

## **English in Global University Education: Issues of Hegemony and Global Elite Dominance in Chinese Contexts**

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**Abstract.** The establishment in Asia of Western university programmes where English is the medium of instruction results in a complex set of power relations between institutions, staff and students. Indeed, the role of English as a global language in such contexts merits close examination in terms of cultural imperialism and class inequality. An awareness of such issues can be argued to be of great importance to EAP and ESP professionals, as well as academic and administrative staff. This paper analyses these issues of power, and in particular, assesses the validity of Phillipson's (1992) model of 'Linguistic Imperialism' in the light of his comments on the role of Western Universities in Asia, and specifically, the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China (Phillipson 2009). It is argued that an analysis of linguistic power relations in contemporary global education should reject the existing preoccupation with the imposition of Western cultural values through language spread. A more complex and contemporarily relevant approach is proposed, incorporating the role of English in sustaining the hegemony of an emerging global elite class, which dominates the kind of university settings in question, and includes axes of power which do not necessarily stem from 'centre' locations in the sphere of English influence (Kachru 2006). An analysis of resistance to such hegemony follows, with particular reference to the actions of students and teachers in sites of global higher education such as the University of Nottingham, Ningbo.

**Keywords:** Hegemony, Linguistic, Imperialism, Elite, Universities, Chinese.

### **1. Introduction**

The existence in Asia of university programmes where English is a main medium of instruction results in a complex set of power relations between institutions, staff and students. Such relations are clearly exemplified in the context of The University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China (UNNC), a British university campus on the East coast of China. Due to the particularly international nature of the university and its exclusive use of the English medium, and equivalent content to that of the sister campus in England, it can be considered a particularly appropriate site for an analysis of global power structures, and the role that the English language plays in them. More specifically, this study examines the role of English in cultural and pedagogical interaction at UNNC. A more nuanced approach than that which dominates the current literature, which tends to suggest that dominance through English stems only from Western loci of power, is suggested. Thus, English is herein considered as a tool used by an emerging *international* global elite to sustain unequal relationships of power, as opposed to simply being a tool for increasing Western cultural and ideological dominance.

It is acknowledged that an international project such as that of UNNC does indeed need careful scrutiny in terms of power relations (Phillipson 2009), and the historical and contemporary injustice stemming from colonialism and its remnants are not denied. More problematic, however, is the subsequent suggestion that a British university using the English language and British content in China is, *by its very nature*, representative of an uneven relationship of dominance:

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“The University of Nottingham’s subsidiaries – its campuses in Malaysia and at Ningbo, China - give the clear impression that what is being exported...is not only the British English medium but also British content. Can this really be considered culturally, linguistically or pedagogically appropriate in Asia...is the interaction uni-directional, or open and reciprocal, and how is the project being implemented and perceived?” (Phillipson 2009: 11)

The policies, practices and pedagogies of UNNC and The University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM) are being questioned directly here. There is also an entailed suggestion that dominance of ‘the West’ over ‘the East’ is a key issue, and the consequent implication is that power relations at UNNC and UNM are examples of the ‘linguistic imperialism’ that Phillipson has proposed elsewhere (Phillipson 1992, 2009). There is considerable discussion of such issues elsewhere in the literature (Phillipson 1992, Pennycook 1998, Brutt-Griffler 2002), particularly regarding the persisting cultural residues of colonialism and the role of the English language in the perpetuation of uneven power relations. For example, Pennycook argues that it is difficult to separate the English language from Western dominance, both historically and contemporarily, stating that: “Its spread has not been the coincidental by-product of changing global relations but rather the deliberate policy of English speaking countries protecting and promoting their interests” (Pennycook 2001: 86). Clear agency is posited here, as it is suggested that language is actively used by powerful Western institutions for the benefit of their countries, and therefore that ‘West to rest’ exploitation persists in modern times, both in the the postcolonial Hong Kong context in which the study is situated, and elsewhere (Pennycook 1998). Without discounting the accuracy and value of such a perspective, it will be argued below that power relations in such contexts are in fact considerably more complex. Indeed, it can be argued that in both contexts, there are other *non-western* institutions and social groups which use English to a considerable extent in order to retain and expand their power on a local and global scale, contributing to sustaining local and global inequality.

## 2. Global Elite Hegemony

Hegemony is considered herein from a Gramscian point of view, as defined by Fontana:

“Hegemony is defined by Gramsci as intellectual and moral leadership whose principal constituting elements are consent and persuasion. A social group or class can be said to assume a hegemonic role to the extent that it articulates and proliferates throughout society cultural and ideological belief systems whose teachings are accepted as universally valid by the general population.” (Fontana 1993: 57)

Using Gramsci’s model, we assume that where hegemony exists, the ideas of the dominant group come to be seen as natural, normal and generally beneficial, whilst in reality only benefiting the powerful. This model can easily be applied to global English, raising questions of whether its use is perceived to benefit all, whilst in reality only benefiting some. In the present context these questions are indeed pertinent, as it can be argued that by virtue of the existence of great demand for English learning at all levels of education in Chinese contexts, we can see that advanced English skills are perceived to be highly desirable for all. Issues of access to and applicability of such skills, however, almost certainly preclude the majority from translating them into the ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1992) required for upward mobility. Thus, the use of English remains a tool which can only be used to any real effect by the elite in such contexts.

Taking such conclusions into account, and when the dissolution of national boundaries brought about by globalization is carefully considered, a simple East-West dichotomy appears insufficient when mapping the global dominance of English in the contemporary context. A more productive site of analysis perhaps, is; ‘The formation of global power elites...that use knowledge of international languages as commodities and tools to secure...a dominant position in the world’ (Jaquemet 2005: 261). The dominant hegemonic role here is assumed by various international elite groups, not tied to any geographical base, rather than simply being a modern form of Western imperialism and colonialism, as suggested in the works examined above. The argument of the current paper, therefore, is that questions regarding English and reciprocity at UNNC, in other institutions in the Chinese context, and indeed in international higher education in general, should be posed in the context of global class relations rather than simply in terms of Western dominance.

## 3. Resistance and Reciprocity

One key aspect of the Gramscian viewpoint is that resistance is always possible where hegemony exists. Although structural and cultural dominance is entailed in such relations, this dominance is not necessarily totalitarian, and is therefore open to challenge (Sonntag 2003). Resistance to the hegemonic 'global elite' dominance outlined above, for example, can be seen in the actions of teachers and students within global university education. The current project examines these actions through ethnographic research in the classroom in the two study sites, and through interviews with students and teachers in those establishments.

Examples of the type of resistance which forms the research object of this study have been noted by Canagarajah (1999), who examines the everyday actions of students in Sri Lanka, stating that they exemplify a challenge to forces of dominance in the context of linguistic imperialism. A parallel perspective regarding the actions of teachers has been presented by Pennycook, who argues that we should 'Become political actors engaged in a critical pedagogical project to use English to oppose the dominant discourses of the West' (2001: 87). It can be argued, however that both these and many other studies in the literature, refer to an insufficiently subtle target of resistance, based on a loose notion of 'the West'. The current study suggests a more nuanced approach within this valuable and solid theoretical framework, shifting from dominance of the West to dominance of the global elite, without rejecting the solid and valuable paradigms of Canagarajah, Pennycook and others. Indeed the analysis of sites where dominant discourses are being resisted by teachers and students in the context of global elite hegemony (e.g. UNNC) form the basis of my research, and Western dominance and cultural imperialism are certainly not excluded or ignored. What is argued, however, is that they can be subsumed into a larger social category, which is more accurate in describing contemporary global realities, and the shifting loci of global power and dominance both in terms of English and in wider economic and social terms.

#### **4. Methodology**

With regard to the detailed approach of the current study, there are a number of aspects of the functioning of English which were examined at UNNC. One specifically relevant aspect of the university system is the selection of materials in the context of English teaching. Thus, in the first stage of the research, a critical discourse analysis of UNNC materials and language policy documentation was carried out, whereby discourses representing hegemonic dominance and/or the cultivation of resistance to it were identified. Firstly, the materials chosen centrally by the department for first-year English for Academic Purposes classes were analysed, with a particular focus on identifying any material which could be interpreted as demonstrating power relations and attitudes towards them. For example, if the selection of materials for university English classes was built to some extent around raising awareness of global interdependence and intercultural issues, it could subsequently be argued that discourses of elite hegemony were being challenged, as students' awareness of inequality amongst different nations and cultural groups would inevitably be entailed. Similarly, any promotion of critical thinking in the contexts in question was interpreted as likely to encourage challenges to the status quo, and therefore challenges to hegemonic discourses. Concurrently, any material which used themes and language that appeared to demonstrate the naturalization of Western dominance, or a hegemonic role of British education, philosophy and politics was analysed in depth. Secondly this data from learning materials was supported by a critical analysis of university language policy documentation which details the existing rules regarding the use of English and other language inside and outside of the classroom. This was deemed necessary in addition to the analysis of classroom materials since the choice of which language is chosen or permitted in a more general university context can also have significant implications in terms of power relations and hegemony.

Subsequently, the second stage of the research was ethnographic observation within UNNC classrooms, with a focus on the discourses of students, their interaction with the learning materials and their adaption to the multicultural university context they were in. Since learning materials need to be engaged with in order for their themes to be fully articulated, and because the complex discourses produced in the process have potential for a much deeper analysis in terms of cross-cultural subject positions and power relations, ethnography was deemed a useful triangulation of the discourse analysis from class materials. Finally, focus group interviews were carried out with students and staff from the university in order to ascertain individual viewpoints on the themes of the research, and to identify any related discourses arising.

## 5. Conclusion

Having adopted a Gramscian framework of hegemony, the current research has shed light on issues of cultural dominance from all entailed subject positions. Indeed, the existence of and/or resistance to discourses of cultural hegemony were analysed both in terms of Western dominance over the rest of the world but also, crucially, that of the emerging global elite over other sections of society. Subsequently, evidence of hegemonic discourses were found not only in the nominally 'British' learning materials and policy documents, but also in the texts produced by students in their classroom and focus group narratives regarding their education and their future. Thus, the results of the current project demonstrate that although attitudes and structural inequalities stemming from colonialism have far from disappeared, the role of the West as the exclusive beneficiary of linguistic inequality with regard to English is beginning to fade. Indeed, young students in universities in Chinese contexts have been shown to be exercising clear agency in their use of English, and often claiming ownership of it, at least to some extent. Thus, these findings contribute to the literature on world Englishes in the sense that they demonstrate another example emerging linguistic bases in periphery contexts (Kachru, 1992). Crucially also, the results show that these new linguistic bases are also bases of power, and that in these cases power is held by local people from those contexts, and not by Western 'linguistic imperialists' (Phillipson, 1992). It should perhaps be stressed once again here, however, that there is no intention to imply that global imbalance and West-east inequality forged through language does not exist, only that a new force is emerging which should be taken into account. Interestingly, according to focus group data, UNNC students generally had clear intentions to use English as a form of social capital, and also, in most cases, they saw no threat from entailed Western dominance.

Furthermore, it has been shown in the current study that pedagogical and language policy planning provide great potential in terms of resisting global elite discourses. Indeed, such resistance to hegemonic discourses was evidenced at the research site in complex and multifaceted ways, including teaching methods, student and teacher interpretations of materials and policies, and active, cosmopolitan self-fashioning on the part of the students. With regard to teaching materials, the promotion of critical thinking and global citizenry both inside and outside the classroom provides students with a global perspective which has been noted, in some cases, as leading to increased awareness of class inequality and to increased motivation to bring about social justice. The challenge identified for the teachers in this study is to underline in their classes the fact that such a perspective is, in itself, valuable to students in terms of increasing their social capital, while simultaneously enacting resistance to discourses of global elite hegemony by raising student awareness of contemporary global realities, and encouraging a spirit of social contribution.

Because the backgrounds of the students in the study enable them to be very much connected with the rest of the world, and due to their continuing education in such a site, they are prime candidates for jobs within the global elite class. The conclusion here is that, in such cases, English will be used to sustain unequal class relations, but without any Western subject position involved in the process. This is the addition that this study brings to the current literature, which seems to focus mostly on exploitation by the West. It is also significant, in terms of resistance, to note that a number of the students implied or explicitly stated that they hoped to use English to play a role in redressing the balance of global inequality, and eliminating the residue of colonial dominance. It would perhaps not be too wild a statement to claim, therefore, that the tables seem now turning in terms of the use of English as social capital in global contexts. The consequent recommendation is that 'Dystopic (neo-colonial, ecolinguistic, and anti-globalization) discourses of penetration, rape and extinction' by the West (Jaquemet 2005: 274), should be challenged and replaced with a more nuanced view on how English usage occurs in contemporary global university education. Subtle and complex discourses are clearly at work here, and the target of resistance therefore should be clearly defined.

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