

***Romantic Illusions in ELT: The Cultural Creation of Pedagogic 'Self' and Student 'Other,' from Shakespeare and the Sublime to English Textbooks***

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**Abstract**

This paper will discuss the connections between Western cultural movements such as the Enlightenment and the Age of Romanticism, and their residue in modern English teaching practices abroad. While Enlightenment culture represented Western progress positively, demarcation between 'civilized self' and 'savage other' meant that other parts of the world were judged by Europeans to be inferior. The Counter-Enlightenment, with its emphasis on sublime, astonishment and horror, served to further accentuate the colonialist notion of the non-West as mysterious terra incognita. Romanticism provided a sensory threshold, or liminality, whereby it could represent other parts of the world through the creative power of the human imagination, whilst also being bound by the liminal nature of this intermediate condition. In specific relation to The Middle East and Asia, Romantic writers contributed to a colonialist tradition of depicting the Orient as an exotic and inscrutable place of adventure. This has in turn influenced modern travel guides, which further convey the promise of adventure that draws backpackers and travellers to the poorer parts of the world on 'gap' year travels. Yet this may also implicitly influence the motivation of many Westerners working abroad as English teachers, while Western created stereotypical representations of 'self' and 'other' also pervade contemporary ELT materials. Therefore, of specific interest to this paper is discussing the interconnected relationship and tension between enlightened depiction of 'self' and romantic perception of the 'other', and its remnants in the pedagogic materials and political and economic practices of the English language teaching industry.

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## Introduction

The goal of achieving competence in a language is rarely viewed by learners as an end in itself; a language is not a teleology, but instead, as Vygotsky observed in *Thought and Language* “language is a tool” (1987, p256). In the modern era English is the central tool for global communication, which can be utilised by those learning it to gain knowledge and to transcend boundaries. Students and learners often engage with English actively and creatively, and, as Brumfit notes, “develop their own repertoires from their store of linguistic capacity, crossing language and dialect boundaries as they do so” (2006, p38). Yet at the same time, it should be recognised that English is not completely value free, and cannot be easily disassociated from ideological elements. Language is not, as Bakhtin argued, “a system of...abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated” (1994, p74). The global power of English is underpinned by the commercial and cultural ideology of the United States, and also permeates the English language teaching (ELT) industry, from economic rationale to classroom practice and materials design. ELT textbooks appear to aid the practises of Western corporations, legitimising global brands and products as an inevitable norm (Gray, 2010) and this has led ELT to be accused of exercising hegemonic domination through “cultural and commercial globalization” (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p.359). Due to this, some teaching practitioners have expressed a reluctance to use ELT materials (Sell, 2005, p.86) feeling that they are operating as pedagogic Trojan horses.

While ELT is underwritten by American commercial values, it is also subtly informed by a number of Western epistemological and historical discourses. These facts have not always been explicitly acknowledged or critically discussed by ELT materials writers. The handbook *Teaching English abroad: talk your way around the world*, for example, observes “English has come to dominate the world” (Griffith, 1999, p10), but neglects to discuss or identify the explicit reasons for this domination, which were not linguistic in origin, but can instead be seen as the result of successive waves of Western colonialism and were, in turn, underpinned by the ideological values of the Enlightenment. European culture drew a demarcation between ‘civilized self’ and ‘savage other,’ while the subsequent Romantic movement, with its emphasis on the sublime, astonishment and horror, served to further accentuate this division, with eastern parts of the world represented in Western culture as a mysterious terra incognita. Stereotypical representations of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ however, still pervade contemporary ELT materials. Commercial textbooks contain a number of cultural stereotypes, such as examples of floating markets and exotic tropical foods, juxtaposed next to features on Starbucks and McDonalds. This has led to criticism from some academics, such as Phillipson, who maintains that ELT “needs to be situated in a macro societal theoretical perspective” (1992, p2). It is therefore the purpose of this paper to discuss ELT in such terms, foregrounding the exploitative background which underpins its culture and economic policies, which are subtly shaped by the historical ideologies of colonialism, the enlightenment, and romanticism. In particular, this discussion will specifically focus on the ELT industry in Japan, and will discuss how lingering romanticized representations of Japan as exotic ‘other’ subtly influence ELT materials and rationale in a Japanese context.

## Colonialism and the Exporting of English Values

The export of cultural ideas in English and the beginnings of English teaching as a foreign language arise at almost the same point in history. The attack on England by the Spanish Armada in 1588 had provoked the Tudor monarchy into bolstering nationalist fervour and Shakespeare's history plays reflected this; John of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II* celebrated England as a "scepter'd isle...this precious stone set in the silver sea" (1623/1966, p388). Such jingoism also celebrated and promoted the English language, however, as in *Henry V* when the warrior king remarks "Fie upon my false French! By mine honour in true English!" (1623/1966, p499) While the promotion of English at home reflected national, religious and cultural agendas, at the same time the idea to actively export British cultural values abroad through English was developed by Sir Walter Raleigh during his experiences as a colonist in Virginia and Guiana. The ambitious Raleigh planned to break into the Spanish domination of the Americas (Hill, 1972, p157), and recognized that these ventures would succeed most easily and least expensively with the support and assistance of local Indians (Oberg, 2000, p149). His diplomatic policy thus envisaged "the export of English arts" (Hill, 1972, p156) and this cultural exportation was to be achieved through the use of English speaking Indian translators such as the famous Manteo and Wanchese, who were taken to England and taught English by Thomas Harriot in 1584 (Oberg, 2000, p152). Coincidentally, Jacques Bellot's *English Schoolmaster*, the first known textbook designed solely for the purpose of teaching English as a foreign language, had appeared just 4 years earlier in 1580, having been prepared in order to meet the arrival of French Huguenots fleeing the massacre of Paris (Howatt & Widdowson, 2009, p20). Nascent English teaching hence reflected national, colonial, religious and cultural concerns. While Raleigh's colony in Virginia failed to survive, his imperial ideas, outlined in his literary text *The Discovery of Guiana* (2007/1596) denoted him as an "important figure in the history of English culture" (Hill, 1972, p219). In particular, this set in motion a colonial mode of thought based on civilizing through cultural values, which were translated from English into the languages of the colonized.

Colonialism in Africa also involved the exportation of cultural values, which were championed by the explorer and colonialist Henry Morton Stanley (Sherry, 1971, p121) and were disseminated through the missionary work of people such as David Livingstone. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe described how British missionaries in Nigeria targeted the religious education of the young in the battle for hearts and minds. Knowing that "a frontal attack on it would not succeed" (Achebe, 1959/1991, p166) the missionary Mr. Brown builds a school, so that "from the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand" (p166). Yet the teaching of English also went hand in hand with such education, because "the purpose of education was to bring the benefits of European (and specifically British) knowledge and culture to the colonial peoples...and of course the same language" (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p128). English was therefore seen as a valuable colonial tool for conveying cultural and religious values, which Orwell was later to describe as a "weapon which our enemies cannot use against us" (Orwell, 1948, p250).

Yet while the age of colonialism is now considered finished, English, is still employed as a tool through which to export cultural values. The rise to prominence of Western laissez-faire economics precipitated a shift in English language teaching

policy towards a newer oil based economic system (Brumfit, 2001, p118), overseeing "a period of change which radically altered the scope and structure of ELT" (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p232). English became a valuable commodity analogous to oil, exemplified by the British Council's 1987/88 report which specifically identified that "Britain's real black gold is not North Sea Oil but the English language" (Phillipson, 1992, p48). ELT can thus be seen as projecting neo-economic values, which are linked to petroleum and the economy connected to it, and yet this corporate ideology is also historically linked to the values of colonialism, so that, as Phillipson argues, any analysis of ELT must still encompass a study of "ELT and imperialism" (1992, p75). In Japan, perhaps a major nexus between ELT, cultural and economic values and imperialism may be the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET), which was set up in 1987. The official website states that JET "is aimed at promoting grass-roots international exchange between Japan and other nations" (Jet Programme, 2014) by inviting young overseas graduates to assist in foreign language education. Others argue, however, that JET was forced upon the Japanese, being created to open Japan up to Western markets, originally arising due to trade tensions and being presented as a gift to the American government (Galloway, 2009, p170).

Modern ELT textbooks also open up the world to Western business interests, and such materials are often saturated with corporate driven values and product placements (Litz, 2005, p6), paving the ground for the development of markets favourable to the West. The provision of ELT textbooks has allegedly been identified as a strategic business move (Gray, 2010, p716), and many critics of the global market economy argue that textbook production occurs with government backing, in conjunction either with international sponsors or with big publishing. Flavell cites the Sri Lankan situation of the 1980s, in which the main course book, called *English for Me*, was "developed with the support of Norwegian aid and the secondary one (*English Every Day*) underwritten by the British Council/Overseas Development Agency" (Flavell, 1994, p48). Similarly, Phillipson notes that the U.K textbook for Africa program was designed by the British government to get surplus textbooks into African schools to aid the U.K economy (Phillipson, 1992, p48).

### **Enlightened Self and ELT Textbooks**

It appears that the commercial exploitation of the English language has a "long and honourable history" (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p357), stretching back from the modern ELT industry to the age of Stanley and Raleigh. The historical discourse that underpinned this exploitative colonialism and helped to distinguish it from the rest of the world was the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment. This age of rationalism gave Europeans "reasons for self-satisfaction" (Russell, 1947, p560) and created a cultural and ideological demarcation; an ontological legitimacy was bestowed upon Western progress whilst an inferior status was conferred upon other parts of the world (Pennycook, 1998, p50). This helped legitimise English as an emancipatory tool whereby savage 'other' could be educated by enlightened English speaking 'self.' English native speakers considered their language superior, and other languages inferior, opaque, complex; hence to be deemed civilised, non-native English speakers would need to acquire it. Even as succinct a writer as Orwell championed English as the supreme candidate for global communication because, he argued, of its superior logical simplicity, maintaining "a completely illiterate Indian

will pick up English far faster than a British soldier will pick up Hindustani” (Orwell, 1948, p33).

This ethnocentric conception of English can be discovered in a number of English literary texts. In Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, the scenes where Crusoe teaches Friday English display a Western superior attitude towards English (Defoe, 1719/2007, p269-74). Crusoe does not consider learning Friday’s language, because he considers English to represent a superior discourse. Therefore, Crusoe quickly sets about the process of civilizing Friday by teaching him English. Pennycook claims that Friday is subordinated whilst his identity is constructed, arguing “Not only does Friday not get to speak in his own language, but he has been given very particular, colonizing English words to express his cultural background” (Pennycook, 1998, p15). Similarly, however, we find this superior English speaking ‘self’ in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Marlowe judges the Congo natives by the standards of his own language, and, as the natives cannot speak his tongue, Marlow refers to their chanting as an “immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense” (Conrad, 1889/1995, p80). Conrad’s narrator, conversely, describes “the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz” (80), which was possible because “he could speak English to me” (82). Because Conrad’s Marlowe cannot understand the language of the Congo natives he doesn’t afford it the status of a proper language, claiming that he holds “a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend” (63).

Yet Conrad is celebrated as one of a number of writers whose works represented the enlightened values of western civilization. F.R Leavis claimed in *The Great Tradition*, “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad” (Leavis, 1950, p1). The images of various literary figures from the Western canon, such as Dickens and Austen, however, still pervade the content of ELT communication textbooks such as *Headway Upper-Intermediate* (Soars, J, & Soars, L, 2005, p29), while the continuing cultural caché of Shakespeare, whose *Henry V* championed ‘true English’, has seen his image employed in ELT textbooks such as *English File: Students’ Book Upper Intermediate* (Oxenden, 2001, p112). While ELT textbook writers “think and compose chiefly through culture-specific schemas” (Hedge, 2003, p56), these cultural schemes of perception may occlude students from accessing and critically processing the cultural data found in such teaching materials. A learner of English who is unfamiliar with the cultural context found in such materials will “most likely experience problems in processing English systemic data” (Hedge, 2003, p53). Such problems may engender student lack of motivation and interest, resulting in a potentially crucial obstacle to language acquisition.

### **Romanticism and Liminality**

ELT is a top down, culturally specific industry, and the ideology and language displayed in teaching materials often reflects this; the title of the EFL handbook *Teaching English Abroad: Talk Your Way Around the World* (Griffith, 1999), for example, places emphasis on talking, and projecting one’s language and values, rather than listening or learning. Yet this ideology can be traced back to the cultural inheritance of Romanticism, which posited importance on the imagination; projecting one’s images onto objects, rather than perceiving the thing in itself. Romanticism

bestrode a period of political, social, and economic change, and yet also oversaw a period of great cultural transformation; while the Enlightenment had placed importance on the well formed and classically pleasing, Burke's (1756) *A philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful* argued that objects of astonishment, mystery and horror were equally worthy of intellectual attention. Later poetic works by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron and Shelley instigated a rebellion against the empirical, rational faculties of the Enlightenment, and instead perpetuated an idea that culture should function as a vehicle for romantic contemplation, rather than logical utility, being defined by Keats as "negative capability" (1848/1996, p1015). Yet this cultural movement also served to further accentuate a colonialist representation of other parts of the world, such as The Middle East and Asia, as exotic, beautiful, grotesque objects of mystery. Romanticism provided a sensory threshold, or liminality, whereby writers and painters could creatively represent the 'other' whilst also being bound by the liminal nature of this intermediate condition. In Wordsworth's 'The Prelude', the poetic dreamer finds himself in an "Arabian waste" where he meets an inscrutable "Arab of the Bedouin tribes" (1850/1996, p337), while in Coleridge's 'Xanadu' the poet mystically imagines the "pleasure dome" of Kubla Khan, and its mysterious "caverns measureless to man," set in "a savage place" (1816/1996, p514). Russell notes that "Coleridge's Kubla Khan is hardly the historical monarch of Marco Polo," and further observes that "the geography of the romantics is interesting...the places in which it is interested are remote, Asiatic" (1947, p704). De Quincy wrote that China, and Southern Asia in general, was "the seat of awful images and associations" (1821/1996, p680). Shelley's 'Ozymandias' described the ruined statue of Ramesses the Great, set in the ruins of "an antique land" whilst "the decay of that colossal wreck" (1818/1996, p860) was used as a metaphor for human decadence, and in particular, non-Western decline, as viewed through the eyes of a Western explorer, a romantic traveller in an antique land.

These romantic illusions were and still are echoed in the advertising language employed by travel companies, which emphasize the exotic and mysterious nature of the colonial 'other.' For example, the rear cover of *Footprint Morocco* describes, in terms similar to Shelley's romantic descriptions of Egypt, a "dusty desert" country (McGuinness, 2003). Morocco is denoted as a blank canvas upon which Westerners created romantic art, being "the land where Delacroix and Matisse discovered color" (McGuinness, 2003). Similarly, in ELT textbooks, foreign cultures are often represented romantically as perceived through Western travellers' eyes. The textbook, *Headway Upper-Intermediate*, under the chapter title 'Explorers and Travellers', features a section on Western exploration, and observes that Marco Polo "gave Europeans their first information about China and the Far East" (Soars J, & Soars L, 2005, p16). Asian English students using this textbook thus learn about the West's discovery and interpretation of them, but are not given a comparative account of the East's interpretation of the West. This is then juxtaposed with pictures of floating markets and textual information about a young Western backpacker who is exploring the Far East (p16). This ethnocentric conception of discovery and adventure is therefore brought from the past into the present. Western teachers using this textbook are tacitly persuaded to perceive themselves as represented explorer 'self,' whilst Asian learners using the textbook are implicitly encouraged to see themselves as discovered 'other,' becoming, in effect, a Western knowledge commodity. In such examples, complex cultures are rendered as romanticised,

immutable snapshots, a form of bad sociology, which, as Brumfit notes “can easily degenerate into stereotyping” (Brumfit, 2001, p35).

### **Japan as Romantic ‘Other’ in ELT**

Romantic stereotyping of Japan as exotic ‘other’ has subtly influenced the type of ELT materials and pedagogic rationale employed in a Japanese context. The Ukiyo-e inspired vogue of *Japonisme*, which held Europe in thrall during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did much to initiate such illusions, yet English literature such as Lafcadio Hearn’s 19<sup>th</sup> century *An Attempt at Interpretation* (1904) also perpetuated a myopic, romanticised representation of Japan. Hearn talked of a land full of “queer small streets full of odd small people, wearing robes and sandals of extraordinary shapes” (Hearn, 1904, p10), while Japanese living abroad were also represented as strange and inscrutable by Westerners; W. Somerset Maugham, on a visit to 1920s Singapore, described the Japanese there in the short story ‘P & O’ as “sly” and “busy with pressing and secret affairs” (Maugham, 1969/1926, p125). In the post-world war era, Edwin Reischauer’s circle of US endorsed Japanophiles, known somewhat pejoratively as ‘The Chrysanthemum Club,’ continued this tradition, representing the Japanese in texts such as *The Japanese Today* as exotic, inscrutable samurai salarymen (Smith, 1998, p25-27). Yet these romanticised representations can still be found in travel guides young English teachers may bring with them to Japan. The Lonely Planet’s *Japan: A Travel Survival Kit* describes “raked pebble gardens, the sensuous contours of a temple roof, the tripping step of a latter day geisha in pursuit of a taxi” (Taylor, et al, 1997, p372) whilst asserting that “all westerners long for these things of Japan” (372). A more recent *Japan Times* article, entitled ‘Rediscovering Lost Tokyo’ describes Arakicho as a quarter where, come evening “backlit signs and paper lanterns glow and there is the click of heels on stone...Some might even call it...romantic” (Milner, 2014). This is no different to language employed on the Internet homepage of the JET programme, however. The organization, which is responsible for bringing a great many young assistant language teachers to Japan, uses words such as ‘traditional’, ‘pristine’ and ‘remote’ to describe life in Japan (Jet Programme, 2014).

Yet ELT textbooks have also been found to contain romanticised stereotypical examples of exotic Japanese ‘other.’ The business English textbook *Market Leader* includes a feature on Japanese department stores, which is embellished with a picture of feminine office ladies bowing and also includes a romantic image of Mount Fuji (Cotton, Falvey & Kent, 2005, p122-123). Conversely, a chapter on Western management techniques is juxtaposed with a photo of masculine American cowboys lassoing cattle (p100). This perception of ‘self’ and ‘other’ also influences ELT pedagogic theory on teaching English in Japan and ‘others’ Japanese learners; titles include *Classroom Cultures: East Meets West* (1996), *The Chrysanthemum Maze* (1993), or *West vs. East* (1996) (Susser, 1996, p54). Viewed in this way, Japanese classrooms and students are perceived as illogical constraints to be overcome, exotic obstacles to the implementation of Western imported wisdom. Pedagogic research has also reflected this, Atkinson (1997) maintaining that ‘critical thinking’ is a Western specific practice and inappropriate when employed in some second language contexts such as Japan.

Whilst discussing the romantic cause of these `self` and `other` representations, it is also important to examine the possible effects they may have upon the represented. Due to the overpowering influence of these romantic representations it can be argued, as Said claimed in *Orientalism*, that the East participates in its own orientalising (1979, p285); Japan`s self-Orientalism, the Nihonjinron literature, a body of discourse that purports to demonstrate Japan`s traditional uniqueness from other cultures (Befu & Manabe, 2003, p124) can perhaps be viewed as an example of this influence. This rather romantic ideology, produced largely by and for a Japanese audience, seeks to idealise Japan`s traditional cultural identity, and crude traces of this can be found in *New Horizon* (2013), one of the most commonly used junior high school English textbooks in Japan. In these books, published by the private company Tokyo shoseki, Japanese students are introduced to English language study through comparative romanticised focus on hamburgers and green tea, American potluck parties and ikebana, contributing to a strong cultural demarcation of `other` and `self.` This division is not just restricted to crude cultural snapshots, however, as a comprehensive study of Japanese seventh grader English textbooks (Matsuda, 2002) has previously illustrated. Such texts tend to prioritise native speakers such as Americans and UK nationals over Japanese and outsider circle speakers of English, `othering` Japanese speakers of English as inferior. Matsuda noted that Japanese characters in English textbooks “produce fewer words (2,844) than those from the inner circle (3,074)” (2002, p189), giving the impression that native speakers are the dominant speakers of English, and threatening to undermine Japanese learners` agency as English users. *New Horizon* is no different in this respect; the character Mary Brown, an American teacher, is the main focus, and Japanese students studying English with this textbook are led through her experiences as she learns about a fossilised, romanticised Japanese culture. Kakuko Sato, the Japanese English teacher, however, is mostly ignored, helping to subordinate the Japanese teacher of English in print, and, potentially, in the classroom itself.

## **Conclusion**

While English teacher recruitment abroad to service the needs of empire was a major difficulty for the British during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p135), modern advances in travel and communication have seen a new breed of economically motivated Westerner criss-cross the globe teaching English. Yet an adventure-seeking attitude, which sees its origins in the romantic illusion of exotic `other,` may also implicitly influence the motivation of many young Westerners working abroad as language teachers. Due to this culturally inspired wanderlust, many ELT teachers` motivations may not be commensurate with the requirements of their learners. Griffith notes the “proliferation of cowboy teachers who have no feel for language, no interest in their pupils and no qualms about ripping them off” (1999, p.11). Even skilled language teachers, however, may not properly understand the foreign pedagogic systems in which they are employed, and may mistakenly apply Western solutions to distinctly non-Western problems. For example, Tollefson argues that ELT experts are “often hired as consultants to disperse `solutions` to complex educational problems in countries about which they know very little” (Tollefson, 1991, p97).

The ideology and practises that inform the ELT industry are centralised and Western-centric, arguably functioning in some contexts as a neo-romantic liminality; this

liminality provides a creative threshold, but also, as Phillipson maintains, ensues a “disconnection of ELT from the social context within which it operates” (1992, p259). To re-engage with context the ELT industry perhaps needs to consider the words of the late Stuart Hall, who saw cultural education being as much about future routes as historical roots (1993). All culture is in flux, and most people live within the space between stereotypes and representations. Thus we should think of cultural identity as “a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within” (Hall, 1993, p222), and if ELT is to avoid the practice of cultural stereotyping and become a truly egalitarian enterprise it needs to develop a more context specific, student centered pedagogy. Students are the sole justification for language teaching as a profession, and if indeed ELT does profess to centre on its learners, it must become, as Brumfit observes “a far more dynamic concept than it often appears to be” (2001, p53).

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