A New Paradigm on Language Imperialism: Student-Teachers Voice on Language Learning

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Abstract

Background:
The current language policy in Indonesia removed English language programs from the elementary school curricula for fear of constraining children's first language ability and foreign language domination. However, the policy results in worry among those who believe in the importance of learning English, such as parents and English teachers.

Methodology:
Using the descriptive qualitative method, we interviewed six student-teachers who took a sociolinguistics course at a state university in West Java, Indonesia.

Findings:
The current research shows that the student-teachers perceived teaching English as a form of empowerment. Their future job as English teachers is not to promote the language but to help their future students face a more globalized and competitive world.

Conclusion:
Contrary to popular belief, student-teachers in this study see their profession as a religious devotion and a platform for future generation empowerment. They believe that teaching English is a way to promote local cultures and languages to the outside world by using local content in the EFL classroom.

Originality:
The current debate on English language teaching considers teaching English as part of language imperialism. In our study, however, we found that it is not always the case. Teaching English means equipping learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in 21st-century society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse on the global expansion of the English language emanates from the concept of linguicism, which refers to the unequal distribution of power and resources between groups that are classified based on their language (Phillipson, 1992). Given its dominance on the global stage, English is considered part of linguicism (Phillipson, 2007) and is believed to create an asymmetrical power relationship between English and other languages, also referred to as English imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). This view has divided scholars, with some debunking English imperialism as a myth because its spread benefits its users (Davies, 1996; Rajagopalan, 1999), while others express concern about its potential impact of English domination on other languages (Phillipson, 1992; 1997; 2007; Phillipson & Karmani, 2005).

This polarization significantly impacts language policy and status in peripheral countries - those that adopt English as their second/foreign language. Some scholars consider English language teaching essential and view English as a powerful tool for communication and a means of gaining a competitive edge in the job market (Hu, 2005; Lai, 2007; Symaco, 2017). Others discuss how the fear of English spread has influenced language policy changes in some countries, giving English more power than other languages (Lie, 2017; Mackenzie, 2022; Rose & Conama, 2018).

Our research takes a different approach by investigating student-teachers' perceptions of English. While the debate surrounding English imperialism is ongoing, little research has been conducted from the perspective of English teachers (Jiménez Catalán & Moreno Espinosa, 2005). English language teaching is sometimes viewed as part of language imperialism through language promotion and maintenance (Phillipson, 2007), making it important to explore English teachers' views about their profession. Neglecting to investigate the opinions of those who work in the ELT industry makes the discussion incomplete, as it excludes the voices of those actively involved in day-to-day practices. Thus, it is crucial to understand the views of English teachers in countries where English is a foreign language, especially in light of the impact of this debate on language policy. This study focuses on exploring how pre-service English teachers in Indonesia perceive their profession, which provides an alternative perspective on the ongoing debate about English and imperialism and its impact on language policy in the country.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language imperialism has been the topic of debate among scholars who analyse its impact on language policy in many countries. Robert Phillipson's book, Linguistic Imperialism (1992), is central to this debate. He argues that the spread of English is perpetuated through colonialism and neo-colonialism. Colonialism entails the acquisition of natural resources and the imposition of the

colonizer's language and its cultural implications on the colonized, while neo-colonialism involves the perpetuation of the colonizer's power and interests through language aid programs (e.g., the British Council, the IMF and the World Bank). These programs are often accused of maintaining the interests of the donors by asserting and maintaining the dominance of English over other languages (Phillipson, 2007).

There are intrinsic, extrinsic, and functional arguments for promoting English (Spichtinger, 2000). The intrinsic argument posits English as superior to other languages. English is promoted as a "God-given, rich, noble and interesting" language. The extrinsic argument highlights its well-established teaching and learning resources where the teachers are well-trained, and the teaching materials are readily available. The functional argument emphasizes its importance in securing future career opportunities. This propaganda is believed to create asymmetrical relations among languages, with one language becoming more dominant than others, threatening their existence. Those who oppose language imperialism argue that the global spread of English was not incidental but rather a part of language planning for those who have an interest in preserving their control in a country.

This argument faced criticism from advocates of English. Davies (1996), for instance, has strongly contested the idea of linguistic imperialism, dismissing it as a myth. Specifically, Davies has criticized the two ideas raised by Phillipson, namely colonialism and language aid. In terms of colonialism, Davies contends that the spread of English in former colonies is an inevitable consequence of the history of colonialism rather than a deliberate effort to maintain dominance. Similarly, Davies argues that the promotion of English through language aid is not an intentional means of perpetuating English dominance but rather a byproduct of the process.

In Indonesia, English imperialism has influenced the language policy, with the government reducing English teaching hours in high schools and changing the status of English lessons from mandatory to "extra" at the elementary level (Lie, 2017). These policies impact the availability of teaching jobs for English teachers. As the status became "extra", many schools opted out due to a lack of funding and resources. It also creates a learning gap between students from well-funded and underfunded schools. Students from well-funded schools can still have access to English lessons, while those who come from underfunded schools might need to wait until middle school. In the longer term, they can lose their competitive edge.

This paper aims to investigate student-teachers' perceptions of English teachers in Indonesia regarding English language teaching, which has shaped language curriculum policy, and their future profession within the frame of language imperialism. In doing so, this research aims to provide insight into their perceptions of English language teaching in Indonesia. This perspective is often missing from the ongoing debate about English imperialism and its impact on

language policy. Thus, the study hopes to offer an alternative viewpoint and contribute to the discussion of the constant debate over English and imperialism and its effects on language policy in the country.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore student-teachers' perceptions of linguistic imperialism in English Language Teaching (ELT). The research used a case study design and interviewed six English Department students who had previously taken a Sociolinguistics in ELT course. The participants included three males and three females between 19 and 20 years old, who volunteered based on their end-of-course reflection. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and each lasted about 30 minutes. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2008) six-step thematic analysis process. This process included (1) getting familiar with the data, (2) conducting initial coding, (3) grouping initial codes into categories, (4) finding themes, (5) naming and defining themes, and (6) writing the report.

In step 1, the researcher reviewed the data transcription to ensure the clarity of the data. Step 2 involved the researcher in breaking down the data into fragments, while step 3 described the process of grouping the initial codes into categories based on their similar properties and dimension. Step 4 showed the researcher review of the categories and determined the theme. Steps 5 and 6 illustrated the researcher naming, finalizing the themes and writing the report respectively.

To ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings, the two researchers involved in the study met to discuss and compare the themes. They noted agreements and disagreements and evaluated the themes until they reached a consensus (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). This process enhanced the validity and credibility of the research findings.

4. FINDINGS

The question of whether teaching English is a form of imperialism or empowerment is a contentious issue. However, the overall findings of this study suggest that student-teachers hold a positive attitude towards their future profession as English teachers. Instead of feeling guilty about promoting a foreign language, they view teaching English as a means of empowering themselves and future generations. Empowerment is defined as a way to enhance global competitiveness through English language skills. This positive viewpoint presents a new perspective in the ongoing debate on language imperialism from the lens of student-teachers. The theme of empowerment emerged across four categories, indicating the significance of this concept in the student-teachers' perceptions.

4.1 Transformative Learning

Transformative learning encompasses the student-teachers' perceptions of teaching English in general. It describes their attitude and motivation to become an English teacher and how they make meaning of the profession. Student 1 states that teaching English involves more than teaching but connecting the classroom to the wider social context.

> *"It is not only about how I could teach my students but how I involved myself with all elements of teaching-learning not only in the classroom but wider. [It is] not only about the language itself, but also the attitudes, the moral value in facing this world globally.*

The role of teaching English also extends beyond language promotion; it provides a platform for equipping these teachers and their future students. They understand that English is recognized as an established international language that has global importance. Therefore, they view teaching English as essential to empowering themselves and their future students to be more literate.

> *"The English language itself can be a bridge for me to know the whole world because most of the information is delivered in the English language. So, as a language teacher, English can be a beneficial tool for my students to spread their minds." (Student 2).*

From a close look, teaching English also influences their worldview. Through English, these student-teachers found why English is important in their lives and how it changes how they see themselves and the world.

> *"Especially to be more aware that language is very important in all aspects of my life, and how English transformed me into a tolerant person and creative person to create something that I could not imagine before." (Student 3).*

Overall, the student-teachers in this study view English as a tool for transformative learning. They are able to see what their future profession entails and, at the same time, reflect on how English affects their own "self".

4.2 Self-Determination and Religious Importance

Building on the notion of transformative learning, self-determination and religious importance extend the role of teaching English in shaping these student-teachers. Teaching English is seen as the driving force for the self-determination of these student-teachers. They are able to make choices for their lives and overcome the challenge.

> *"To be honest, learning English is hard sometimes...and it makes me think how can I teach students if I do not like English itself. So I decide to like English although It's hard or easy, I should survive until I finish what I had started." (Student 6).*

Student 6 shows the determination to overcome the challenge and race to the finish line. While he considered English as difficult to learn, the fact that it was his choice motivated him to continue learning the language. Such self-determination can also be seen in student 5, who dreamed of being the kind of English teacher she always envisioned. She understands that the job will be challenging, but she decided to go the extra mile.

> *"If I am to be an English teacher I will be a friendly teacher, share happiness and always make my students feel happy in the teaching process. But I know being an English teacher it's not easy but I will do my best for my students"*

Empowerment can also come in the form of religious importance. In this sense, teaching English is not merely about skills but also about the good deeds (*amal jariyah*) they create for the hereafter. For example, student 4 mentioned that her background from a religious family influences her motivation to teach English.

> *"Since I was born and grew up in an environment that put religion as the top of the goals. I perceive myself in the field of English language as the agent of change to bridge people to reach those goals, so that they would have a better social life in every aspect."*

These student-teachers demonstrate that teaching English is a source of motivation for their future "selves" and that self-realization is an essential factor in shaping their identities as future teachers. Throughout their learning process, these students have come to accept themselves and develop a deeper understanding of their role as educators.

4.3 Global Competitiveness and Local Culture Promotion

While English language teaching has traditionally been viewed as a form of cultural imperialism that promotes foreign cultures at the expense of local cultures, these student-teachers present a different perspective. They believe that while English is a foreign language, its teaching content can be contextualized to the local context, including local cultures, histories, and traditions. This suggests a shift in the language imperialism debate from foreign language promotion to the localization of teaching content.

> *"Teaching English will influence the imperialism of English but my point is not that. Some people say 'think globally and act locally, so in this case, we can use English to spread our local wisdom and be accepted in the world." (Student 1).*

During the interviews, the phrase "think globally act locally" was frequently mentioned by the student-teachers, indicating that they view teaching English as a means to promote their own cultures and values to the world. They emphasise helping their future students become global citizens while maintaining their local identities.

> *"Becoming an English teacher is my way to stimulate students to think globally but must act locally." (Student 3).*

4.4 Language Awareness and Intercultural Communication

Teaching English facilitates these student-teachers in their understanding of the language used in society. One student mentioned that his motivation to be an English teacher made her gain more understanding of how language functions in society. Language is seen as a means to teach differences and to communicate across cultures.

> *"In the future, I will become a teacher (language teacher). I would teach the students about the differences of culture in language because when we learn the language we learn the culture. Language and culture are connected." (Student 5).*

Teaching English has contributed to their language awareness and understanding of the importance of intercultural communication. This positive attitude towards teaching English reinforces the new perspective on the debate on language imperialism through the lens of student-teacher voices, suggesting a paradigm shift towards empowerment rather than exploitation.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study examines the perceptions of student-teachers regarding English language teaching in the context of linguistic imperialism. The results indicate that teaching English is not a means of imperialism or imposing language skills but rather a means of empowerment. This empowerment takes various forms that encompass both the self and others. These forms are demonstrated through the following categories: 1) transformative learning, 2) self-determination and religious significance, 3) global competitiveness and local culture promotion, and 4) language awareness and intercultural communication.

Teaching English is transformative when teachers can change how they view themselves and their teaching practices. It goes beyond simply transferring knowledge and skills and instead prompts them to reflect on their experiences and make changes in their approach to teaching. Through this process, they see teaching as an opportunity to bring attitudes and moral values to their students, creating a broader impact beyond language acquisition. This transformation leads to the development of autonomous and self-directed individuals whose minds are capable of challenging the status quo (Hodge, 2014; Mezirow, 1997).

Teaching English serves as a driving force for self-determination and religious function for these student-teachers. They recognize the challenges of the profession and are motivated to improve their content knowledge. Their social background influences how they see the profession beyond materialistic considerations and extends into spiritual values. These student-teachers have developed a sense of independence and self-regulation through teaching English. They feel empowered both psychologically and in terms of self-realization (Wehmeyer, 2005).

In the context of linguistic imperialism, teaching English is often viewed as a form of neo-colonialism. However, the perspectives of these student-teachers offer a new viewpoint.

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They suggest that teaching English is not about imposing a foreign language or culture but rather a means of empowering future generations to become more competitive in today's globalized world. While the language itself may be foreign, the content can be made local, with teachers promoting local cultures and wisdom within their teaching materials. By doing so, English teachers can help their students develop a global mindset while maintaining a strong connection to their roots. This new perspective suggests that English teachers can become cultural agents, bringing about positive change and new forms of cultural exchange (Sudartini, 2012).

Teaching English can contribute to creating a more equitable and diverse world, as the student-teachers in this study recognize. They understand the power of language and the importance of promoting intercultural communication and world peace. By teaching English, they hope to foster tolerance and appreciation for different languages, cultures, and speakers, which can, in turn, facilitate subsequent learning of other languages (Svalberg, 2012). This appreciation for language and culture is essential for effective intercultural communication (Bennett, 1998).

The concept of linguistic imperialism has had a significant impact on language curriculum and policy. The current study highlights the importance of considering the perspectives of English teachers when making policy decisions (Lauder, 2008). It suggests that policymakers should conduct a comprehensive analysis that includes teachers' viewpoints before making any policy decisions.

However, this study has some limitations, such as collecting data only through interviews. Future research could use data triangulation to gain insights from multiple sources. Additionally, this study only focused on student-teachers voices, so it would be beneficial to conduct similar research from the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as language policy experts and administrators, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

6. CONCLUSION

The current study challenges the assumption that English Language Teaching is a form of linguistic imperialism, as the English student-teachers perceive it as a platform for empowerment. In addition, they view teaching English as a way to fulfil their religious devotion, believing that mastery of the language can lead their future students to succeed in the 21st century. This positive view of English teaching also highlights the potential to promote local cultures and languages through the use of local content in the classroom. These findings suggest that policymakers should consider the perspectives of English teachers before making decisions about language policy. Neglecting these voices may lead to premature decisions that harm the teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in English education. Future research should explore these

perspectives further and incorporate multiple stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues surrounding English Language Teaching.

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