

Maurice Carder reviews

World English: A Study of its Development

by Janina Brutt-Griffler, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. 2002

English is the language of instruction in the great majority of international schools, and it is clearly important for us to know why this is so. If we know where we have come from we may be better able to plan our route to the future. Brutt-Griffler clarifies many misconceptions about how English spread to reach its present level of dominance, and also makes interesting points about the status of present day speakers of English that may helpfully cast some light on how we should proceed in developing appropriate staffing and instructional models in international schools.

She opens the book with a poem (from Kamala Das, 1997:10) which could be seen to characterize many international school students:

I am an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses,
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me...

It also highlights the paradox of English in the world today – it has spread from being 'owned' by the original 'mother-tongue speakers' in England to the some two billion people who are largely bilingual and who are equally at home in English and their original mother tongue. Brutt-Griffler goes on to quote Chinua Achebe (1994:433):

'The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use... The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost... He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.'

English has thus now reached a stage where it is becoming liberated from the control of its mother-tongue native speakers. There is therefore no need for native-speaker custodians. Brutt-Griffler quotes Smith (*Discourse across cultures*, 1987, New York: Prentice Hall) who outlines several essential characteristics of an international language:

- 1 It implies no essential relationship between speaking the language and assimilating an associated culture. There is no necessity for second language speakers to internalize the cultural norms of the mother tongue speakers of a language to use it effectively.
- 2 An international language becomes denationalized. It is not the property of its mother tongue speakers.
- 3 Since English as an International Language plays a purely functional role, the goal of teaching it is to facilitate communication of learners' ideas and culture in an English medium.'

Those of us who have taught in international schools for some

time have probably battled with these issues: British or American English? Which model to teach? Which spelling to use? Which literature to teach? Brutt-Griffler's book points us in directions which demand we re-phrase the question, and by the end of the book we come to understand the active historical role of non-mother tongue English speakers, both teachers and learners, in the development of World English.

One issue that is fascinating is her exposé of the falseness of much that has been written about 'linguistic imperialism'. This hypothesis claimed to show how certain powers, especially the British, had imposed English in their colonies to the detriment of native languages. Brutt-Griffler shows how the British positively encouraged the teaching of the 'vernacular' languages and only wanted a small group to be literate in English so that they could act as go-betweens and 'middle managers'.

In fact colonised peoples used English as an anti-colonial tool: they realised the power that language ownership confers, and became fluent in English in order to use it against their masters. One only has to look at the example of Gandhi to comprehend the truth of this. In fact the only example of a deliberate policy of teaching a whole colony English is that of the USA in the Philippines.

The attitude of the British towards educating the colonised is shown in the following extracts (from page 67): 'book learning ... lowered [Africans'] usefulness for work,' and made them 'uppish' and 'conceited' – by which was meant that they became 'disinclined' to work for the European (Clark, 1905).

Cecil Rhodes said "...a dangerous class is being evolved. These preachers ... and scholars, after the education they have received, feel it undignified to return to manual labour, consequently the country is becoming gradually infested with unemployed men, who will in the end develop into agitators of the most pernicious type".

English had thus long been seen by the colonised as constituting a means of gaining more lucrative work, and many British colonial administrators considered that making English available to the colonised was a recipe for revolt.

Brutt-Griffler continues to develop her premise that 'there is need of a paradigm shift from monolingualism to bilingualism reflecting a historical shift in language use' (page 110). This ties in with Romaine's point (*Bilingualism*: 1996) that bilingualism is taken as central to processes in language evolution, as monolingualism represents a special case as a condition pertaining to a minority of the world's population – a point that needs much reiteration to those many monolingual English speaking international school teachers.

International schools are now places full of bilingual speakers – the majority of them students. Brutt-Griffler shows how, in fact, there is a potential majority of bilingual teachers whose expertise is not – yet – being drawn on. The now well-known cognitive and metalinguistic advantages of bilingualism are becoming institutionalised in some international schools (such as this reviewer's) and this is a trend that is sure to increase.

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