those strange, unfamiliar words instead of completing the listening practice. We still have to rely a lot on these foreign audio visual materials as we do not have sufficient locally developed materials to use in all the levels.

Now the question is, while learning the language why do we want to be carbon copy of the native speakers? As language is the means of communication with the outside world, foreign language learners want to master it with native like proficiency to communicate with the English native speakers. Countries like Bangladesh need to learn the language for matters like education, politics, or economy. Here native like pronunciation or adopting the cultural notions of their culture is not important. As mentioned earlier, language learners want to achieve proficiency by following materials produced by the target language's native speakers. As a result, when they do exercise or practice from those materials, first of all, they fail to understand the activities. For an example, in a language class at undergraduate level, when students were asked to correct the fragment sentence, "While searching for salad croutons," they did not understand the food item as they were unfamiliar with the name. Same thing happened when they were confronted with strange words like senior prom, Azax cleanser or names like Joanne, Dennis, or Jose, or pastime activities like baseball, rugby, water polo, or drinks like red bull, champagne. Still they prefer materials which have these kinds of foreign names or situations. In the reference book section, they become happy if they see more books written by British or American author. Even they tend to follow English culture, food habit, clothes which result in their dissociation with their own culture. This germinates a kind of less interest for locally developed language material, which is correctly reviewed by Bisong who explains how English deters the development of the native culture: "Through deliberate contrivance, successfully displaced, or replaced some of the indigenous languages of these countries. The dominance of English has also resulted in the imposition of the Anglo-Saxon Judeo-Christian culture that goes with it so that indigenous cultures have been undervalued and marginalized" (123).

This leads us finally to see the connection between political hegemony and linguistic imperialism. As imperialism means the rule of the empire, hegemony supports this idea and wants to establish itself as the ruling empire. Language

hegemony then can be termed as maintaining the language in question as dominant language and imposing values, beliefs of the same language on learners. Furthermore, it also means that they have to accept these as undoubted truth and have no choice of ignoring them. The result will be, learners will be passive, because they will be only receiving these and will not be able to use this knowledge to interact within their own culture. It deserves notice that there are countries or nations that voluntarily try to learn foreign languages, especially English, to fulfill their own objectives and maintain a better global relationship. For an example, in India English is used widely by people because it is a multilingual nation. But they do not try to adopt British or American English, or solely rely on books written by American or British authors or retain their (L1) culture. Rather they use the language with their own accent to communicate because they want to be understood first and use locally written books which reflect their own culture. Thus they preserve individualism of their nation. But what are we doing? We are blindly following books, getting zero understanding of the language as we neither understand the context nor the content. The result is poorer acquisition of the knowledge of the language and lesser ability to communicate. As a last resort, we incline towards the Indian authors as the situations and vocabulary used in their books are far more familiar and easier to identify with.

Why do we have this tendency of selecting the British or the Americans as model of foreign language? In answer to this question we can refer to Phillipson's finding a connection between Anglocentrism and linguistic imperialism. Anglocentrism means to view the world from Anglo-American perspective and to establish their culture in an eminent position. That's what English language learning has turned into, a way of establishing Anglo-American culture in the whole world. So, we see that Anglocentrism promotes English language learning and continues the hegemony and linguistic imperialism. According to Phillipson, "The title linguistic imperialism refers to a particular theory for analyzing relations between dominant and dominated cultures, and specifically the way English language learning has been promoted." (15) But the assumption that all native English speakers are the most intelligible speakers of English has been questioned. Smith and Rafiqzad's empirical study of the role of native speaker's phonology found that English native speakers' phonology is not always better than the non native's ones. They concluded, ". . . since native speaker phonology does not appear to be more intelligible than nonnative phonology, there seems to be no reason to insist that the performance target in the English classroom be a native speaker" (57). So there is no reason to think that English speaking nations have the ideal culture and phonology which should be always followed. This is also acknowledged by Widdowson whose study shows that sometimes the English native speakers have to be instructed formally to properly use standard or correct English. He notes, "The majority of those who are to the language born,

speak nonstandard English and have themselves to be instructed in the standard at school" (397). With its global extension throughout the world, English is no longer considered as a property belonging to its native speakers. According to Shaw "English is no longer the language of its originators. It has become a property of the world" (21). As English is a universal language of communication, it has the status of being an international language. So no nation or country has controlling power over the language. As Widdowson further asserts, "the very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it. To grant such custody of the language, is seemingly to arrest its development and so undermine its international status" (385). Moreover, when a language becomes international, it cannot remain bound to any single culture. Rather the language itself becomes a medium of communicating different kinds of cultures.

Knowing the language well will ensure better representation of one's culture to the outside world. It will also ascertain more exposure to international situations and better communication. Here learning the foreign language's culture will not help us to use English well. The main emphasis should be on learning the language itself and actively acquire it to suit purposes that are not decided upon by the imperialist culture. We should use contexts relevant to the society, culture and values of our country. That does not mean we will not read or accept foreign language materials. We will study it to expand our knowledge, to train ourselves, but will not blindly follow or copy it. We are using local materials and having success stories, as for example, BBC Janala's English learning materials have become very popular as it uses local contexts and characters. If we can develop more materials like these and use them in the classroom, it will be very useful for both the learners and teachers. Learners should take care not be drawn into the hegemonic ambition of English language. Here brainstorming for local materials by the teachers for all the four skills, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and learning, and implementing them in our learning activities are very important. Both learners and teachers of English are integral part of it because if the concerned parties do not come forward to accept and bring this change, the scenario of hegemonic dominance and imperialism will continue. The acceptance should be from both the sides. Only then we can bring the change in the English learning situation without sacrificing our culture or bowing to foreign ones. There is actually no gain in being something which is strange to us. So we should preserve our culture, be proud of it and let the outside world know how rich we are.

Works Cited

- Bisong, Joseph. "Language Choice and Cultural Imperialism: a Nigerian Perspective." *ELT Journal*. Vol. 49, Issue 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Dulay H, Burt M, Krashen S. *Language Two*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

- Holmes, J. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Second Edition, Longman: Harlow, 2001.
- Kennedy, C., Knowles, M., Caldas-Coulthard, C. R., Coulthard, M. *Sociolinguistics*. The University of Birmingham, Centre for English Language Studies, Department of English, Birmingham, 2001.
- Phillipson, Robert. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Philipson Robert. "Realities and Myths of Linguistic Imperialism". *Journal of MultiLingual and Multicultural Development*. Vol 18, Issue 3. August 7, 2011. <<http://www.multilingualmatters.net/jmmd/018/0238/jmmd0180238.pdf#search=phillipson%20linguistic%20imperialism>>
- Shaw, W.D. "Asian Students attitudes towards English" In Larry E. Smith (Ed.) *Readings in English as an International Language*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1983.
- Smith, Larry E. (Ed.). *English for Cross-Cultural Communication*. London. Macmillan, 1981.
- Smith, Larry. E. & Khalilullah Rafiqzad. "English for Cross-Cultural Communication: the Question of Intelligibility". In L. Smith (Ed.) *Readings in English as an International Language*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1979.
- Widdowson, Henry G. "The ownership of English". *TESOL Quarterly*. 28/2, 1994. 28 August, 2010. <<http://ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/tesol/tesolquarterly/lucas.htm>>



Rabindranath Tagore with his family.