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## BOOK REVIEW

### The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language

by Alastair Pennycook (1994)

Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman Group Limited

This book is about the cultural and political implications of the spread of English across the globe over the last four centuries. It raises fundamental questions about the nature of education, language, and culture. Pennycook challenges the traditional views of English language teaching and applied linguistics has nothing to do with politics. He underscores how language is always taught in a political context. Teachers who assert they're "only teaching language" will find it hard to accept many of the ideas in this book. Throughout this book Pennycook exhorts readers to critically reevaluate existing concepts, particularly those claiming to somehow be "universal". Pennycook insists that any academic discipline should be evaluated in terms of the vested interests supporting it and the historical contexts in which it arose

Many of Pennycook's statements are a variation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. However, he criticizes Whorf for being too structuralist in his approach and for failing to explore the concept of social class. Pennycook feels the most fruitful way to consider language is as a locus of a political struggle. He uses the term 'political struggle' in a Freireian sense: as an endeavor to ascertain contending values and to establish a personal worth. Envisioning culture as an "active process by which people make meaning of their lives" (p. 61), the author portrays cultural politics as a "struggle over different meanings" (p. 66). He disputes the Marxist tendency to view culture as "a superstructural phenomenon determined by the socioeconomic 'realities'" (p. 63) as well as the positivist view of culture as the action of nation-states within a high/low diametric field.

Pennycook discusses the spread of English in terms of Galtung's (1971) concept of *Center and Periphery*. He points out how English media from 'developed' countries have penetrated the media of developing nations. This essentially one-way flow of information erodes the national sovereignty, cultural identity, and political independence of developing nations. Though institutions considered along the Periphery tend to become distributors of knowledge received from the Center, Pennycook emphasizes that the actual situation is more complex. Many institutions in the third world are more than passive information receptors. Through the process of 'writing back' – of expressing their own values and vision – marginalized populations can gain dynamic voices. Pennycook concurs with Appadurai's (1990) appraisal that, "the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which can no longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models." (p. 32)

Outlining the global spread of English in recent centuries with the expansion of Anglo-American power, Pennycook disputes the assumption that its proliferation has been natural, neutral, or beneficial. He also refutes claims made by Fishman et al. (1977) that English is not "ideologically encumbered." Every language, Pennycook maintains, carries the weight of a civilization. The decision to use a certain language means to support the existence of a given cultural matrix.

Phillipson's (1986, 1988, 1992) notion of "English linguistic imperialism" is considered in depth. The author concedes Anglo-American expansion has gone hand-in-hand with the expansion of English and that the American and British governments have fostered the disciplines of EFL/ESL and organizations such as the British Council and Peace Corps. Pennycook, however, criticizes Phillipson for not adequately considering how English can be used in diverse contexts. Although the author concedes that English is 'the language of international capitalism,' he also

underscores that English is a language of protest. Pennycook points out how writers such as Achebe, Baldwin, and Lim have had an impact not only on readers in their homeland, but on readers around the world. Emphasizing the power of human agency to reshape language in unexpected ways, Pennycook remarks, "it becomes important to acknowledge [English] . . . not merely as a language of imperialism, but also as a language of opposition." (p. 262)

A theme considered at length in this book is the nature of education. Instead of viewing schools as "neutral sites where a curricular body of information is passed on to students" (p. 297), Pennycook urges readers to think of educational institutions as "cultural and political arenas" in which different values are in struggle. He agrees with Giroux (1991) that "teachers need to see themselves as 'transformative intellectuals' rather than mere 'classroom technicians employed to pass on a body of knowledge'" (p. 299). For Pennycook, teaching is a process of political engagement and the curriculum should be based on themes of social relevance to students. He emphasizes that teachers can empower learners through an amalgam of approaches known as 'critical pedagogy.'

## Conclusion

This work was both revealing and recondite. Many of Pennycook's key assertions are, I maintain, all too briefly outlined and unsupported. His description of the "metanarratives of modernity" (p. 58), for example, is as terse as it is abstruse. Moreover, When Pennycook suggests that, "perhaps language – and particularly English as an international language – should also be replaced by a vision of powerful discursive formations globally and strategically employed" (p. 64) he doesn't elaborate what this means.

Pennycook offers no prescriptive list of pedagogic dos and don'ts in this work. Nor is a clear-cut teaching methodology elucidated. What he provides is an impassioned vision of personal philosophy, stating how he sees his role in shaping the political agenda for the next century. Embracing the concept of cultural relativism and lambasting all claims towards "objectivity", much of this text is thought-provoking.

- reviewed by Tim Newfields

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