

Of Holidays, Adventures and Language Teaching

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Abstract. English is one of the most powerful globalizing media and agents in Asia. But what exactly is this thing that is globalized? Who is it addressed to? What global circuits does it move in and with what effects? How does it relate to other networks of global culture and capital? This presentation draws from the work of Alistair Pennycook in examining the form and content of the English that is disseminated in English language lessons in Asia. To that extent, it uses two lessons from a commercial EFL textbook that is widely used in Thailand and other parts of Asia. The paper is intended for practicing teachers and administrators of English in Asia, especially TEFL and for scholars working in cultural and postcolonial studies. It is hoped that it will inspire practitioners to adopt a more critical intellectual attitude to role of English as a communicative instrument, global commodity and aspect of mass culture.

Keywords: Colonial Discourse, White Privilege, TEFL

1. Introduction

In the November 2005 issue of a *farang* magazine published in Bangkok, an English speaking white female teacher tells about the privileges her whiteness allows her in Thailand. With great excitement and triumphalism, she shares her ‘native English speaker’ experience with her implied *farang* audience.

Teaching English was one of those things I had thought about but never seriously considered until a few months ago, when I found myself back on Khaosan Road, tired of traveling and low on funds, but not quite ready to go home yet. I decided to respond to one of the many ads for English teachers. Bangkok is notorious for its cowboy operators and rogue dealers, so I was a little concerned that I might get whisked off and sold as a sex slave.... I had no experience or qualifications but the next day I was enthusiastically embracing my new role as Teacher Alison, strutting around with a microphone, dramatically scrawling all over a blackboard

One of the schools [where I taught English] was located in thick rainforest near the ancient ruins of Ayuthaya. It’s hard to imagine a more exotic location and the school was nestled inside a huge complex of ornate temples and built almost entirely on water. Classrooms rose up on stilts and were connected by a series of wooden bridges. Water lilies and elaborate sculptures filled the water. It was the first time a foreign teacher had come to the school and I was welcomed like a movie star.

I have quoted this passage at length because the text offers a vivid display of the kind of privileges which Whites in Thailand enjoy as a result of their real and/or imagined proximity to the English language and the way these experiences of privilege are culturally handled. The text also offers insights into the continued salience of colonial Self/Other relationships between Caucasians and Asians which are made available in and through the global spread of teaching/learning of English.

Alistair Pennycook (2004) has argued quite convincingly that colonialism can best be seen as a site of cultural production, that its cultural products are discourses of Self/Other and that these discourses adhered to English as a whole and to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in particular. In the above text, for example, we catch a glimpse of the cultural politics of representation in the worlds inhabited by the ‘native speaker’ and the native other. The aim of this paper is to follow Pennycook in exploring this relationship between English and colonial discourses in more detail by looking at how TEFL lessons work as sites which traffic in colonial Self/Other binaries. In doing so, I shall focus on how key themes such as native

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culture, travelling and colonialism and their dense web of relationships circulate in a TEFL course book to produce raced and gendered identities.

To understand the global role of English today, we need to see it in relation to, and as an aspect of, the form of modernity disseminated globally by transnational corporations in Anglo-American mass culture. English is key to this global mass culture, as instrument, as a dimension and as a commodity. As an *instrument*, it is integral to the global movement of images, ideas, information, commodities and people, that is, to the phenomena that we call globalization. In this capacity, English facilitates globalization processes and appears as a tool which is without substance. As a *dimension* of global mass culture, it is part of the cultural export of Anglo-American civilization through concerted government and business policies and the movement of Western peoples around the world as tourists, experts, teachers, entertainers, business people, and customers. Finally, as a *commodity*, it is an object that is bought and sold globally and which a handful of governments and global corporations control and which people struggle to acquire, adjust to or use meaningfully. Nevertheless, globally people import English and use it not just for instrumental communicative purposes but also for acquiring and displaying class and status identities, and to exercise power. Two of the most powerful features of this global phenomenon are its Eurocentricity and its English monolingualism.¹

2. The Pleasures of the TEFL Text

A major site on which the cultural politics of race and gender are at work is TEFL curriculum, most of which is available via TEFL course books, work books, teacher books, and activity books. In addition to these, a great deal of material is also available in newspapers and on-line ESL-related websites such as www.ajarn.com and www.eslflow.com. In this paper, I analyze a lesson which appeared in one of the most popular course books now used in Thailand, *Cutting Edge* to show how colonial constructs of Self/Other are at work in TEFL.²

As an indication of its popularity, the course book which became available on the market in 1991, had seen nine impressions by 1994.³ It is widely used in Thailand and around the world for high beginning and intermediate learners of English. For example, it is used by one of the largest language centers in Thailand, ECC, and by IDP Training for its ‘foundation’ pre-intermediate and intermediate level courses which prepare students for entry into the center’s IELTS preparation courses,⁴ as well as language schools in Japan. For each course level, there is a course book, class cassettes/ audio CDs, students’ cassette/audio CDs, a workbook, a Teacher’s Resource Book, tests and a companion website. Each course book comprises sixteen modules of seven to eight pages structured around a specific grammar point such as comparative and superlative adjectives, the passive voice, the present perfect tense, modal verbs for requests, suggestions and offers, and so on. The modules are organized around themes such as “appearances” (module 5), holidays (module 6), “countries and cultures” (module 8), and health (module 10) (the modules analyzed below), and other open-ended and ‘fun’ topics. As I shall demonstrate below, each of the above named module deploy colonial and gendered constructs.

Module 6 in *Cutting Edge* (pre-intermediate) uses a tropical island to have fun in learning English while recycling the colonial Self/Other imaginary in ELT. Here, the fault line in the Self/Other distinction is between apparently innocent British tourists and “horrible” Caribbean service. The text in question appears as a five minute listening exercise involving a British man and woman talking about their holiday on a Caribbean island. It is preceded by a tourist brochure advertising the holiday package and by pair-work speaking exercises. Cloze exercises and further pair-work speaking, all of which relate to the couple’s plans and subsequent holiday experience, follow the listening. Save for the hotel building fronted by a swimming

¹ “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicities,” in A. D. King, ed. *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997b, pp. 19-40.

² S. Cunningham, P. Moor and J. V. Carr, *Cutting Edge* (Pre-intermediate), Longman: 2001.

³ S. Cunningham, Peter Moor and Jane C. Carr. *Cutting Edge: Pre Intermediate*, (Students’ Book), London: Longman, 2001, Inside front cover.

⁴ ECC started in the mid 1980s and currently has over 45 branches across Thailand. IDP Training is the official language center representing thirty-nine Australian universities. Like most EFL courses, each *Cutting Edge* level requires 120 hours to complete.

pool ringed with deck chairs for sunbathing, ‘the Caribbean’ is both invisible and inaudible.⁵ The lead-in to the actual listening informs the readers that “Unfortunately, the holiday was awful. In fact, Mark and Rosa appeared on a program called *Holidays in Hell*,” presumably in the United Kingdom. This listening exercise uses a similar title, “The holiday in hell.”⁶

In the audio text (transcript on pp. 161-162 in the students’ course book), Rosa begins in an easy going, matter-of-fact way, saying, “So anyway, we decided to have a really good holiday – a ‘dream holiday’ in the Caribbean because we’d always wanted to go there.... We booked it for two weeks in May, because all the brochures said that the weather’s beautiful there in May.”⁷ At this point in the audio text, Mark takes over and says: “We were flying from Gatwick airport.... When we arrived at the airport they told us that because of bad weather in the Caribbean, the flight was delayed until the next morning.” Rosa’s then joins in: “But that was just the beginning. On the plane they told us that the bad weather was actually a hurricane ... and that ... we had to go to the capital instead, and stay in a hotel for the night.... They told us that we were going to a five star hotel, next to the beach, with a swimming pool, so we were quite happy at that point”⁸ Mark continues: “Anyway, we arrived at the hotel, the Hotel Paradiso it was called. What a joke! They said that it was a five star hotel but I wouldn’t give it one star. It was just awful ... yes, it was next to the sea, but it wasn’t a beach. Just a few rocks, and the sea was so dirty you couldn’t swim in it. There were big ships traveling past, and the sea was all polluted and brown. It looked horrible,” at which point Rosa added: “So we went to look at the swimming pool, but that was no better. It wasn’t the nice blue color, like you would expect.” And so they go on, narrating the annoyances of their Caribbean dream holiday ruined by hurricane George.

3. White Privilege in TEFL

What is clear from the text is that the enabling factor of Rosa’s and Mark’s narrative is the denial of voice to ‘the Caribbean’ and the assumption that ‘the Caribbean’ ought to live up to their supposed ‘normal’ expectations of a ‘dream holiday’. Throughout the text, ‘the Caribbean’ speaks through Rosa and Mark and never appears through its own representatives to explain its case before the court of good conscience and reason assumed in the couples’ narrative. In its absence, we find that the beach was not a beach, and the pool “wasn’t a nice blue color like you would expect,” and later, that the breakfast was not “the usual things you get in hotels, bread, marmalade, fruit, coffee”⁹ Here, the Eurocentric colonial perspective from which this narrative unfolds inserts itself as a universal conscience in a similar way that the “invisible knapsack” which Peggy McIntosh (2001) unpacks is loaded with white privileges that have been normalized and institutionalized. And, it is this voice of white privilege standing for universal reason, working as both prosecutor and judge, which *Cutting Edge’s* EFL student/jury must heed as they deliberate on the Caribbean’s unruly behavior while they role play Rosa and Mark, starting with: “So, did you have a nice holiday?” Through all this, the Caribbean plaintiff is rendered via the tourist gaze. One can only surmise that Thai students, being as far away from the Caribbean as they are and in a country that has made tourism its largest source of income, would not have to deliberate for too long before siding with the voice of universal reason: “That’s a horrible place!”

In addition to representing the Caribbean as a deviant and dishonest Other of Europe, the text homogenizes the region around the quintessential sign of the White Western tourist gaze: sun, sea and sand. The Caribbean which appears here exists completely for the pleasure of this group, and must answer to its whims and fancies through hurricanes, floods, poverty, economic dependency, political instability, communal violence and the haunting memories and legacies of slavery and indentureship bequeathed to it by Europe and its superpower political cousin, the United States of America. This Caribbean of the White tourist imagination is not recognized as a place where people live, where young women sell their bodies on beaches and in brothels, or where men of all ages toil on sugar plantations while their leaders plead with

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 161

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

European governments for fair sugar prices on the European market as they struggle with economic dependency. Rather, this Caribbean, having been baptized by Europe into the modern world by extermination and plantation slavery, remains as a space where White Western tourists like Rosa and Mark can write their Crusoe-like fantasies of sun, sand, sea and sexual adventure, fantasies that bear the powerful traces of Western colonialism and imperialism. This is the Caribbean which such tourists, having enjoyed, returns home to Europe and North America to show and tell their friends about, and when this Caribbean does not deliver the ‘goods’ and the ‘service’, to tell the world about it via their national and global television networks and their publishing companies like Longman. Ironically, this is the Caribbean which features as part of *Cutting Edge*’s “rich international content” for its EFL students around the world.¹⁰ To be sure, this colonial rendering of other space as backward is not an aberration in *Cutting Edge*; rather, it is integral to the cultural content of English disseminated via TEFL.

3.1. The time of the Other

Cutting Edge’s module five, titled “Appearances,” deploys the colonial Self/Other binary primarily in terms of time rather than space. In this module, the colonial binary is established along aesthetic lines, with the modern and Western occupying the privileged place of a universalized aesthetic and desire while the pre-modern and non-Western are relegated to strange and curious tastes of Others in distant times and places. The text creates this effect by juxtaposing five photographic images representing modern and traditional concepts of beauty accompanied by a short text. The title of the text, “You’re gorgeous!” is placed above the photograph of Cindy Crawford, the first of four photographic images of women in a single row across two adjacent pages. Crawford’s close-up image has the famous American model with auburn hair flying in the wind dressed in a bright pink turtle neck sweater, squarely facing the camera and smiling broadly.¹¹ Next to this is a dull photographic image of an early modern European painting. It shows six plump, gaudily dressed European women almost piled on top of each other idling their time away. The next two photographs, one representing a ‘long neck’ Paduang hill tribe woman with a bright pink head scarf and the other a pale image of a pale faced wigged woman of Elizabethan England are inserted side by side at the beginning of the text on the adjacent page. The layout of the images along a horizontal line makes it possible to view them serially. Thus, one first encounters the text’s title “you are gorgeous!,” then Cindy Crawford, then the other images. However, Crawford’s red turtle neck sweater and the red head scarf of the Paduang woman, coupled with the receded images of the women in the other pictures, invite direct and immediate comparison between the two twentieth century contemporaries, Crawford and the Paduang woman.

Thus, not only does the layout of the text effectively nominate Crawford as “gorgeous,” but having done so, uses her global image to relativize the aesthetic appeal of the others, especially her ‘native’ tribal Other. In doing so, the text is quite effective in suggesting that while pre-modern European concepts of beauty have evolved into today’s universal, desirable body, Europe’s contemporaries living in other lands are stuck in a backward time lag. Rendered as a people without history, they represent the antithesis of the global aesthetic. This message is reinforced in the reading passage which follows. Beginning with a paragraph which nominates Cindy Crawford as “the perfect American dream girl.... as ‘The face of the Decade’” [1990s], it contrasts outlived European concepts of beauty before settling on Crawford’s contemporary Others. It informs its EFL student readers that “Ideas of beauty can be very different according to where you live in the world, too. For the Paduang tribe in South East Asia, traditionally, the most important sign of female beauty was a long neck.”¹² Thus, we find Crawford’s contemporary competitor nominated as tribal and traditional and stuck in a time lag, while she possesses the universal and normal measure of beauty and desirability.

Further, apparently it is not enough to say that Europe’s Others are strange or different or even inferior, but to insist that their aesthetic concepts are without history and that their “tribal” and traditional status weld them to a primitive past while the West moves on. With one of the West’s idols positioned as setting the universal standard and reference, the Paduang is offered as not just examples of unmodern or pre-modern concepts of beauty, as in the case of Elizabethan women who glorified white skin but as living examples of the contra-modern, living outside of the privileged space of the West and beyond the wheel of time. And this, despite the devastating impact which Euro-American colonialism and imperialism has had and is having on

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, back cover.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

the Paduang's culture and livelihoods through today's global flows of images, information, people, finance and commodities.¹³

In such circumstances, what possible response can any student studying English in our post and hypermodern world have to the questions which follow the text? Can we expect our well-off urbanized EFL students to buck the trend, turn away from the Cindy Crawford and assert that indeed beauty is relative, or that Longman is an example of how global capital helps to circulate Self/Other binaries produced under colonialism? One can only guess what the students' responses may be to these questions which immediately follow the text:

"a) Who do **you** think is the most attractive man/woman in the world? Why?

b) Which is the best explanation of the saying below? Do you think it is true?

Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder"¹⁴

4. Conclusion

This essay has sought to highlight the ways in which the race, gender, status and class hierarchies of colonial and global modernity adhere to English and are at work in and through it. To that end, we have examined their complex operations in curriculum practices of TEFL. By analyzing two lessons in a popular course book, this paper has shown that in this particular vein of 'international education', White people of European descent are empowered and privileged while non-Whites are more often than not, marginalized, excluded and treated with disdain. Importantly, we find these patterns reproduced in the work of Western corporate giants like Procter & Gamble and Unilever as they retail ideas of 'White is beautiful' through a variety of whitening creams (Persaud, 2005). These exercises of power are neither tangential nor contingent to TEFL but are in fact consistent with the goals of nations like Thailand to become competitive and modern under contemporary conditions of globalization.

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¹⁴ *Ibid.*