

Identifying and Confronting Language Ideologies in English Language Classrooms

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Introduction

English language classrooms are embedded both in ideologies of language and in ideological language (see e.g. Warriner, 2016; Volk & Angelova, 2007), which highlights a clear paradox in terms of ideology and neutral language teaching. With this in mind, teachers must consider what potential effects ideology can have on educational settings intending to mediate a nuanced and value neutral message to its students. In accordance, this paper aims at displaying how “language ideologies frame and influence most aspects of language use” and how “their influence is not always directly observable” (McGroarty, 2010, p. 3), and how this is relevant for English language educators in their everyday practice.

Fundamental Questions to Consider

The matter of language ideologies lends itself well to classroom analysis, and it can therefore be of use to consider some questions in relation to this issue. This paper, with the following questions in mind, aims at notifying pre-service teachers and teachers about potential issues of embedded ideology in English language teaching, and to suggest a course of action to follow.

- How can ideology be said to play a key role in English language education?
- How can ideology be problematic on the implemental level of an English language classroom?
- How can a teacher tackle the struggle between implementing ideological policy documents and offering an unbiased English education?

Language Ideology on Micro and Macro Levels

With the fundamental notion that language education and language policy is closely connected to ideology (De Costa, 2010), we must consider the levels on which ideology and education converge. On a macro level, political agenda influence documents, while micro-level planning is formed from the cultural atmosphere in which policies are implemented (De Costa, 2010, p. 219; Chua, 2006, p. 215). In other words, macro-level planning is in play on a national scale, while micro-level planning is executed on a local level, by amongst others teachers and principals. It is here, on a micro-level, that teachers play a key role, as final implementers of policy documents. Having established that education consists of ideological elements on different implementational levels, the following sections will explore *how* ideology is present in language education through hierarchies, policy documents, and language itself.

Language Hierarchies in Language Classrooms

Research shows that hierarchies are manifested in language classrooms, both within languages (De Costa, 2010; Carreira, 2011) and between languages (Flores & Murillo, 2001; Mori, 2014; Luykx et. al., 2008; Volk & Angelova, 2007). Relating

this to a neutral educational setting, it becomes clear that these hierarchies raise an issue when trying to build accepting and tolerant classrooms.

Hierarchies within languages

One major finding of hierarchies in English language teaching is De Costa's (2010) study conducted in Singapore. There, he found that "a standard English language ideology was in operation", which means that students were required to be able to produce both oral and written English according to international standards of English (p. 226). Moreover, in interviews with teachers, De Costa (2010) found that they tended to put an equation mark between 'good English' and the use of 'standard English' (p. 226; see also Carreira, 2011 for similar discussion).

From these findings, we can confirm that hierarchies within the English language are well established. Drawing on this, it is central for teachers to consider and reflect on how varieties of English are labeled, so that their classrooms can become atmospheres with acceptance towards different local and global varieties of English.

Hierarchies between languages

From further research on language ideologies in education can be observed that hierarchies exist not only *within* languages, but moreover *between* languages, where English is seen as the 'proper' and 'good' while, in this case, Spanish is Othered (Flores & Murillo, 2001, p. 184; Volk & Angelova, 2007, pp. 186-189). In other terms, this means that English is placed above other languages, like Spanish, in a hierarchal structure of languages. In practice, however, teachers should consider other languages than English in English classrooms as valuable, rather than problematic, as they can be of help to each other (St John, 2010).

This leads us to look to a dichotomy of ideology that relates to hierarchies between languages, namely that of monolingual contra bilingual language ideology. Mori's (2014) findings from a study of an English language classroom demonstrate "conflicting ideologies", where the teacher's altering attitude towards "English-only" has an impact on students' perception of English (p. 160). Similar discoveries were revealed in Luykx *et. al.* (2008). In this study, research and samples from science classrooms showed (a) restrained learning due to English-only policies, and (b) that allowance for the use of L1 to figure out meaning in L2 was of help in students' learning process (Luykx *et. al.*, 2008, p. 659).

Ideology in Language Policy Documents

Language ideology, as has been shown above, is firmly rooted in language hierarchies and a language's position within a hierarchal structure. Relating this to the idea of education free from ideological elements, how can we see these hierarchies manifested in policy documents?

Root (2012) observed how "the ideology of English influences English language classrooms" in South Korea (p. 177), and how English as a mandatory part of successful citizenship is deeply rooted in curriculum and policy documents (Root, 2012, p. 178). Looking at content of the Swedish curriculum for English further strengthens this view, where we see similar tendencies of how English is emphasized as playing a key role in developing a successful citizenship, nationally and globally (Skolverket, 2012, p. 1).

If we understand the ideology of English as a key part of successful citizenship, it can be concluded that English as a second language is valid only as

long as ruling language ideologies support the idea of English as a useful language. Consequently, students are being taught English much as a result of English as the presupposed *lingua franca*¹.

Language as a Negotiator of Ideology

Ideological varieties and English as a language of equality

So far, we have mainly concentrated on research on language ideologies, which define ‘good’ and ‘bad’ languages according to language norms. To take this concern further, it is relevant to include Modiano’s (2001) consideration that “in the process of learning a language, one is ontologically colonized by the ideologies which flourish in the acquired tongue.” (p. 162). This means that different varieties within English negotiate different cultural meanings, and because varieties within English mediate different meanings, English as a language of uniformity, is in a threatened position. British English, for example, has a tendency of upholding “systems of exclusion and marginalization, of class stratification and the preserving of traditional ways of living and thinking” (Modiano, 2001, p. 169).

It is evident from Modiano’s (2001) noteworthy reflections that different varieties of English bring different perceptions of basic values to the classroom. It is apparent, moreover, that British English, from this point of view, mediates values that are in conflict with the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school, which explicitly states that school should “establish respect” for values such as “the equal value of all people” and the “solidarity between people” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4).

English as an international language

Perhaps a fitting solution to an issue like this, as is suggested by Modiano (2001), would be to use “English as an International Language (EIL)”, which would lay ground for a “culturally, politically, and socially neutral” English education (p. 170). This is especially important if we consider curricular aims, for example the curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school, which emphasizes the need for openness and tolerance towards different opinions and attitudes, and the need for objectivity in teaching (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). Yet, while EIL is posed as a solution to issues of biased varieties of English, this type of English would inevitably bring ideological elements in the same way that BrE or AmE would. However, in contrast, EIL would offer students a chance to use a variety of English that is not associated with a certain “speech community” (Modiano, 2001, p. 170; for more on EIL, see the further reading section).

Practical Advice for Teachers of English

First of all, because hierarchal structures within (De Costa, 2010) and between (Flores & Murillo, 2001) languages are present in classrooms, teachers must make informed choices to make sure that one language, or one variety of a language, is not degraded in comparison to another. By doing this, educators resist the reinforcement of language ideologies.

Furthermore, it is of relevance for teachers to consider how different varieties of English convey different ideologies (Modiano, 2001), and to highlight to students how this is a potential hazard for an impartial language classroom. EIL is a possible

¹ *Lingua franca*: shared language for communication internationally (Modiano, 2001, p. 169).

solution to this issue, but there is still much to do in terms of standardizing this type of English before introducing it to classroom use (Modiano, 2001, p. 170).

It is crucial, conclusively, that teachers consider their language classrooms as a ‘mediator of ideology’ (Volk & Angelova, 2007), and that they include critical thinking in their teaching. Avoiding the issue of ideology means ignoring it, which might run the risk of ideology in language teaching as the *status quo*. While this is the case, we must never neglect the fact that all activity entailing human interaction will inevitably bring biased elements.

Concluding Reflections

In conclusion, this paper has focused on ideologies of language, and how they are mediated through policy on a macro-level, and through teacher practice on a micro-level. We have seen that languages, and varieties within languages, are perceived as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ as a result of language hierarchies, which is a potential threat to a value free educational setting. Further, we shed light on the notion that a certain variety of English might collide with having a value neutral classroom, which lead us on a path to consider a more international variety of English. Drawing on this, it is my hope that the potential issues of ideology in English language teaching brought to light here can activate awareness in teachers to make informed choices in their English language teaching.

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