International English in Its Sociolinguistic Contexts: Towards a Socially Sensitive EIL Pedagogy by Sandra Lee McKay and Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng

Review by: Gregory P. Glasgow

Comparative Education Review, Vol. 54, No. 1 (February 2010), pp. 132-134

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Comparative and International Education Society

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/650705


Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

As nations endeavor to enhance the quality of their English-language education policies in this current age of interconnected global flows, the need emerges to further understand how the priorities of top-down educational policies interact with local ecologies of teaching and learning. International English in Its Sociolinguistic Contexts contributes to the current discussion by asserting the need for a socially sensitive English as an International Language (EIL) pedagogy. By targeting a readership of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) administrators, educators, and students, Sandra Lee McKay and Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng emphasize the power of local knowledge in fostering the delivery of a culturally, socially, and pedagogically responsible language program. As there are many nations with differences as well as similarities in the way in which the English language is promoted in their societies, this volume implicitly suggests that potential exists for research from a comparative perspective that contrasts how societies respond to current global processes through their English language-in-education policies.

The book is a welcome addition for the applied linguistics community as well as for the comparative education community, not only because of its readability but also because of its relevance to current trends in language-in-education policy and planning in an age of globalization. As the agency of the local practitioner becomes paramount in the ways in which English education is spread worldwide, more focus is necessary on teaching methodologies that will be employed not because of their dominance but because of their applicability, local relevance, and social sensitivity. The central premise of this book is to transcend narrow ideological views of English and English-language teaching and to appreciate English for the forms and varieties it has assumed—but to do this through pedagogy that is progressive.

The first chapter addresses the current role of globalization and how English is currently constructed in the new world order. The chapter signposts the theoretical underpinnings of the book, which emphasize the role discourse has to play in the representation of policy and the implementation of practices. The authors contend that the discussion of “various discourses that surround the topic of globalization and language teaching is to better assess which discourses are more adequate” (4). Attention is given to the spread of English and the potential implications of this spread vis-à-vis other languages. Additionally, the purported economic, educational, and mass media incentives derived from acquiring English proficiency are discussed. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng suggest that through the phenomena of the English-globalization connection, the notion of incentive is among the “many pull factors that entice learners to learn English” (25).

In the following chapters (chaps. 2–4), a broad overview of the way in which EIL functions in various parts of the world presented through Kachru’s concentric circles of English (see Braj B. Kachru, The Other Tongue [Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992]) are employed. Chapter 2 provides the reader with a geographic overview of the social contexts in which EIL is taught and learned around the
globe, with the authors employing the use of this model strategically to describe the characteristics of English education. In chapter 3, the sociolinguistic concept of diglossia in multilingual societies is discussed, with India and South Africa mentioned as countries that perceive English as an H (High) language, while nondiglossic nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, possess “a marked contrast between their large bilingual population[s] and the policies that seek to minimize or fail to support such diversity” (75). The following chapter focuses on language policy and planning and the fact that they always have “direct implication for education” (90), since these policies and planning activities are implemented in local communities. Drawing upon case studies in the United States, Singapore, China, and South Korea, the argument is advanced that language policies are never just about language itself, one rationale for McKay and Bokhorst-Heng’s adoption of the term “language politicking.”

In chapters 5 and 6, the authors give an overview of the creativity found in linguistic variations from standard English, the realities of standard English ideology, and a need to better understand the complexity of L2-L2 interactions and the pedagogical implications of research on code switching. While it is true that appreciation of the linguistic variation of L2 speakers could have key implications for EIL pedagogy, I felt that such an acknowledgment seemed to overlook the realities of local school cultures that may resist the status quo. Clearly, as chapter 5 suggests, the pervasiveness of the promotion of standard English needs to be transcended to allow for more pluralistic viewpoints. Interactional sociolinguistics (an interdisciplinary field developing out of linguistics, anthropology, and sociology) could provide a gateway into how standards and pragmatic norms may differ cross-culturally. I felt that a key issue missing from this conversation is the question of how to create and sustain the political and organizational will to make this happen in a school culture in which a varied array of ideological orientations may exist that allow or stifle creativity. To allow for such acceptance of variation and understanding of pragmatic norms, further professional support, development, and collaboration will be required. It is mentioned earlier in the book that in teaching contexts such as those in South Korea, teachers’ feelings of inadequacy and lack of support for teachers contribute to difficulties in the implementation of the English-teaching methodology known as the communicative approach. This seems to signal that the discussion needs to move away from what must be done and toward how it can feasibly be done from a local standpoint.

The final chapter includes a discussion of the way in which the “discourse of Othering” (190) is promoted in EIL materials, proposing that “local teachers can try to achieve more diversity in the uses and users of English by supplementing the textbook” (189) and gathering “audio-taping examples of L2-L2 interactions” (189) as a way to facilitate awareness of how L2 speakers engage with English. However, more examples of successful innovations would have been helpful.

Nevertheless, the direction in which McKay and Bokhorst-Heng suggest EIL pedagogy should go is a necessary one. They conclude their book by contending that EIL curriculum needs to be relevant to the domains in which it is used, to promote egalitarian L2 learning opportunities, to be cognizant of the national varieties that exist, and to recognize other languages spoken, as well as to respect local cultures of learning. This is a strong start in conceptualizing a new dawn for
an EIL pedagogy that will prove to be more congruous with the realities faced by today’s educators. The key step now is for educational institutions involved in teaching EIL to deliver on the suggestions that McKay and Bokhorst-Heng provide.

GREGORY P. GLASGOW
University of Queensland


Egyptian education is in crisis—a crisis created and maintained by the failures of Egyptians and, more recently, by foreign aid agencies. Educational Roots of Political Crisis in Egypt attempts to trace the political, social, and economic sides of this crisis. Surprisingly, the author, Judith Cochran, does not provide a conceptual framework or even utilize the crisis as a theme to anchor the book or guide the discussion. With no framework, readers are left to construct their own understandings of the historical development and current status of the crisis.

To me, the crisis began in the 1820s, when Muhammad Ali introduced his rigidly centralized, military-based education system and ignored religious education already in existence. The crisis escalated when the British occupied Egypt, as they exerted little effort to improve modern education. They abolished free education altogether in 1907 and introduced a system of difficult exams to control enrollment in and graduation from government schools. “The guarantee of a position with the Civil Service after graduation from government schools continued to be firmly implanted in the people’s minds” (50), and memorization was regarded as the most effective means of preparing for the exams.

With the 1952 revolution, socialism became the framework for governing and was reflected in the education system. In theory, Cochran argues, everyone had a right to education, but overpopulation and lack of resources placed practical constraints on that right: “The elite-masses dichotomy had been destroyed in favor of mass secular education of questionable quality” (75). In 1970, Egypt was in chaos. Educating everyone remained a priority, but the country could not afford to do so. Anwar Sadat adopted an open-door policy, inviting foreign investors to stimulate development in all areas, including education. This trend continued during Hosni Mubarak’s regime. Following the Camp David Accords in 1979, Egypt became one of the primary beneficiaries of U.S. and Western development aid programs. According to Cochran, the influx of foreign money “did not make any significant or even noticeable educational improvements” (116); rather, it “has allowed Egypt to continue its antiquated educational systems” (138).

Until recently, Cochran argues, employment in Egypt had been determined by national exams. Thus, “test-taking skills superseded learning . . . [and became] the focus of instruction at all levels” (84). In preparation for national exams, extensive private tutoring has become the norm: “The people have become used to the prevailing patterns of exams, just as they have become used to the notion