A Critical Analysis on Thai University Students' Reflections towards Politics of the English Language

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Abstract

The English language is a gatekeeper to positions of prestige in society (Pennycook, 1994), especially due to its dominant status as a world language or as a Lingua Franca. Many take the English language as apolitical, particularly in educational systems worldwide, including Thai's (Methitham, 2011). From a different view, however, there could be many hidden agendas behind the language itself as the English language is not only simple skills, but a more complicated process with socio-cultural and political-economic implications (Lin, 2013). It is problematic to ignore the fact that the English language somehow produces, reproduces, or intensifies an inequality within each community. In fact, the English language has been termed a form of Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson, 2011).

Thus, this study aimed to critically analyze the reflections of Thai university students towards politics of the English language in Thai educational system. The data was collected from the reflections of 15 Thai university students attending a 15-hour-course of Critical Awareness and Language Development adapted from Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) developed by Andreotti (2005). Critical pedagogy was used as a lens in the analysis of the reflections. The course raised the students' awareness to some extent of the underlying ideologies of the English language and English language curriculum. It is suggested that Critical pedagogy be considered in English educational system in Thailand in order to adjust Thai students to become fully human in a world of superdiversity.

Keywords: English educational system in Thailand, politics of the English language, Critical pedagogy, English language domination, Language rights.

Introduction

It is irrefutable that in contemporary society the English language plays an avoidably dominant role in our globalized world. This need for English speakers leads to the growth of English education. However, looking deeper into the real status of the English language, one can find many hidden agendas behind the language. The English language produces inequality among English users, as English is a gatekeeper to positions of prestige in society (Pennycook, 1994). This phenomenon is a key point of how inequality is produced, reproduced, or intensified within the community. The English language is not only a set of simple skills and techniques; it is a complicated process with socio-cultural and politico-economic implications (Lin, 2013). Furthermore, the English language has been named as a form of Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson, 2011) —a favoring of one language over other languages and it is paralleled with other imperial societal structuring through race, class, and sex. However, if linguistic theory merges with political theory, it produces the vital concern of an inequality in minority communities as a result of other languages being marginalized by their social status. Thus, political theorists begin to take the term 'Language Rights' into account (Ricento, 2014).

Focusing on the English language, it spread widely after colonization. Moreover, it has also been criticized as a threat to other languages. It is not only the language itself that is dominant, but also the ideologies of the colonizing countries since language and culture can never be parted. In addition, the cultural ideologies of the dominant countries are naturalized as normal so as to support the culture of power. It could be implied that neocolonialism is partly a planned policy of first-world countries to maintain their domination in developing countries after colonization (Altbach, 1971). There are multidimensional influences of the English language in both post-colonized and non-colonized countries. The English language is somehow dominant in terms of internationalization when the West is currently leading the world market.

There is no difference to Thailand, the focus of this study. In Thailand, the English language has been obtained since the 18th century and utilized for many purposes, such as military, trade, or tourism (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). Although Thailand has never been directly colonized by western countries, the English language and its domination remain influential components of British colonization in Southeast Asia. The English language came along with the new wave of modernization. It has been more common to learn, though, among the elite Thais (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). A major drawback is that the elite Thais have been more privileged in accessing English education properly, while people in lower societal status have limited accessibility to English education. Moreover, the adopted teaching methods evaluate success and failure against the English natives' norms and standards. In other words, we are applying the values of both the language and its culture without forming the critical values (Docker, 1978).

In sum, the English language is welcomed to each country's door with no doubts of what may lie behind it, similarly to a Trojan horse (Qiang & Wolff, 2009). Consistently, an Anglo-American power successfully generates the concept of domination as neutral and apolitical in teaching the English language (Methitham, 2011). Nevertheless, due to the fact that Thailand has never been directly colonized

by a western political power, it is important to scrutinize the English language status and English language education in this country more critically. Hence, this research aims to critically analyze the reflections of Thai university students towards politics of the English language and English language educational system in Thailand.

Politics of the English Language

Politics of the English language can be seen in various aspects. Primarily, it is a policy which aims to spread the English language globally, embedding with the former British Imperialism furthers to the modern form of Anglo-American dominant power, eroding the national sovereignty, cultural identity, and political independence particularly in the developing countries.

Focusing on Language Imperialism (Phillipson, 2011), it is a theoretical construct addressing why some languages are used more than others and what ideologies facilitate this phenomenon. Language Imperialism is derived from the term Linguicism. The concept of Linguicism follows ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources on the basis of language (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013). The existence of a hierarchical structure produces a source for Racism (discrimination of people based on their race), Sexism (discrimination of people based on their sex), as well as Linguicism (discrimination of people based on their language). These three discriminating concepts complexly correlate with one another. In addition, Linguicism can be both interlingual among different languages and intralingual when one dialect is more privileged than the others in the same linguistic heritage.

In brief, the domination of one language over another is not only a form of oppression within colonized societies, but also within the native English-speaking countries. It is a prejudice of someone's linguistic history. Accordingly, the English language has been imposed directly and indirectly throughout a global context. How could the language be a tool to prolong the power of its owners? I will explain further the use of Critical pedagogy as a lens to assess this question.

Critical Pedagogy

The ideas arose from human beings are not truly liberated and living in a world of contradiction with a constructed asymmetries of power and privilege (McLaren, 2009). Since historical and social knowledge is deeply rooted by the power of the dominant group, inevitably, some people who hold inferior societal status are marginalized as disadvantaged. Resulting from oppression in society, Critical pedagogy tries to seek a channel of voice and empowerment with the aim to create social justice and equality. From the view of Critical pedagogy, culture signifies the way people live sensibly in a society. It is a set of values which affect the social practices of a community with a shared belief of making sense of the world. For one culture to become more dominant, it needs to be reaffirmed of its central value and as a symbolic wealth of the society. The dominant culture prolongs its status by exercising its role through a concept of hegemony. Hegemony explains the phenomenon of a set of moral and intellectual leadership. It is unknowingly internalized as common sense by the oppressed. It also prolongs its existence

throughout history with the support of hidden ideologies. Ideology itself refers to the presentation of ideas, values, beliefs, or whatever produced by one individual or group and shared by the majority in the society. Hence, power needs no force but becomes more of a natural routine. It inscribed in economy, politics, culture, and education, subtly controlling the minds of the people.

An illustration of oppression can be portrayed from the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* written by Paulo Freire (1970). Freire lived in a former colonized country, Brazil, where he questioned the true identity and existence of the common people. The theory is believed to be an important tool to reflect and understand the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized. Moreover, education is also seen as an important tool to perpetuate the existence of oppression in a society- the kind of education which prevents people from developing their powers to perceive the way they exist in this world and have a capability to transform it. Freire (1970) termed this kind of education as 'banking education'. In this system, the oppressor benefits from the use of education as propaganda to blind the oppressed of their current situation (status quo).

Ideologies of the oppressive society could be transcended through a form of education. It was once said that education becomes a weapon against those who are illiterate (McLaren, 2009). To see a broader view of education in which carrying the hidden agenda that comes in a form of a must-learn knowledge, education is not just a process of giving and obtaining knowledge in school anymore. It is a matter of politics and economy, as Michael Apple termed *'Official Knowledge'*.

Official Knowledge

Literacy, literally has a nonpolitical function for most people- education helps people move up in their paths of life, another function of education is to produce economic skills, foster a system of beliefs and values, and create a national identity. Official Knowledge (Apple, 1993), a term used to define democratic education in a conservative age. The knowledge that dominates the learners for making them become under control. Henceforth, the awareness of an Official knowledge needs to be critical, but this does not mean that we must find faults in the policy. Though, it is more important to understand the history and contradictions of power relationships which affect our everyday lives.

Similarly to Freire's (1970) concept of cultural invasion, Apple (1993) regarded culture as one of the most important sites to be examined carefully. Politics involves power and forms of knowing. People in the society need to participate in social movements. In other words, humans are not free-floating individuals. We create culture and politics of culture. Culture is a producer and reproducer of value systems and power relation. Moreover, education can either open the horizon, ensuring mobility in society, and practicing democracy, or it can just as well be a social control, an embodiment of cultural changes. In terms of Official knowledge, the means and ends in education result from the powerful social groups who have made the knowledge legitimate. The aim is to accord or compromise the society by integrating the perspectives of various groups of people under its leadership. Therefore, the dominant power has been produced, distributed, and maintained in the culture of power circulation.

Participants

The participants in this study included 15 undergraduates from one of the Thai state universities in the northeastern region of Thailand. The number of the students was believed to be adequate for creating a safe space for an in-class discussion. Each student was given a pseudonym so that they could communicate anonymously. The students were purposefully selected from diverse backgrounds. The chosen students were balanced by age, sex, educational fields, and social classes.

The procedures of the given course in this study were adapted from the educational project called Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE). The purpose of this project was to develop an approach to transnational (global/political) literacy based on reflective ethics, and its conceptual framework is based on postcolonial pedagogies (Andreotti, 2005). The materials chosen for each class' discussion were varied. There were books, articles, news, quotes of famous persons, and video clips. The theme for each session focused on the position of the English language in different contexts worldwide. The materials were balanced in both native Thai and English while I provided further assistance with additional translations. Moreover, some leading questions were used as a guide for eliciting responses from the students. These questions shall enhance the critical thinking development and expand the social and cultural limitations of the ways the students think and do. The leading questions were as follows,

Leading Reflective questions for the students (individual); Why do you think like that ?, Are you sure of your thinking ?-why ?, Will other people agree or disagree with you ?, What do you think influences your ideas ?, Have you ever questioned yourself on why such ideas of some people are fixed about something ? *Leading Reflective questions for the students (in group)*; Do you think people in other countries have the same ideas as yours ? Have you ever wondered about people's different backgrounds ? and how such differences can shape one's ideas ?, What/who do you think can shape our ideas? Through what means ?, What is an ideal society in your opinion ? Who/which groups are important in developing society ? What's wrong with the rest of the people ?

Data Collection

The reflective diaries from the students written during each class, an in-class observation by the researcher written as field notes, and an in-depth interview of the students both individually and in a group discussion were used to collect the data throughout the research project. The data collection was done in native Thai language since the low English language proficiency of the students could be an obstacle that may hinder any insightful reflections. This study did not aim to evaluate the students' linguistic ability of the English language.

Data Analysis

In this study, Discourse analysis (Gee, 1999/2011) was used as a tool to analyze the data. The data refers to students' reflections towards politics of the English language. Discourse explains how the language is used by the observation of one's nonverbal messages or contexts including physical settings such as clothes, gestures, actions,

interactions, ways of doing things, symbols, tools, technologies, values, attitudes, beliefs, or emotions (Gee termed these as non-language stuff). We may understand that context helps design the language of what we say, on the other hand, the language itself also creates the context.

Questions based on the concept of the *'six building tasks'* were used to analyze the reflections of the students. The questions from Gee (2011) were; *the significance building tool-,* ask how words or phrases add or lessen the significance of a thing, t*he activities building tool-,* ask what activities the speaker seeks to get others to recognize and also ask about the social groups, institutions, or cultures that set his/her norms, t*he identities building tool-,* ask what identities the speaker intends others to recognize, vice versa, how the speaker positions others in the communication, *the politics building tool-,* ask what counts as a social good or the norms, t*he connections building tool-,* ask if the speaker connects or disconnects between things, t*he sign systems and knowledge building tool-,* ask what type of language the speaker uses, either a technical language, everyday language, or any privilege language. It could be concluded that Discourse analysis helped to identify and analyze the social identity of an individual.

Results

The shared ideas and concepts of the students' reflections were categorized into a theme by using Gee's Discourse analysis. Furthermore, each theme was interpreted by using the theoretical frameworks from Critical pedagogy as a lens. Hence, four different themes emerged namely;

'Oppression', the students pictured how the colonized countries were oppressed under the colonizers. They recognized the cruel existence of the history. The materials and discussion about oppression in the past facilitated them to relate the history to their own experiences. Even though they have never been oppressed in a way the colonized countries had, they shared similar emotions towards oppression such as loss, anger, or sympathy using the '*significance building tool'* to analyze some words or phrases the students produced which added the significance of this issue such as,

Stanza 1 (Significance building)
(Angelic) Line 1   they were forced to do things, in my mind I want <u>revenge</u>.
(Taylor)   2   she was looked by other people with mockery when speaking Isaan.
*   <u>(angry face)</u>*
(Emma)   3   I feel <u>sorry</u> we lost in war, we had to accept it, but it's also <u>not fair</u>.
(Ellie)   4   <u>Nobody likes</u> to be forced. If we are forced to do something often, we will
*   <u>not stand anymore</u>*
(Vicky)   5   I'm <u>worried</u> about my own language and culture too.

Furthermore, the students related the notion of oppression to their own Thai society which has a long tradition of a seniority system conformity to the elders is still practiced in Thai society. It is in line with Critical pedagogy which pointed out that the hegemony of the society is supported by an ideology which is internalized and naturalized by the citizens (McLaren, 2009). The closest reality the students reflected is the oppression in Thai classroom. They are classified by the varying academic abilities and social classes. The students also perceived the concept of stupidity. Freire (1970) suggested that this is the practice of dehumanization in which humans

are hindered of their own capability into being real humans and being able to transform themselves and the world. Instead, they created a self-depreciation. On the other hand, some students had no concerns about the historic facts since colonization did not affect their lives directly and it happened in the past. These students can be regarded as non-politicized. The overall reflections were of social oppression. However, when turning to discuss about oppression by means of language, the English language in particular, the students were perplexed about the concept of how the English language marginalizes some people. Hence, the second theme emerged.

'Power Dynamics through Languages'- the English language in this sense is used as a tool in an oppressive reproduction and in a power perpetuation of the dominant countries. Initially, the students had no idea how the English language has a different dimension apart from being a communicative tool. They could reflect after a few sessions by connecting politics of the English language to their own native Thai dialect in terms of language discrimination or Linguicism (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013). It showed that their native Thai dialect, Isaan is still discriminated in modern times since the Isaan dialect (spoken in the northeast of Thailand) has been in the lowest hierarchy among other dialects in the country. In addition, they reflected on an inequality brought by the English language in that there are fewer opportunities for some people to study English which has caused them to be regarded as socially and socio-economically inferior. Nonetheless, in terms of the English language alone, the students still regarded the English language as important and necessary for their lives in the future. They were well aware of politics of the English language but they simultaneously tended to adopt the language use due to their needs, values, and aspirations (Canagarajah, 1999). In accordance to Lee and Norton (2009), the ideological frameworks description about the English language is laissez-faire liberalism which focuses on the freedom of choice of people in deciding their own use of the language.

'Institutionalized Knowledge' - the third theme focuses on English education in Thailand. The students shared the typical experiences of classroom oppression such as mockery from teachers or classmates. There was also the centralized curriculum the students raised about their textbooks and lesson plans which made them become a captive audience (Apple, 2006). Furthermore, not only the students, but the teachers as well that have been deskilled. This knowledge is consistent with Freire (1970)'s notion about 'banking education' in which the students received only the knowledge that has been prearranged and embedded with the ideologies to conform with the norms and values the society has already set. The students were exposed to alternative sources of knowledge at a later age- though, they had already been skeptical about the previous information they received from school. However, they still responded that the English language is a must-learn language in order to complement their career requirements in the future. Their perspectives were formed as a result of the globalization they are living in. This can be explained by the prominent role of neoliberalism (Apple, 2006). It is economically driven rather than Imperialist like the past. Still, Apple (2006) emphasized the fact that neoliberalism has widened the gap between the center and the periphery in all aspects.

'Present Resistance'- this theme emerged unexpectedly since it reflected more of the students' foresights of how they will balance their lives and the reality of oppression, culturally and linguistically. They relied on the modernity of time and technologies of

how their ideas were shaped. Moreover, the fact that Thailand has never been directly colonized by a Western power has been a major influence on them. They have born in a time when some inhumane practices had already been denounced such as the abolition of slavery. Likewise, the rights of the marginalized have been successfully promoted to some extent, and the use of World Englishes (WE) has been recognized more in a period of post-colonialism. Hence, their reflections towards English language discrimination were to be aware of but not violently resist. They were more apt to adjust and adapt themselves to be able to live peacefully. Additionally, they will even use the English language as a tool to gain benefits from the dominant spheres such as education and job market without losing any of their origins and resources as illustrated in stanza 2.

Stanza2 (Adjustment)
(Vicky's diary) Line 1   I think English language is important so that
2   we can read the English minds what they want, it makes us know
in advance how to negotiate with them.
3   In contrast, if we don't know any English language, we will not know
what the British want.
(Emma's diary)   1   when time changes, I think we have to adjust ourselves
2   but not because we surrender, but instead we need to learn English
language in order to voice ourselves and to understand the other side.
(Ellie's interview) 1   English is necessary but sometime it's not
necessary to receive everything that belongs to them.
2   we should know language and the grammar but we don't have to
speak exactly like them. Why do we have to change to be like them?
3   but we adjust just to be smart enough not to be fooled.

Conclusion

At this point, the analysis of the students' reflections can be used to respond to the objective of this study, what are the Thai students' reflections towards politics of the English language and the English language education in Thailand ? The students agreed on how the English language is a dominant language and embedded with the ideologies of dominant countries for the purpose of perpetuating their power when they connected the language to the history of the colonial period to their own lived experiences. However, they only partly agreed that it was the language that oppresses, but instead argued that it is the people who use the language to oppress. Lastly, a few students disagreed with this point and distanced themselves from politics. Moreover, students who are young and live in the modern world resist the English language domination by using it, conversely, to gain benefits without being disadvantaged or losing their own grounds. In addition, to be able to adjust themselves in globalization where neoliberalism is leading the economic aspects in our time. At this stage, I believe that the students were made aware at some level of the hidden agendas behind the use of the English language and how it produces, reproduces, or intensifies an inequality in the society.

As a final point, I would like to draw an attention to English language learning in the globalization era. It is undeniable that the English language can never be diminished and the results of this study also adhere to this point of view. I do not argue that the English language should be given less importance in our education, rather I would seek an alternative channel for the rights of other languages and dialects.

Sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology are paying more attention to the fact that the world has changed into one of superdiversity (Blommeart, 2011). Critical pedagogy will help enhance students' awareness, initially, of the hidden regime in the language and policy. Moreover, Critical pedagogy helps terminate the 'banking education' in Thai education where students will not be able to critically scrutinize their realities. In this sense, I support the implementation of a change in the English education in Thailand to be more humane by raising and emphasizing the importance of English language learning in line with the cultural and political diversity expressed in the temporary world.

Limitations- this study was conducted in only fifteen hours. The limited time for the students be exposed to the materials, to one another, or to me, was quite small for eliciting a more saturated data sample from each component. Another concept of time constraint is a person's fixed ideas about something. This kind of provocative issue needs more time to get crystallized. Furthermore, Discourse analysis tools were the most central limitations in this study. When analyzing the data, each reflection can also be interpreted by more than one tool depending on the aspect we were looking for in the answers. Moreover, one person can have more than one idea towards one issue. The reflections were also relative to the points we tended to focus on. This is a contradiction within a person.

Further studies- the sessions provided for the students could be extensively longer. Moreover, the materials could be given in more abundantly and kept updated all the time since the world is changing every second. For this same reason, the world's knowledge should also be discussed. It is best to let the students be exposed to various sources of information from many different directions of perspectives towards one particular issue. This way, the students will have authentic reflections before we can trace how their reflections may alter or not and to what extent. This is to balance their ways of thinking. It is believed that the more the students are exposed to the materials and enter into dialogues, the more they can reflect on themselves and may even seek ways to transform. I personally believe in the dialogical practice (Freire, 1970). They will be guided by Critical pedagogy when reflecting on themselves and their realities. Furthermore, Gee's Discourse analysis tools can be adopted to analyze the data from different angles, but different tools can be used to analyze each situation and context appropriately.

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