

The Views on Linguistic Imperialism in Multicultural Classroom

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Abstract

This study reports on a project in a Japanese university's multicultural classes where international and Japanese students studied together. Students investigated various linguistic dominance cases throughout the world, based on 'Linguistic Imperialism' as originally defined by Phillipson (1992). Linguistic Imperialism involves the imposition of a dominant language, in particular, English. The negative view included in this concept can be traced through history to the expansion of English as the result of colonialism and hegemonism which has led to inequalities between English and other languages. The imposition of other languages has also been repeated in many areas of the world, often under circumstances of colonialism and border conflicts. This seemed to be a thought-provoking topic in multicultural classes since the linguistic backgrounds of the students vary and its aims include the dimension of learning from differences and otherness. Each student investigated an area of the world which experienced the imposition of another language. Fifteen students' written products, such as essays and reflection diaries after discussion, became the primary data of this study to qualitatively analyse how students' views developed throughout this project. Although many students did not exclude negative views on hegemony, most of them also pointed out the complexity of the issues and beneficial results of the dominant language, as well as protecting the rights of Indigenous languages and their speakers. The solution suggested was that the context using more than one language, i.e. multilingual or plurilingual settings should be much more common in societies.

Keywords: Linguistic Dominance, Linguistic Imperialism, Multicultural Class, Plurilingualism

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Introduction

This study reports on a project in a Japanese university's multicultural classes where international and Japanese students studied together. It investigated various linguistic dominance cases in the world, based on 'Linguistic Imperialism' originally defined by Phillipson (1992). The significance of the English language in a globalizing world is recognized, while the negative aspects of English dominance in non-anglophone areas are identified. In the contemporary world, the spreading influence of English in culture, media, education, etc. even dominates the lives of non-anglophone countries through language. Students presented different linguistic dominance cases in different areas of the world and analysed the influences of the imposed languages. The diverse linguistic backgrounds of the students were utilized through this project and its implication and future directions and agenda are presented at the end.

Multicultural classes

The context of this study is a Japanese university's multicultural classes where international and Japanese students study together. The international students who are enrolled in these classes are primarily exchange students participating in Study Abroad programs in Japan for 6 months to a year. The term, 'multicultural class' may not be common in universities in other countries, and if a society has a culturally diverse construct, perhaps such multicultural classes are unnecessary. However, in a country like Japan where 'one nation-state, one language and one culture' remains generally the case (despite the population of foreign residents gradually increasing), the occasions to meet foreigners remain limited and multicultural classes can offer students occasions to interact with those from other countries, i.e. a Study Abroad-like experience while staying at home. Many of these classes are conducted in English, according to the internationalization policy of higher education to introduce EMI (English-medium instruction). Additionally, quite a few multicultural classes are offered as Japanese-medium instruction classes, for international students who are advanced or better-level L2 (second language) Japanese learners. A bilingual mix of English and Japanese multicultural classes is occasionally also offered.

Typically, the teaching style of multicultural classes utilizes PBL(problem-based learning/project-based learning) to maximise the interaction between students and discussions in small groups of several students are encouraged.

Multicultural classes are content-based and non-language teaching courses. A minimum language level is usually required for non-native speakers, but language barriers remain. The management of linguistic accommodations within the classroom can be an issue in such courses (Yamada, 2021). Therefore, the topics of multicultural classes require more careful consideration and are somewhat linguistically controlled compared to usual content-based academic courses.

In contrast, the variety of the students' backgrounds can be an advantage in these courses and enable and expand valuable educational opportunities to learn from differences and otherness. It occurred to the author to deal with 'linguistic dominance' cases as a topic to utilize the diverse linguistic backgrounds of these students, since many areas of the world have experienced certain types of linguistic dominance in their histories.

Linguistic Dominance and Linguistic Imperialism

There are quite a few areas in the world which have experienced dominant languages imposed through occupation by powerful nation-states, often during colonialism, border conflicts or nation-building.

In the class, the case of English and its influence on the world was first studied and discussed. The concept of 'Linguistic Imperialism' was initially defined by Phillipson (1992) as follows:

...the dominance asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. (p.42)

Within a global context, the condition of the English language has been changing for approximately 20 years since the end of the Cold War. The power balances between anglophone countries and others differ also. Concepts such as 'World Englishes' and 'English as a Lingua Franca', suggest basically sharing the English language between native and non-native speakers and could have weakened the 'status' of particular anglophone countries associated with the English language. The concept was redefined by Phillipson (2009) as follows:

Linguistic imperialism, or linguistic dominance in the sense of the maintenance of injustice and inequality by means of language policies, is invariably connected to policies in commerce, science, international affairs, education, culture and the media, all of which involve material resources and attitudes, and all of which evolve dynamically. (p. 5-6)

What must be addressed here is that his critique of 'Linguistic Imperialism' focuses on 'inequality' between dominant and the subordinate being dominated remains the same. The English language continues to invade other non-anglophone countries and continues to influence their cultures and economies without people's awareness, through a kind of demilitarization.

Although Phillipson's description was a sort of warning about 'Linguistic Imperialism' as a threat, there are controversial views on 'Linguistic Imperialism', in particular, more recently. Zhao et al. (2017, p. 418) raised four contrasting points to be carefully considered for the comprehension of Linguistic Imperialism:

...whether the dominance of English is imposed or elected, by force or by choice, conspiracy or non-conspiracy and whether the spread of English has led to hegemony or to democracy, to the decline of local languages and cultures or to linguistic diversity and the cultural progress of the dominated.

The position of English in the contemporary globalized world is specific and unique and no other language is comparable. However, what can be inferred from English Linguistic Imperialism is that imposition of a language can also influence and dominate other aspects beyond languages, such as culture, political structure and media within a society. It was assumed that students with various linguistic backgrounds could bring thought-provoking perspectives into multicultural classrooms.

Project on Linguistic Dominance

The project on Linguistic Dominance was introduced into the multicultural classes where international and local Japanese students studied together. Each student introduced a case of imposition of a dominant language in any area of the world. It was expected that this project would utilize students' various linguistic resources, though these were primarily knowledge rather than practical language skills.

The context of the study was three multicultural classes conducted over three academic years (2020–2022). These were English-medium classes and online classes using Zoom in 2020 and 2021 and classroom-based teaching in 2022. In total, 2 Japanese students and 13 international students (from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, India, the UK, France, Germany, Poland, and Canada) participated. The students were third- and fourth-year undergraduate students and postgraduate students, so the abstract topics could be adjusted relatively easily.

This study aims to explore the types of views students developed through the various cases, based on a research question set with a relatively loose classroom research design. The target data collected and analysed were students' written products, such as essays and reflection diaries after class discussions. Rather than quoting from academic literature, student' original analytic views were required in their work. An ethical consideration was followed to deal with their work anonymously. Students did not necessarily select areas of their home countries and the choices were based on their interests. The cases students introduced are listed in Table 1.

Ainu language in Hokkaido, Japan
Okinawan language, Japan
International resort area in Japan
Japanese occupation in Taiwan
Language policies on indigenous Taiwan
Japanese occupation in Hong Kong
Mandarin in Canton Region in China
Domestic language issues in Indonesia
English language in India
Breton language in France
Latin and Roman Empire
Silesian ethnolect in East Europe
Colonization in America by Spanish Empire
Sign language users of deaf communities

Table 1: Student-introduced cases

The key concepts that emerged from the analysis

The descriptions which include the students' analytical views were extracted from the written products. These were categorized into six thematic groups and a description of noteworthiness for items that could not fit into any of the six groups. The key parts are underlined in the following section.

The roles of the imposed language

All of the following are related to the roles of languages rather than languages as communication tools, that imposed languages played.

Language played a role in bringing *the power* of the dominator during colonialism.

Not only language, but *culture and values* were also imposed.

The role *to reinforce domestic unification* was introduced by the language, as well as the role of a common language.

The skills associated with the dominant language indicate *social class and are a symbol of the elite*.

The dominant language has *the power to change social structures*.

Local languages are connected to local identity. This may allowed an opportunity for the imposed language to enforce “*civilizing the locals*”.

The need for a local common language

Some countries have many internal local language areas. The following identifies the need for a local common language other than English.

A local common language is more needed than global English in some areas.

Both the local languages and a local common language need *to co-exist according to policy*.

Teaching local languages

The growing presence of English in a globalized world may lead to disregarding local languages. The following identifies the need for teaching local languages.

Some non-anglophone countries have policies to prioritize English in their general education. There are objections to this, including *the loss of opportunities to foster identity through local languages*.

Minority languages, extinct languages

There are many more than other categories. The following are related to minority languages.

Not only languages but *cultures*, should be maintained and introduced.

It would be difficult to maintain them in reality, if they are used *only in rituals for special occasions*.

Minority languages are officially protected, but this is sometimes decided *for political reasons*.

The distinction between language, dialect, and ethnolect is sometimes decided *for political reasons*.

It is difficult to maintain minority languages due to associated *costs and work*.

Contrastive methods of dominance

The following analyses and summarizes methods of dominance.

Direct and deductive vs. indirect and inductive patterns are found, with the latter seeming to be more effective in integrating the imposed language into societies with an ‘emphasis on the benefit of the language’.

Multilingual environment as a solution

The followings is presented as a suggestion associated with social environment changes.

A multilingual society may naturally raise awareness among people.

Multilingual environment in societies should be more common to foster respect for other languages.

The following description did not fit into any of the six categories but is noteworthy, as a kind of deeply-expressed insight.

The position of Latin is special. Although it no longer has political power, its influence is huge since it provided a foundation for many European languages and academic terms. It can be said to have power globally, not only in Europe.

Overall, students tackled this task enthusiastically and many of their views were not superficial but indicated deep insights. Interestingly, similar views which were categorized into the same groups were generated from cases in different areas.

Implications and Future Directions

The major finding is that power structure and the sacrifices caused by linguistic dominance are similar among the cases examined in different areas. Languages are generally considered communication tools but this project highlighted that they can be political mediums of dominance. The political aspects of language and language education are also addressed in some studies (eg. Byram, 2008).

The initial intention of this study was to lead the students to focus on the inequalities created by linguistic dominance, but they expanded their analyses to issues including the beneficial aspects of language imposition.

The suggestions of these students provide valuable insights. The multilingual social context was suggested to raise the social awareness of society towards language issues, but the social context is not created easily. Instead, plurilingualism will be a more adequate and alternative concept in an educational context as it can be taught through education. Plurilingualism refers to the capacity of individuals to speak, read and write two or more languages or language

varieties to differing degrees and for changing purposes throughout their lives (Hu, 2017, p. 535). It is contained in the language policy of the Council of Europe (2001) and is an educational initiative. It has been confirmed that the project utilizes the diverse linguistic backgrounds of multicultural classes and will lead to the development of a plurilingual dimension in society.

An important future goal resulting from this study is to further explore the influence of this type of activity specifically on Japanese students, who are based in their homes. In contrast, international students tended to provide more varied topics and analyses which can be assumed to reflect their original linguistic backgrounds.

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