

The English Language and Inequality : Case Study Wales

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The English Language and Inequality: Case Study Wales

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There are a number of important implications concerning the global spread of English. English has become both a global and local language in many parts of the world. This raises a number of questions in the classroom in regards to standardization and intelligibility as well as contested notions of native and nonnative speakers. In this paper particularly will be a focus upon forms of resistance to and appropriation of English. Jim Tollefson (2000) points out that the role of English often confronts us with a paradox: “at a time when English is widely seen as a key to the economic success of nations and the economic well-being of individuals, the spread of English also contributes to significant social, political, and economic inequalities.” By using Wales as a case study I aim to discuss in what ways and in what contexts this paradox may be true and what implications this has for English teachers.

Firstly a history of Wales, the Welsh language and English in Wales to the present day provides a useful discussion point for Phillipson’s (1992) and Kachru’s (1983) core and periphery and inner, outer and expanding models of English use. It could be argued that Wales has experienced identification with each of Phillipson’s and Kachru’s countries or circles of language use and the discussion will exemplify this and its implications. This history, as well as a present day discussion of English and Welsh in Wales also offers much insight into the many paradigms of English use, from a colonial celebration and imperialism to Tsuda’s “linguistic ecology” (1994). This leads on to a discussion of how the case of Wales may exemplify the implications of English and bilingualism on the rest of the world: the positives and negatives of pluralism or monolingualism; language rights; the implications of global Englishes and hopefully some conclusions on how we might best address these issues. This will lead to a final discussion of the pedagogical role of English, particularly in regards to English language classrooms as a microcosm of the larger world and how the case study of Wales can help to formulise individual approaches to EFL teaching.

Wales has a population of just under three million people and the Welsh language has been spoken there for over 1,600 years. Welsh and its ancestor “Brythonic”, or “Britannic”, was the language spoken over most of the territory of Britain before English even existed as a concept either culturally or linguistically. Today however Welsh, as an administrative language is confined solely to the 21,000 sq.km of land that constitutes the nation of Wales and spoken by just 20.8% of the population according to the last census in 2001. Its general decline has been referred to as “a catastrophic collapse” (Nettle and Romaine 2000), particularly from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1970s. At the same time however, it should be noted that just 10 years earlier in 1991, census data showed numbers of Welsh speakers at just 18.7%; meaning that percentage of speakers had risen within that ten year period. More interesting was the fact that the percentage of people able to speak Welsh in children aged between 5-15 years had grown to 40.8% (Census of Population 2001). Currently a quarter of Wales’s primary schools are Welsh medium schools with Welsh a compulsory part of the curriculum up to the age of 16 in all Welsh schools. There are Welsh language television channels, both on radio and television and Welsh literature is flourishing (Gruffudd 1998). It

is this story of Welsh and the policies behind it that will be discussed here, particularly the ideology and reaction to bilingualism in Wales. It should be noted that the last set of data available in regards to Welsh-only speakers indicated that just 0.8% of the population spoke solely in Welsh; 99.2% of the population was also able to speak English to a degree that they would consider themselves “native speakers”, what Brutt-Griffler et al (2001) describe as “one who learns the language in what is often called its ‘natural environment’”. In fact, Wales lays squarely within Phillipson’s “core” English speaking countries and Karachu’s “inner circle” whereby English is used “in major institutions, such as government, education and the media” (Tollefson 200). The main difference being that, by law, Welsh is also used in government and public administration. Contemporary Welsh policy is aimed towards a future of bilingualism and language equality between English and Welsh. In 2003, The Welsh Assembly Government unveiled its “National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales” which purported to “set out in the clearest terms the strategy and the commitment of resources by which the goal of a bilingual Wales would be achieved”. The success of these policies has interesting implications for the paradigms of English we encounter across the globe. The document also states “in constructing a national plan for a bilingual Wales, The Assembly Government recognizes that it is not a matter of starting from scratch”. Legislation has already been introduced in Wales through respective UK governments that have provided a foundation for this bilingualism. This seems somewhat contradictory to Tsuda’s “Diffusion-of-English Paradigm” and certainly that of Phillipson’s belief that Britain particularly promotes and supports English through organizations such as the British Council. It seems that it has not always been entirely true that Britain has had a policy of “linguicism” in Wales, it is therefore necessary to analyse these UK policies as well as the historical context around them.

In an historical context there is certainly evidence of Skuttnabb-Kangas’s (1998) “linguicism” in Wales, what she argues is a “linguistically argued racism” and what Phillipson has described as a “linguistic imperialism”. There is much evidence that in Wales “the dominance of English is (has been) asserted and continuous reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages”. It is important that this historical context is now discussed. As has been mentioned Wales and Welsh existed before England in both a cultural and linguistic sense. Even as England developed linguistically and culturally, Wales remained entirely outside of the sphere of English. In his book “The Adventure of English” Melvyn Bragg (2003) notes “For the Celtic language so threatened by the hammering force of the German tribes was saved. In Wales, in Cornwall, in the north of Scotland, in Gaelic, it kept its integrity. That, too, is part of this adventure – there are both casualties and survivors as this hungry creature, English, demanded more and more subjects”. The historical context also reveals however a gradual movement of Wales into Karachu’s expanding circle, outer circle and its present position in the inner circle. It is perhaps more accurate however to trace this movement in terms of Phillipson’s “core” and “periphery”. Wales transferred into Phillipson’s periphery in 1536 when the “Act of Union” meant “English was imposed in colonial times and then ‘successfully transplanted’ as an important language for intra-national communication (Tollefson). The act explicitly stated that English, not Welsh, was to be the official and administrative language of the country. Here England was exercising “major control over the economic and political fate” of Wales. As in Tollefson’s example of the Philippines English began to determine access to wealth and power, like the Philippines in 1946, Wales became dominated by a relatively small group of wealthy families who controlled the political system in contrast to the Welsh speaking population underneath. England thus used language as a tool for subjugation, as Toffelson puts it “one mechanism for this continuing control is the use of English as a language of government, education, business, technology, and the

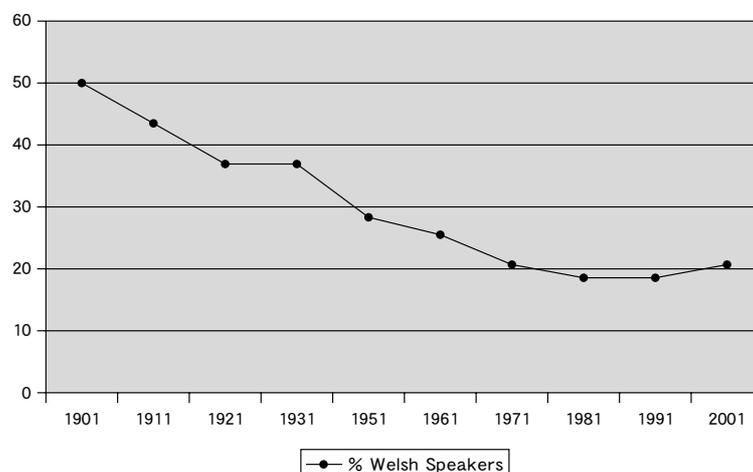
media”. At this stage however, Welsh was still able to flourish, below the constraints of administration, the general population functioned in Welsh – much like Phillipson’s contemporary countries situated in the periphery. Generally speaking therefore, shifting to English generally offered no advantage to Welsh individuals and mirrors Garcia’s belief (from Tollefson 2000) that “the social and political relationship between the minority and majority communities is the key factor” and that English is of no economic benefit “when the minority language is not viewed as a suspicious characteristic that must be eradicated”.

In the case of Wales however, this situation changed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Welsh did indeed become a “suspicious characteristic”. Tollefson suggests that the “spread of English is justified in some settings as the key to economic equality and in other settings as the key to national unity”. During the nineteenth century Wales became the hub of the industrial revolution (Davies 1993), its coalmines fuelled the expanding British Empire to such an extent that the Welsh city of Cardiff was host to the world’s largest coal port. This was to have important consequences for language in Wales and policies of linguistic imperialism. Firstly, it led to a rise in Welsh national consciousness and identification with the Welsh language was a major component of this. Coupled with the translation and widespread production of the bible into Welsh, the language began to flourish and threatened to fracture “national unity” in Britain. For example, The Church of England was disestablished in Wales in 1914 and Welsh nationalist political parties began to grow in popularity with parties such as Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales) being established, nationalist organizations like Cymru Fydd (Young Wales) in 1866 calling for Welsh independence. Wales and Welsh was now very much what Garcia describes as “a suspicious characteristic that must be eradicated” and this is mirrored in British language policy. When we consider the somewhat laissez-faire attitude to the Welsh language as a popular means of communication after the Act of Union, the language policies implemented from the 19th century onwards in Britain begin to reflect factors that may have consequences in the contemporary peripheral countries, specifically those that Karachu labels the “outer circle”. It is these policies that will now be discussed.

It is the language policies of the late 19th and 20th centuries that led to the “catastrophic collapse” of the Welsh language, and it is this that perhaps has most direct consequences in the language policies of the contemporary world, whereby, as Garcia outlined, the social and political relationship between communities is changed. The first signs of linguistic policy in Wales came with the publication of the “Blue Books” in 1847. The Blue Books was a British government sanctioned report on the state of education in Wales, the report was conducted by three English, non-Welsh speaking Anglican commissioners who came to the conclusion “that the Welsh were ignorant, lazy and immoral”, and that this “was caused by the Welsh language and nonconformity.” As a result the report came to be known in Wales as “Brad y Llyfrau Gleision” (the treachery of the Blue Books). Welsh historian Kenneth O. Morgan, in his book “Wales in British Politics” claims that the report was “the Glencoe and the Amritsar of Welsh history” in relation to massacres by the British army in Scotland and India. There, was of course, no physical massacre, apart from that in a linguistic sense. Morgan also goes on to state however; “One of the inevitable results of the report was its effect on the nation’s mind and psyche. It was at this time that ordinary Welsh people began to believe that they could only improve themselves socially through education and the ability to speak and communicate in English”. The effect of this report was thus twofold: firstly, it led to a change in the laissez-faire attitude to the Welsh language from the British government, but also an important shift in Welsh public opinion as to the status of their native language and the importance of English. This mirrors what Auerbach (1993) describes as “practices which are unconsciously

accepted as the natural and inevitable way of doing things”, which in fact may be “inherently political, serving to maintain the relative position of participants with respect to each other”, what Fairclough (1989) calls “ideological power”. Skutnabb-Kangas refers to this control as “linguicism”, ideologies which “are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources”. The vast coal resources of Wales now became the fuel for the British Empire and did not benefit the Welsh themselves, who were very often paid in “truck” for their work in the mines, a system of payment whereby tokens were received instead of cash that could only be spent in the shops of the landowners who happened to be the MPs and Lords of the British government, who themselves were of English ancestry and the Anglican religion. The coercive nature that Fairclough outlines as one of the two manifestations of power and control came with the creation of the “Welsh Not”. The Welsh Not was a piece of wood, inscribed with the letters WN, that was hung round the necks of children who spoke Welsh in some schools in the 19th century. The “not” was given to any child overheard speaking Welsh, and he would pass it to a different boy whom he overheard speaking Welsh. By the end of the week, the wearer of the not would be given a lashing. The idea of the not therefore was to discourage pupils from speaking Welsh, but also to instill in the children a notion of punishing each other for speaking Welsh in the process of handing the wood to another boy. English was considered the only suitable medium of instruction. This not was introduced as a direct result of the 1847 Parliamentary report into education in Wales.

These institutional practices continued into the 20th century. In 1923 researcher D.J. Saer stated “bilingualism confuses a person’s thinking and works against achieving a high level in either language”. Saer had given IQ tests to 1,400 Welsh children, both monolingual English speakers and those who were described as Welsh-English bilinguals. He became convinced that bilingualism reduced a child’s intelligence quotient by 10 points. However, “the flaws in Saer’s study were not widely noted until much later. From our modern viewpoint, we can see that, among other failings, he failed to take into account socioeconomic status (the bilingual children were from poor rural areas as compared to the monolingual city children), failed to test statistical significance, and gave IQ tests in English which was not the dominant language of the bilingual children” (Childs 2000). Saer’s findings were accepted as fact however and reinforced this “willing acquiescence” amongst the Welsh population, coupled with the coercion of the “Welsh Not”. Following this report the decline in the number of Welsh speakers was swift and dramatic, as the following graph shows:



Source: Office for National Statistics and the National Assembly for Wales

1901 represents the first set of data whereby we can chart the physical decline of Welsh speakers, which at this time, had already dropped to just 50%. Interesting to note however, is that the data between 1991 and 2001 shows the first increase in the number of Welsh speakers, which will be discussed later.

What this historical context shows us with reference to modern global language discussions such as Phillipson's is that the post-colonial countries in his periphery may have very legitimate concerns concerning contemporary language policy. He argues that English has come to be a primary tool of postcolonial strategy: "whereas once Britannia ruled the waves, now it is English which rules them". Tollefson's example of Edna Velasco seems to mirror the ideology of power which also occurred in Wales, there is a danger therefore of a rapid destruction of indigenous languages around the world and political and economic exploitation as evidenced in the case-study of Wales. Despite its vast coal resources which has allowed Britain through empire to become one of the most successful and richest nations on earth, Wales remains one of the poorest regions of Europe. This is exemplified by Wales's qualification for Objective 1 funding from the European Union, funding that was available in the 1990s for regions where the Gross Domestic Product per head is less than 75% of the EU average. In an analysis of Tsuda's (1994) language paradigms, Wales it seems exemplifies perfectly his main concerns. In its historical context Wales has mirrored many of the characteristics of his diffusion-of-English paradigm: the spread of English was born of capitalism, science and technology and modernization at the start of the industrial revolution; it grew on the back of a policy of monolingualism and an ideology of globalization and internationalization represented in this case by British Empire building; and most importantly was the concept of linguistic, cultural and media imperialism. Language policy initiatives in Wales fitted onto Tsuda's continuum at the most extreme endpoint, they served to shift the political and educational ground towards an English lingua franca that maintained inequality. Of particular resonance to the current debate is the idea of ideological power that was so devastating in Wales. Tsuda perhaps has genuine concerns when he reads comments such as those of The Straits Times 2002 that claimed "Singapore's edge lies in English" or even those of his own compatriots such as Shoichi Kobayashi (1999) who claims "English can save Japan". Such "willing acquiescence" in Wales led to a destruction of native language and also the educational, political and economic control of the country to the British government.

Such conclusions ignore some very important parallels to modern Wales however: between 1991 and 2001 the numbers of Welsh speakers rose for the first time since the Blue Books; the Welsh Language Acts of 1967 and 1993 made it a legal obligation for public bodies to produce all literature and services in Welsh; in 1999 the Welsh Assembly opened, granting Wales political power it had not experienced since the Act of Union; Welsh-medium schooling, literature, TV and media is thriving; Wales is even home to what has been claimed as Europe's largest youth event, the "National Eisteddfod" a celebration of Welsh language and culture; and finally the Welsh government has pledged to make Wales completely bilingual through a clear "strategy and commitment of resources". Such a change in fortunes does not seem to echo Rassool's notion that "the complex, interconnected nature of the modern world suggests that continued appeal to the moral basis of universal rights may no longer have adequate credibility". If we look at Wales in a modern context the notion of universal linguistic rights is not too much of a dream and continues to have a very firm basis. In a more contemporary Welsh context, particularly in the 1960s, we can perhaps see many of the linguistic tensions evidenced globally by the works of linguists such as Tsuda in regards to English. From the 1960s there ceased to be an ideological power structure in Wales, whereby people accepted that English was

a means of achieving success, instead a new doctrine has grown, that of bilingualism or pluralism in Wales. The birth of language-rights in Wales was perhaps heralded by protests in the 1970s. Welsh language activists had campaigned for a TV service in the language, which already had its own radio station, BBC Radio Cymru. This led to acts of civil disobedience, including refusals to pay the television licence, thereby running the risk of prosecution or even a prison sentence, and sit-ins in BBC and HTV studios. Some took more extreme measures, including attacking television transmitters in Welsh-speaking areas during a bombing campaign. In 1980, the former president of Plaid Cymru, Gwynfor Evans, threatened to go on hunger strike, if the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher did not honour its commitment to provide a Welsh language TV service. Ultimately this led to the creation of the television channel S4C which functions from a fixed annual grant from the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Furthermore Welsh became a compulsory subject for all pupils in Wales at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 (i.e. up to age 14) in 1990. In 1999, it became a compulsory subject at Key Stage 4. So now all pupils in mainstream schools in Wales study Welsh (either as a first or a second language) for 12 years, from the ages of 5 to 16. Some schools in Wales now teach solely through the medium of Welsh, as well as some bilingual schools, in any respect a Welsh child will either be taught mainly in Welsh, or learn Welsh as a second language. This signals a complete turn-around in both the Welsh public's opinion of Welsh and bilingualism, but also the British governments policy of monolingualism and linguistic imperialism that seems to contradict utterly Tsuda's notion that the diffusion-of-English paradigm is driven by Anglo-American monolingualism. It must therefore be questioned whether or not Tsuda's paradigm is at all relevant, particularly in regards to those countries that lay in Karachu's outer-circle, such as Japan.

Perhaps in Wales has been created a circle not apparent in Karachu's model however, a fourth circle of nations that are, or are becoming, bilingual. Indeed there is growing evidence that Britain itself is realizing the need for bilingualism. The British Council, which Phillipson points to as a tool for linguistic imperialism recently published an article entitled: "*Why global English may mean the end of 'English as a Foreign Language'*" (2006) and its author David Graddol suggested that "monoglot English graduates face a bleak economic future as qualified multilingual youngsters from other countries are proving to have a competitive advantage over their British counterparts in global companies and organisations." This could weaken the relative strength of the English language in international education markets as demand for educational resources in other languages increases. The very success of English and its position as "a more triumphant language than its rivals" (Phillipson, Skutnabb-Kangas 1996) has created a monoglot population in core countries, that Graddol suggests are becoming severely disadvantaged in the global market place and that other languages in countries where multilingualism has been better nurtured, partly in response to a necessity to learn English, will gain in dominance. Bilingualism has become a key policy in Welsh politics, economics and linguistic policy as outlined in the Welsh government's "National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales". Which talks not only of the social importance of the language, but also its economic benefits. A recent report by the BBC (2006) entitled "Education in Welsh" and aimed at providing information for parents in Wales choosing the medium of language they wish their child to study in, states that "bilingualism can increase opportunities and choices". In rather stark contrast to D.J. Saer in 1923, the BBC report claims (based on "international research from the 1960's to today") that bilingualism gives children advantages in creative thinking; sensitivity, IQ and reading. Whilst its references are rather vague, this report at least points to a fundamental shift in opinions of bilingualism. It seems to be the case that where such opinions are apparent then an ideological power situation is impossible.

Coercion alone is not conducive to maintaining linguistic imperialism and a policy of bilingualism without these ideological power relations is beneficial rather than negative and goes hand in hand with a future for language rights. In Wales bilingualism is not viewed negatively, the number of schools that teach solely through the medium of Welsh has grown from 44 to 52 in the last decade with a total of 8 new schools being constructed. The new emphasis on bilingualism in the workplaces as outlined in the National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales with “funding for bodies who promote economic development” is increasing students' awareness of the value of bilingual education. The success of bilingualism in Wales means that English is becoming a compliment rather than a substitute for language choice and perhaps this notion is the key to language policy on the global scale. The spread of English need not exemplify an Anglo-American process of monolingual imperialism, but it may instead exemplify a bilingual strategic target “for stimulating political, economic and social reform” (Kobayashi 1999).

In translating this case-study to the global scene however, it is important to remember both contexts of Welsh language policy: historical and contemporary. Despite the increasing success and support for bilingualism, Wales is still completely reliant on English as a fundamental part of its linguistic make-up and success. At first glance in Wales, it does appear that “English will be used for international and some intranational uses, while local languages will be put to local uses”, but this is too simplistic. It condemns Welsh and other languages to a less significant role. Dua (1994) points out “in order to bring about the fundamental change in the complementarity of English it is necessary to learn from the history of English”. And indeed in the Welsh historical context “language is basically involved in class, power and knowledge”. Kobayashi's view that that “we should create a new elite of civil servants who are highly proficient in English” dangerously echoes the “catastrophic collapse” of Welsh. An acceptance of bilingualism, conversely strengthens the global position of English, as English is invariably the “second language”. This necessity for English perhaps undermines the case for bilingualism when we consider that with English comes these historical factors of class, power and knowledge. Despite the seeming change of linguistic policy in the United Kingdom, there is still an important debate concerning the language policies of the US whereby over the past ten years moves have been made to define English as the only official language of the USA and to prevent the use of other languages and bilingual education. As the US is the current world economic power and what many may claim the leading player in contemporary linguistic imperialism, it is important to consider the pedagogical approach to English language.

As a teacher formulating my pedagogical approach to English language in Japan the whole range of questions raised by the Welsh case-study need to be accounted for and a consideration of how my classroom can reflect the multi-lingual world outside is essential. The discussions surrounding the Welsh experience hopefully allow for some interesting conclusions. Auerbech (1993) argues that “commonly accepted everyday classroom practices, far from being neutral and natural, have ideological origins and consequences for relations of power both inside and outside of the classroom”. Wales's apparent success in bilingualism is haunted by the spectre of the historical linguistic imperialism in its background and with this in mind it is important to think about the implications of my teaching and the choices I make in the classroom as they may manifest themselves culturally and politically in Japan. One possible answer for this problem is perhaps redefining the ownership of English, so that it no longer necessarily a tool for linguistic imperialism, but rather a domestic instrument for language education. Karchu and Nelson (1996) suggest that “The concept of monolithic English as the exponent of culture and communication in all-English-using countries has been a convenient working fiction that is now becoming harder and harder to maintain. What we have now in

reality is “English languages and English literatures”. This concept paves the way for culturally and politically neutral acquisition of English – in Japan, students can learn through a context of Japanese English. The concept of a “native speaker” suggests English taught through the context of “native countries”: “one who learns the language in what is often called its ‘natural environment’” and with this comes political and cultural implications. If we disregard this concept of the “native speaker”, these implications are overcome. With this however, comes the linguistic equality of “non-native” English on an international scale whereby “nonnative speaker’s right to linguistic peculiarities” (Ammon 2000) are not acknowledged. This is exemplified further by Tollefson’s case-study concerning Edna Velasco whereby “her fluency in English does not lead to equal treatment as an ESL teacher in the US”, it seems in that case that we are back to square one. In reality therefore, the future of linguistic policy lies with us as EFL educators, the native speakers who are already in the field. As Auerbech states classrooms have ideological consequences outside of the classroom, as educators we can therefore shape these ideological consequences keeping in mind the lessons learned from case studies such as that in Wales. Transferring the ownership of English from an Anglo-American perspective, to a global one; reinforcing the importance of bilingualism and pluralism, by ourselves ensuring bilingual skills and competence in both the L1 and L2 languages of our students. This bilingualism will allow us as Lowenburg argues to “be able to distinguish deficiencies in the second language acquisition of English by these speakers (errors) from varietal differences in the speakers’ usage resulting from having learned such non-native norms”. We can develop an assessment procedure whereby we consider nonnative rather than native speaker norms as part of the student’s learning. At the same time however, we will need to address the concern of mutual intelligibility and this ties in with our role as teachers and a change in the ownership of English into a global language. As English has done since its birth, and perhaps what has led to much of its success and longevity, is its ability to adapt to situation and experiences and evolve into something new and even more useable with an increasing vocabulary as it comes into contact with different languages. Many world Englishes already enjoy popular appeal and understanding: Grace Nichols and her “Fat, black women’s poetry” with its Afro-Caribbean English is on the reading list for the National Curriculum in English in UK schools as too is Liz Lochhead’s poetry written in Scots English. In the case of Wales, what is often rather jokingly referred to as “Wenglish” is found in the much celebrated work of Dylan Thomas, particularly in his play “Under Milk Wood”. Thomas never spoke Welsh himself but much of his work drew from Wenglish which mirrors Welsh grammatical styles and vocabulary. Wales’s Wenglish has allowed the nation to feel an ownership of English peculiar to itself, and it is this sense of ownership that has given the self-confidence needed to develop a positive approach to bilingualism. Each of the global Englishes outlined above hold popular appeal and this belies the claim that a myriad of Englishes create a mutual intelligibility. As global educators it is our job to influence this evolution of English into that of a global language owned equally by everyone who uses it, drawing from all world Englishes, within a context of bilingualism whereby indigenous languages and Englishes continue to thrive in compliment.

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