

The Power of English and the Learner

Diane Diamond, Private ELT Consultant¹

English as a foreign language carries with it an historical and cultural weight that make it unique among subjects. This article will attempt to show the importance of English as a world language and describe how its global significance can play a role in the attitudes that students carry into the classroom. Cultures around the world are having English superimposed upon their own languages. Sometimes this is happening officially through governments, educational institutions or corporations, and other times it is happening unofficially through business and pop culture.

Global domination of English is particularly amazing to contemplate when one realizes that over two thousand years ago when Julius Ceasar landed in Britain, English did not even exist. Yet today three quarters of the world's mail, telex, cables (and email) are in English, as is eighty percent of the computer information. (Cran 1992: 1) The 1998 Olympics may have taken place in Nagano, Japan, but the official language was English. Many other organizations have adopted English as their official language. The World Council of Churches has (Cran: 2) as have capitalistic enterprises such as Nestle Foods and Swatch of Switzerland and Phillips Electronics of the Netherlands. The German-language magazine Stern carries Swatch advertisements which are totally in English, and Japanese automakers use English loan words for naming and marketing their products. (Crystal 1995: 114) Even the United Nations which is supposed to represent all the world's cultures uses English for official statements. For example, when the Voyager One space probe was launched on September 5, 1977, the head of the UN sent this message, "As the Secretary-General of the UN...an organization of 147 member states who represent almost all of the human inhabitants of the planet Earth, I send greetings of behalf of the people of our planet..." (Cran: 21) Yes, English is even going beyond the limits of where it is being spoken in other countries and is reaching into outer space!

Many non-English speaking cultures feel as if they are struggling to maintain their own identities against the ground swell of English. According to Canadian statistics, the percentage of Canadian population speaking French at home has gone from 25.7% in 1971 to 22.6% in 1996. (Wall Street Journal 2.26.1998) Francophone countries have been trying to pass laws to preserve the integrity of their own language, but they cannot stop the sweeping tide of English. In the Netherlands and Belgium, Dutch speaking linguists are compiling a CD-ROM containing millions of words and phrases of spoken Dutch. The goal of this five-year project is to incorporate Dutch into technology, thereby reducing the encroachment of English. (Mexico City Times 3.12.98)

Languages as living, changing systems have always assimilated words from other cultures and have lost many of their own words. Darwin recognized that languages are forming and developing gradually over time, "Dominant languages and

¹ The author can be reached in Santa Cruz #13, Barreo de la Aldea, San Miguel de Allende, 37700 Gto. Phone: 415-28015 e-mail: ddiamond@unisono.net.mx

dialects spread widely, and lead to the gradual extinction of other tongues. A language, like a species, when extinct, never...reappears." (Pinker 1994: 241) Linguists predict that up to 5,000 languages will become moribund in the next century. The minutely slow loss of a language or species is a natural process, but many experts are concerned about the extremely rapid pace in which extinction is now occurring in animal forms and in cultures.

The heavy growth of English as a world language continues to spread no matter how much non-English speaking cultures try to fight it. No longer do gunboats and swords spread the ubiquitous use of English. Instead, English is now spread through more subtle but very pervasive means, for today English travels around the world making its presence felt through marketing, technology, management theory, communications and pop culture. The 1990's leader in American publishing is Bertelsmann AG, which is based in Guetersloh, Germany. Venerable names in US publishing such as Bantam Doubleday Dell (BDD) and Random House are owned by the German media giant. Bertelsmann chief executive officer, Thomas Middelhoff, went to the US last year to learn English and study US publishing methods. (Time 4.6.1998)

Anyone round the world wanting a career in shipping, aviation, computer science or international business is wise to become proficient in English. For instance, most of the world's shipping channels and airports use English to guide traffic. On the job, increasing numbers of employees in non-English speaking countries are required to master enough English to read reports, speak with customers, and correspond with clients.

University students realize that it is no longer sufficient to have a degree in law, business, or engineering, for they must study for their professional discipline plus English. The fact is that many multinational corporations will not hire employees who do not have excellent command of the English language.

Especially the realm of pop-culture is loaded with English. US films are supplanting the local industry the world over, and since the 60's, British and American rock music have been world trendsetters. In the 1980's, the Swedish rock group ABBA wrote and recorded every number in English. Many German rock groups sing at least part of their numbers in English, for British and American groups have been setting the standard, and that is what they have become accustomed to hearing. The movie review section in the Mexico City newspaper *Reforma* on April 16, 1998, summarized nineteen films appropriate for adolescents and adults. Of these pictures, three were in Spanish, one was in French, and all the rest, English speaking. In the huge metropolitan Mexico City area, English language films were showing on 267 screens and Spanish on 31. The great majority of viewers would be reading Spanish subtitles as they watched the films, but it would be the melody of the English language that they heard. Mexican television tells a similar story since movies and cable programs can bring hours of English programming directly into a viewer's home.

The fact is that English is spoken today by perhaps a billion people, two-thirds of whom learn it as a second language. (Crawford 1991: 163) Many of the students of English are happily adding a rich second layer of language and culture into their lives, but other may worry about what the French have called "Coca-colonialism," the spread of American values through global business. (Cran:13) All over the world, cultures raise concern about being smothered by American values. For centuries, Mexicans have

been celebrating their own fall festival, "The Day of the Dead," but recently on October 31, children have been donning costumes, ringing doorbells and crying out, "Me da me halloween." Sometimes the US is blamed for being a cultural imperialist as it imparts its marketing of fashion, music, film and literature upon other nations.

Teachers should be aware of English as a powerful force because it can play an important role in students' motivation. Intuitively learners realize that a foreign language is more than words and grammar but also a world of culture. "Language is the primary vehicle by which a culture transmits its beliefs, values, norms, and world view." (Porter 1994:16)

When Mexicans are watching an English-language film, they are being transported for that time into an English-speaking culture. Students enthusiastic about pop culture may be highly motivated to learn English as a foreign language. The more they learn, they greater will be their access to rock, jazz, film and fashion. Business success may be predicated on English competency and, therefore, can also help motivate the learner.

However, not all learners may be enthusiastic about English speaking cultures. We need to evaluate what attitudes our students are bringing into the classroom. While some students may embrace English in their lives and see the language as an expansion of their possibilities and world view, others could resent the intrusion of English into their own culture. Educators are increasingly realizing that "at the heart of all thought and meaning and action is emotion....Your self-identity is inextricably bound up with your language and ego development." (Brown 1994:61-63) Being required to learn the language of a more dominant culture could affect the self-esteem of some students; therefore, it may be helpful for us teachers to gather feedback about their sentiments. Common ways of drawing out students' feelings are through talkback circles, journals and surveys.

Naturally the students will only be willing to give their opinions in an atmosphere of trust. Intermediate and advanced students will have the vocabulary to describe their feelings. I help along beginners by drawing cartoons of faces which are happy, sad, angry, etc. and help them that way to acquire a basic vocabulary of emotions. It is not uncommon for teachers with proficiency in the students' first language to permit its use during feedback. Some instructors choose to have their talkback circles or journal writing at regular intervals so that the students become comfortable with the process. Presently at the Universidad del Valle de Mexico's San Miguel de Allende campus, we are working on a written survey to understand why some students resist signing up for required English courses.

The spread of English will continue to give teachers of the language worldwide employment opportunities, but we English-language educators need to ply our trade with awareness and sensitivity. Throughout history there has been cross-fertilization of language and culture, but it has never come without an emotional price. When the student's cup is full of positive attitudes and experiences, teaching is easy. When that cup is brimming with negatives, it needs to be replaced with affirmative experiences.

Probably we English teachers need to remain aware of students' attitudes toward this dominant language in order for barriers to be minimized and to make learning successful. I look forward to gathering and pooling information with colleagues as to whether a number of our students find English an invasion into their lives. I think

this could be an especially important concern in Mexico with its superpower English-speaking neighbor. A foreign language well learned is a window into a new world of literature, philosophy, and social interaction. Subtle nuances can be comprehended, and a different culture can be understood in a deeper, more meaningful way. Perhaps by accepting and acknowledging student sentiment toward English, we language teachers can embrace the realities of English as a powerful world language.

References

Brown, H. D. (1994). Principles of Language Learning and Teaching. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Chipello, C. (February 26, 1998). *Francophones Struggle Outside of Quebec*. Wall Street Journal.

Cran W, MacNeil R. & McCrum R. (1992). The Story of English. New York: Penguin Books.

Crawford, J. (1991). Bilingual Education: History Politics, Theory & Practice. Los Angeles: Bilingual Educational Services, Inc.

Crystal, D. (1995). The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lockhart, C. & Richards, J. C. (1994). Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms. New York : Cambridge University Press.

Mansfield, L. (March 12, 1998). *Dutch CD-ROM Aims to Curb Infiltration of English Language*. The Mexico City Times.

Perlman, S. (April 6, 1998). *The Book on Bertelsmann*. Time.

Pinker, S. (1994). The Language Instinct. New York: Harper Perennial.