FORUM

English and a World of Diversities: Confrontation, Appropriation, Awareness

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Karmani (2005) and Kabel (2007) raise various issues on the role of English in global social and political contexts. While I am in agreement with Karmani’s call for language educators to be more sharply aware of certain beliefs about the role of English in the world, I argue that the challenges debated by the authors are not exclusively about English against Islam but more broadly about language. I also argue that English as a language in itself can hardly be viewed as inherently defected, but rather, centrally at stake are the configurations of English language education. Revisiting the role of human agency and subjectivity as a proposed force for counterbalancing linguistic manipulation, I argue that a pedagogy of linguistic possibility which allows for language learning experiences of honesty and awareness, may help the world of diverse communities avoid confrontations as well as stay away from false promises of hybridity.

O, tongue! You are the eternal treasure
O, tongue! You are the endless dread
Mowlana (Rumi), Mathnawi Ma’nawi, Daftar One, Line 1702.

I found the discussions in earlier Forum articles by Sohail Karmani (2005) and Ahmed Kabel (2007) very important and deeply challenging. The need for a dialogue on the role of language in general and English in particular in global social and political contexts has already been raised (e.g. Kachru 1986; Phillipson 1992; Pennycook 1994, 1998, 2006), although it remains under-represented in major scenes of applied linguistics. I share Karmani’s concern over the marginalization of such cultural, social, and political considerations of language and their ‘alarming absence from the mainstream literature of applied linguistics’ (2005: 262). Therefore, the very emergence of these discussions offers a promising prospect for bursting the bounds of atomistic, decontextualized, and fragmented views of language and for placing applied language studies firmly in their social contexts. In my own contribution to this dialogue, I seek to expand on the concerns addressed by Karmani and Kabel, especially the position of language and languages, including English, in the world today.
I agree with Karmani’s portrayal of three interrelated beliefs about the purported role of English in the current world (dis)order, governed as it is by the ‘war on terror’:

First is the highly dubious belief that Muslim languages—in particular Arabic—are in some way inherently programmed to promote a militant Islamic mindset. … Second is the classic triumphalist belief that English…is exclusively endowed to promote the values of freedom, democracy, justice, openness, tolerance, decency, and so forth. … Third is the core driving belief that a certain dosage of teaching English can supposedly help suppress a latent radical Islamic disposition. (Karmani 2005: 264–5)

In addition, I raise two further concerns about the place of English in the world today, which the two authors do not explore. First, the issue of linguistic confrontation is not exclusively about English against Arabic, but more broadly about language and struggles between languages as part of a wider contestation of dominance and control. On the one hand, the role of ‘the language of control and manipulation’ could be played by any language, although given the historical background of English and the current state of global affairs, English may be the major suspect (Pennycook 1994, 1998). On the other hand, it is not only Arabic or Islamic languages that face English. Although these may be currently at the forefront of a linguistic confrontation with English, similar issues can be raised for Chinese, Russian, and possibly Spanish (e.g. in a Venezuelan context).

Secondly, English as a language per se, or even as the language of specific colonial powers, can hardly be viewed as inherently and naturally ill-spirited and manipulative. Rather, the actual battleground is the way in which English is being spread. In the present global context, this spread and imposition would translate into what is known as Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The major role of English as the international language, that may appear as a myth and may be functioning as part of the globalizing force of uniforming diversities (Pennycook 2006), appears to work under the guise of processes of language education which include curricula, textbooks, testing instruments, certificates, and teachers. This is what, in my view, makes Karmani’s caution particularly relevant, that ‘as TESOL professionals, we need to be perpetually aware of how our current language teaching paradigms…ultimately play out on the international political stage’ (2005: 266).

Interpreters’ agency and subjectivity may be counted on as a counter-balancing force. The idea of a conscious and critical encounter with discourse is an intriguing one and a fundamental concern in language education, since it relies on a crucial capacity of language for conscious interpretation rooted in critical subjectivities. However, uncritical reliance on the potential
awareness-raising capacities of language may well underestimate the actual practices of language education that could as well be potentially aimed at suppressing agencies and subjectivities (Peirce 1989; Canagarajah 2004).

I agree with Kabel that both language use and language interpretation are value-laden and ideological, but I would reiterate that what is actually at stake is not language production and interpretation as such, but rather language education, which is of course value-laden, too. I also believe that language interpreters have their own agencies; that learning a language does not necessarily mean surrendering to its determined worldview; and that knowing a language may provide possibilities for taking advantage of its capacities to resist its own forces. This is acceptable in a vacuum of manipulative forces and controlling powers, in which languages move around the world and are taught with their full capacity, not just simply as a means of exploitation and control but also as a practice with the capacity to be employed for creating awareness and resistance. In reality, however, producers and interpreters of discourse are often situated in a complex context of determinate ideological and political relations, which does not leave much ground open for anything like pure linguistic potential, devoid of rivalries and manipulations.

Language learners—rather than being necessarily captured by the imperial force of language—are very likely to employ and appropriate the language that they learn for the purpose of awareness and resistance. However, this can be a viable account of the discursive potentials inherent in languages, if language education could be considered as an innocent process of teaching the essence of language, including the possibilities it affords. In reality, TESOL practices can hardly be claimed to always approach language education as part of a pedagogy of possibility, that is, as constructing learning experiences aimed at triggering awareness and promoting ‘continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action’ (Simon 1992: 49). To blindly rely on the inherent possibility of languages and to ignore possible hidden agendas in English language education, may count as a version of what Pennycook calls ‘liberal ostrichism’ (2004: 329).

The subjectivity of discourse audience is to be significantly taken into consideration as one (perhaps even the) major player in discursive contexts, if it is allowed any space. In the context of the world as we know it, the education of English is ill with several types of infections, and this includes teachers that by some accounts have replaced missionaries and even imperial troops (Phillipson 1992; Pennycook and Coutand-Marin 2003). My reading of Karmani’s caution and call for awareness is that many currently dominant mainstream TESOL trends could manipulate worldviews in the wake of ruining human agency and subjectivity in learners, if they are not viewed as part of a larger socio-cultural context as, for example, discussed in critical approaches to language and literacy education (Pennycook 1999; Norton and Toohey 2004; Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini 2005). A major question, then, remains and it invites consideration: are current TESOL practices aimed
at irrigating language possibilities and cultivating an awareness that can create the ability to understand English as a culturally embedded social practice, or are they confined to asocial and instrumental views of language teaching that blind learners to the socio-political functioning of language, focusing their attention on parroting the prestigious international language, and consequently enslaving them to probable underlying invisible ideologies?

If not practiced as a pedagogy of possibility (Peirce 1989; Simon 1992), communication oriented instrumentalist English language education could rub and rob locally rooted ideologies away from learners, under a camouflaged view of English as an apolitical international lingua franca (Jenkins 2006). My reading of Karmani’s arguments is that the English he is talking about is in fact what he briefly and vaguely refers to as ‘language teaching paradigms’ (2005: 266). Applied linguists, therefore, do need to be concerned about the politics of language education. This is not only the case in Muslim countries but also, as far as I know, in other parts of the world, including East Asian contexts where many mainstream prominent TESOL figures are active.

What I mean by mainstream TESOL practices, which I suppose is close to what Karmani means by ‘current language teaching paradigms’ (2005: 266), could in fact include almost all the apparently different trends of teaching English as a foreign language (communicative teaching, task-based instruction, focus on form, strategy-oriented teaching, English for specific purposes, etc). With all the apparent diversity, these approaches tend to share a common (mis)conception about language, that is, that language is merely an apolitical means of communication. By mainstream English language education, in fact, I basically mean the underlying assumption that English language education needs to be—at best—aimed at enabling people to communicate in English. What tends to be ignored under this basic assumption in the quite fertile proliferation of international TESOL textbooks, multimedia products, courses, journals, conferences, and teachers, is a view of language as a necessarily social practice of constructing subjectivities and creating meanings founded ‘on the way language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities’ (Norton and Toohey 2004: 1). Perhaps critical approaches to language education may provide potentially rich and fruitful prospects for a more socio-contextually informed TESOL, although even critical trends could get distracted if they give in to academization and decontextualization (Mirhosseini, in press).

One further point that needs to be raised is, although it would be an ultimate ideal and a global wish to practice peace and justice in a real sense, I find Kabel’s advocacy for peaceful commensurability and his ‘hope of a peaceful world’ (2007: 141) too simplistic to share. Hope for peace could hardly ever be abandoned, but it would appear naïve to hope for reconciliation, rehistoricization, hybridity, rapprochement, and dialogue between English and Islam simply on the ground that both are global phenomena and both are, as Kabel labels them, ‘expansionist’ (2007: 140).
In my view, it is English (precisely the TESOL enterprise worldwide) that needs to revisit its position in order to create space for commensurability, since the rolling trend of English over diversity moves much more forcefully and destructively than the diversities which oppose English. A simplistic apolitical hope for peace, I am afraid, might hardly go beyond buying time for the rolling stone of English in a world of diversities.

What I would suggest, then, is honesty and awareness on the part of the world of diversities: honesty, in order not to attempt erecting quasi-Englishes where they can (as exemplified by Kabel’s example of Arabization in Morocco); and awareness, in order not to be caught in the process of Englishization (that is a pitfall probable in learning English as a foreign language). The imperative of this awareness is that people do need to learn English today, not so much because it is the international neutral means of communication or the innocent language of science and technology, but because in the world today, unfortunately, most and the biggest lies (as well as many truths, of course) are told in English. Such awareness along with honesty (that is basically present in all human communities) would create a more meaningful hope for peace.

Awareness about the socio-political functioning of language includes consciousness vis-à-vis the triple set of beliefs discussed in Karmani’s article (the inherent ill-design of some languages, the endowed role of English as the language of freedom, and a need for doses of English for globalization) as well as an awareness of my two proposed considerations that, this is not exclusively a battle between English and Islam but generally between languages of control and globalization on the one hand and a world of diversities on the other; and that the language battlefront is not a linguistic vacuum but a specific arena known as language education.

A view of language as a socially, politically, and ideologically loaded phenomenon rather than as a mere instrument of communication, and of education as ‘learning through practice, reflection, conversation, collaboration, courage, and commitment how to be human’ (Leggo 2004: 30) rather than as schooling people into molds, may create learning experiences that can help communities consciously move away from confrontations, without being trapped by false promises of hybridity. Coupled with the inherent honesty of the natural diversity of communities, these learning experiences of awareness and possibility may help the world of diversities in its struggle against domestication and uniformity and its challenge for a more human world.

NOTES

1 Karmani’s introduction of himself as a Muslim applied linguist is called ‘ludicrous’ by Kabel. Despite this awkward labeling, I am writing this article as an Iranian Muslim applied linguist.

2 Perhaps Arabic in this context is regrettably forced to play the role that English is playing in the global context.
REFERENCES


