

English as a Treat and a Threat: Why teachers should be Aware of Critical Language Awareness

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Abstract

Charlemagne, King of the Franks once remarked that to have another language is like to have a second soul. This remark strongly emphasizes that having a command of several languages is beneficial. For this reason, aside from the learning of the national language, foreign languages are also included in school curriculum in Indonesia. Among all of foreign languages taught at schools, it is English which attains privileged position due to its status as one of the subjects which students must pass in the national examination system known as UN along with Math, Science and Bahasa Indonesia. Its privileged position also transpires to other fields such as the job market, academic achievement, and career development. As a result, there is a growing demand for the mastery of English for it has been associated with success and higher social status. However, aside from the benefits it boasts, this frenzy over English proficiency has a potential to be damaging to the national language and culture. It is the objective of this paper to explain the treat the English language has to offer, and the threat in store for an uncritical learning of this language. Thus, in order to maximize our exploit of English for our national interest and to ward off the danger it poses, I propose critical language awareness as an approach in our pedagogic practice.

Key words: *Multilingualism, Critical Language Awareness, Pedagogy*

Introduction

How do we recognize the shackles that tradition has put upon us? For if we can recognize them, we are also able to break them

Franz Boas

One of the fundamental reminders of one's identity is the language that she speaks. However, there are some people who speak several languages at the same time, a condition which is commonly known as multilingualism. This phenomena is not a rare thing in Indonesia since this nation boasts ethnic and language diversities. This archipelagic nation comprises of more than 1.128 ethnicities, and it is also a proud home to more than five hundreds languages whose number might increase significantly as linguistic researches indicate that there are still many local languages and sub-languages which are not yet charted and entried into the existing statistics of languages in Indonesia. Therefore, it is not that surprising if nearly every Indonesian speak at least two languages, namely their mother tongue which is almost always associated with their respective ethnicities such as Minangkabauese, Balinese, Javanese, and the multi-various dialects of Malay, and the national language, Bahasa Indonesia. For those with mix-parentage, they even have greater chance of speaking more than two ethnic languages because they are simultaneously influenced by the language of their mothers and fathers, which in some cases are linguistically very wide apart. Then, to be able to interact, involve, compete, and survive in this rapidly globalized world, the mastery of international languages is a must, and it becomes another catalyst which prompts multilingualism in Indonesia.

Aside from the need to tackle globalization, the benefit of multilingualism is two folds: cultural and cognitive. First, Multilingualism can help one manage communication problem when one is situated in a different environment. According UNESCO (in Paradowski. 2004) "Bilinguals or Multilinguals are more used to switching thought patterns and have more flexible mind." Moreover, knowing more than one languages means owning greater knowledge to deal

with the world. On this ground, Paradowski (2004) believes that multilingualism will “expand [multilinguals’] personal horizons and- being simultaneously insiders and outsiders- see their own culture from a new perspective not available to monoglots, enabling the comparison, contrast, and understanding of cultural concept.” Moreover, multilinguals also have a better cognitive stand compared to monoglots as Multilingual Children’s Association (2004) contends that multilingual children are more superior in reading and writing. For those reasons, it is just normal if the government includes foreign languages like English, Arabic, Japanese, German, Dutch in the school curriculum in tandem with the national language.

However, among all foreign languages which are usually taught in Indonesian schools, English holds a privileged position because it is one of the subject tested in the national standard evaluation system of secondary education or commonly styled as Ujian Nasional (UN) along with Mathematics, Science, Social science and Bahasa Indonesia. Beside enjoying a special place in the school curriculum, the teaching of English has also become a subject of numerous researches grants, seminars and symposiums in search of the most effective approach, method, strategy, and technique to teach English to Indonesian students. This zeal of finding the best way to make Indonesian master English stems from the notion that English is the language of international diplomacy, science, commerce, and most importantly, internet. It is also widely believed that the mastery of English is a “treat” because it can open up many opportunities. However, not many are aware of that English is also a “threat” which can be damaging to the existence of the national language, the national culture, the national identity and the nation itself. Thus, this is the objective of this paper to explore the treat and threat of English with regards to Indonesian context and steps which can be employed to be aware of and neutralize its threat, so that we can maximize our exploit of English for our national interest. For this purpose, I propose critical language awareness.

English: a Treat and a Threat

Due to its current position, English proficiency will surely give one, at least in Indonesian context, a competitive edge. First, English is one of the subjects of the UN. This examination is a crucial factor in determining whether the students of secondary education can further their study to the next level of education since failure in one of the subjects tested will hamper them from graduating in that year. Furthermore, if one reads vacancy advertisements in Indonesia, English proficiency remains the top priority in companies’ recruitment policy. Its privileged status has even reached a new height when Indonesian graduate and post-graduate schools make adequate-to-high score of TOEFL or IELTS test mandatory for those who wish to pursue their study there. Some of them even set up their own English test as the entrance test for the graduate student hopefuls. The English frenzy continues, starting in 2013, when university lecturers who wish to gear up to the level of “dosen sertifikasi” (literally: certified lecturer), which translates to better monthly payment, must sit for TOEP (Test of English Proficiency) test despite their qualification and research field is not English. The same thing is also applied for newly-recruited university lecturers who wish to attain their NIDN (Indonesian University Lecturer Identification Number). Failure to attain this number means not being able to participate in any research grants administered by the government.

Such is the high esteem English holds in Indonesia that a steady growing demand for English teaching institutions is surely guaranteed. Despite the learning of other foreign languages like Japanese, or Korean also gains a momentum lately for the success of their creative industry and cultural imports to Indonesia, English remains the most studied foreign language. Then, it is not surprising that English course becomes a multi-million worth business across the archipelago with local and international English course chains competing to woo students with their interesting packages boasting native speakers as teachers. Parents, who are usually come from a middle class background, who fear that their children will not fluent in English if they attend public school choose to enroll their children into international schools where English is the instructional language. What is more, specific public schools funded by tax payers money through APBN or APBD, which are only populated by the best brains in the

region or the nation usually have a policy that the school compound is an English zone which means no other languages are allowed there even the national language, let alone their mother tongues. This policy is implemented to foster better fluency of English because, normally, those students aspire to pursue their tertiary education abroad (mainly in English speaking countries like the America, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada).

Fear for their children's bleak future also makes some Indonesian parents, especially the middle-upper classes and those who have just returned from studying abroad, raise their children in English. As a result, it is not a rare occasion to see true-blood Indonesian children who do not speak a single Indonesian word, let alone the ethnic language of their parents. In other words, those children who are supposed to be multilingual or bilingual become monolingual. Ironically, these Indonesian nationals only speak a foreign language, not their national language or ethnic language. If these children happen to pick up some Indonesian, this language is exclusively used to speak to their nanny or gardener or domestic helper. This situation brings us back in time to the colonial era as *The New York Times* (2010) in an article entitled *As English Spread, Indonesians Fear for their Language* states that English has become a new Dutch in Indonesia. Like in the colonial time when Dutch was only spoken by the upper classes, while Javanese or Malay were spoken by the mass, English is regarded as owning a higher social standing than the national language, let alone the local language.

This is what I mean by the threat of English. It is like what had happened in the colonial time where the entailing problem arising from language domination is cultural domination. In this case, everything Dutch was looked up and everything Indonesian was looked down. Thus, to be able to step up the social ladder, the colonized Indonesian must speak like a Dutch, dress like a Dutch, eat like a Dutch and think like a Dutch. Now, it is everything English (which is most of the time, everything Western) which is more appreciated even celebrated than the national language and culture. Then, judging from its presumably better stand in securing one's future in Indonesia, English has a heavy potential in corroding the national language, culture and identity. This situation is in danger of being contradictory with the initial purpose of introducing English in Indonesian schools. With regards to the position of Indonesia in world community, *Kurikulum 2013* enacts that English is taught to make students able to introduce the history, the potentials and the richness of Indonesian culture to the world. Therefore, there must be some measure taken to handle the danger of English in our pedagogic practice.

Language Awareness versus Critical Language Awareness

Language awareness (henceforth, LA) has been widely known as an important dimension of the teaching of English, especially in the EFL context. It becomes important because many believe it will help both teachers and learners in forging a conducive and successful teaching and learning process. According to Carter (1995, in Wach 2014) for learners language awareness facilitate learning processes because it will make them want to know about how language works, and it will cause them to be autonomous learners which will foster better learning outcomes. In this case, the attainment of a better learning outcome is possible because learners learn voluntarily that they will seek answers or solution for learning problems they encounter. In a simpler term, the whole project of raising students' language awareness is to make the teaching and learning process centers on the students. As Thornbury (1997) defines language awareness as "what the teacher must know about English in order to teach it effectively (7)," teachers' language awareness will help them to select instructional designs suiting the condition of their students. It will also serve as a platform for the teachers to keep honing their pedagogical skills and developing new teaching methods and strategies since they will always face new batch of students coming with new sets of learning problems.

After knowing the benefit of language awareness, there is also a need to do a bit of ground clearing to shed some light on what LA might mean. Association for Language Awareness (ALA) (2012) defines language awareness as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use. This definition is in similar tone with Donmall (1985, in Ellis 2012) who defines language awareness as "a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and

its role in human life (2).” Meanwhile, Fairclough (1992, in Farias, 2005) states that language awareness is “conscious attention to properties of language and language use and an element of language education (2).” While for EFL teachers, according to Murray (1990) LA means “a teacher’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role and use in human life in general and in foreign language learning in particular.” In accordance with the aforementioned definition, language awareness depends much on the learners’ conscious or voluntary effort to understand the working of the language they are studying. Then, this knowledge will sensitize them toward the use and role of the language they are studying. It can also mean, learners are able to use the foreign language they are studying the way it is used in its place or country of origin.

But foreign language learning is not just about its grammar and pronunciation, it is also about learning the culture which is inherent in the language. According to Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1995) “language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world (290). He also believes that “how people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings (290).” What would happen if the foreign language being studied happened to be perceived as more prestigious than the first language of the learner? It is safe to assume that the learner would also perceive that her culture as more inferior than the culture of the foreign language she is studying. This illustration will definitely help to explain why in colonial Indonesia, European or Western culture represented by the Dutch culture was made the benchmark for modernity while the indigenous culture was deemed as the remnants of primitivity. Even when formal colonization ended in the twilight of the 19th century and the dawn of the 20th century, the assumption of the superiority of Western culture and languages remains, and this time it is English which rules the linguistic sphere of the world.

If language awareness in EFL means cultivating learners’ ability to use the language as it is used by the British, then we should beware of this shade of definition of the term because our students are in danger of interpellation. This fear has a solid ground because according to Waseem and Asadullah (2012) texts used in ESL/EFL pedagogy are frequently charged with culture and ideology, and the traditional teaching method of English often relies on positivist views of Eurocentric critics that those texts will serve as powerful interpellation tool (799). While Waseem and Asadullah speak from the linguistic situation in Pakistan, Nurhadi (2011) contemplates that in Indonesia the teaching of foreign languages, especially English, is vested with the interest of the West (8). Interpellation itself is an apparatus that “call[s] people forth as subjects, and which provide the conditions by which, and the context in which they obtain subjectivity” (Ashcroft, 2000: 221). To put it in simpler term, students of English is being interpellated when she identifies with everything English language and culture or she misrecognizes herself as an English, which is she is not. Therefore, it seems to be perfectly normal, despite the history of the teaching of English in these two countries are different- in Pakistan, as in most former British colonies, it is being a second language, while in Indonesia, it is a foreign language- if the assumption about the superiority of English is the same.

What is more dangerous is in Indonesian EFL context, language awareness is usually means speak like a native, -which is usually like a British, an Australian or an American-, and think like a native. Thus, it is no wonder if English courses or International schools are hiring native speakers as the English instructor even though those ‘native speakers’ have no whatsoever background or qualification in pedagogy or TEFL or TESOL. Sometimes, having a Caucasian look, regardless her nationality, is enough to make one eligible as a native speaker that sometimes she gets higher payment compared to local teachers with TEFL background. This is just a simple example of how deep Eurocentric view which has been unwarily ingrained in Indonesia, which is inevitably damaging to the nation in a long run. First, it is damaging because the interpellated Eurocentric view will be proven to be detrimental to the development the nation’s educational sector. For example, the employment of the native speaker who are not necessarily trained in the basic tenets of the objectives of Indonesian education and, sometimes,

TEFL over a more skillful and qualified Indonesian teachers makes the latter become a minority in their own home. Second, it will perpetuate foreign domination in the form of cultural imperialism in the country, while efforts to free the country from the shackle of colonialism has never been easy. Thus, this nation is in danger of being ‘recolonized’, of losing its own identity and then itself altogether since what is valid is not its national values but other people’s value and criteria.

Language awareness per se is well-meant, yet the way it is understood is incorrect like the dangerous “speak like the native and think like the native mode of thinking can be dangerous. Therefore, the project of language awareness must be accompanied by critical language pedagogy. One thing that prompts this idea is the notion that language is not just a series of syntactical formula which is value free or unloaded. Judging from the linguistic situation of our today’s world in which one language, in this case, English, plays a domineering role shows us that language is not as neutral as it seems. To put it in another way, it is not just a benign and neutral means of communication but its form, use, history and development has always been infused with political notion like power, ideology, race, gender, and sexuality as what people commonly believe. In this case, LA alone would not be able to answer surfacing questions on why and how English attains its current supremacy over other world languages. For that reason, the language awareness project is deemed to be insufficient as Fairclough (1995, in Chen 2014) states that LA has not given sufficient focus to language-related issues of power which to be highlighted in language education given the nature of the contemporary sociolinguistic order. (4)” Thus, there is a need for an approach in language teaching which also focus on the power relation which is at play in language use and teaching, which is called critical language awareness (CLA).

CLA gains currency after being introduced by Norman Fairclough through his idea of critical language studies (CLS) which is one of the form of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Fairclough (1989) believes that “the exercise of power, especially in modern society is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological working of the the language (2). With this, we are aware that language is very powerful that it can be a factor for a person to dominate another person. Interestingly, the domination which is thought as normal or natural or commonsensical is actually influenced by the working of a certain ideology (4). Then why ideology is very important when it comes to power exercise including that of in language use? Ideology or a set of believes or ideas that guide how a certain individual or group of people act or think according to Fairclogh is “the primes mean of manufacturing consent (4)”. In other words, domination will not exist without the consent or ‘willingness’ of the dominated. And it is the power of ideology to make some people believe that they are naturally susceptible to domination. For this reason, it is necessary to infuse critical theory into the analysis of language use which is the basis of CSL, which, according to Fairclough, works to “analyze[] social interactions in a way which focuses upon their linguistic elements, and which sets up to show out their generally hidden determinants in the system of social relationships as well as effect they may have upon that system (5).” In a simpler term, this approach seeks to shed some lights on the possibility of language use to show the speakers’ identity, power, and ideology.

If language awareness readies learners to learn more about the feature of the language they are studying, critical language awareness empower learners with critical eye to analyze why and how language is used the way it is used. According to Ali (2011) “critical language awareness springs from language awareness [in which it] focuses on how language represents the world and reflect social construction, [so] it is a pedagogic procedure which is based on critical discourse analysis and language awareness at the same time (29-30)The.” The importance of critical language awareness, as said by Farias (2005), is it has three main principles, which are:

1. Teaching is emancipatory.
2. Teaching is oriented toward the recognition of difference.

3. An engagement with teaching as an oppositional practice in which all participants are continuously thinking towards the prospects of for empowerment, particularly sectors that have been disempowered or excluded in the past (4).

It is emancipatory because it prompts learner to see things beyond what is said and written especially when it comes to the use of language and how the world is perceived through it. Then, critical language awareness will foster better understanding that there are a lot of language variation and none is more superior than the other. Then, critical language awareness opens up opportunities for learners of English in EFL context to see that the social and political dimension of a language are also an inherent part of a language learning aside from the grammar or other linguistics components of the language. This knowledge is empowering because learners will know why and how the foreign language they are studying gain importance which makes them critical as not to digest all hidden assumption carried by the language.

A very early stage: What Teachers of English in Indonesia should be Aware

Teachers of English should learn that English attains its current position not because it is naturally superior, as it has widely believed, to other world language, but because it is the language of the-once- the most powerful economic and political empire. The history of English as a colonizing language started with the first voyage of British naval fleet in to the New World in the 15th century and formally ended in the 20th when Hongkong was returned to China in 1997. According to Innes (2007) during its heyday, the British Empire ruled almost 470-570 millions subjects, which was 25% of the world population (vii). Then, Banfield and Crow (2007) the size of the British empire covered more than 25% of the landmass of the earth with ninety main colonial territories scattering in regions of Europe, North America, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Then, this bulk of Anglophone subjects and subjected territories could not be matched by other European empire like that of France, of which empire is often styled as Francophone, Spain, Italy, German, and Dutch. Therefore, it is perfectly normal if English is more wide spread than other languages of other European empires. Even after the decline of the empire, English remains the most spoken and studied language in the world thanks to the rise of the United States of America as a new imperial force. Just like its former colonial predecessor, America also views language and culture as important sites of power play that the subjugation a nation's language or culture translates to easier domination to preserve their interest in the region.

It was Lord Macaulay's minutes of Education in India (1835) that started to formalize the superiority of the English language and literature. In his speech before the English parliament he claimed that the British colonial government:

ha[s]to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us, --with models of every species of eloquence, --with historical composition, which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed, and which, considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equaled-- with just and lively representations of human life and human nature, --with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade, --with full and correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect of man. Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations. It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together. Nor is this all. In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the

higher class of natives at the seats of Government. It is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East. It is the language of two great European communities which are rising, the one in the south of Africa, the other in Australia, -- communities which are every year becoming more important and more closely connected with our Indian empire. Whether we look at the intrinsic value of our literature, or at the particular situation of this country, we shall see the strongest reason to think that, of all foreign tongues, the English tongue is that which would be the most useful to our native subjects.

The famous minute clearly emphasize that English is associated with the ruling and elite classes in the society, and at the same it is also emphasized that the only correct way to educate the colonial subjects is through English. On this ground, it was decided that English was to be made as the language of the court and instructional language in schools in India as in other British colonies. With this inherent assumption of its superiority, the teaching of English will only ease the path of the colonizer to interpellate the students with this 'assumed' superiority keeping them feeling bad about their own language and culture. Thus, the colonial enterprise could persist without serious challenges from the colonized subjects.

Despite Indonesia was never formally part of the British Empire, it does not mean teachers of English in Indonesia should not beware of the threat of English. According to Skutnaab-Kangas (in Waseem and Alawiya, 2013) the setting of English as a second universal language, the British and the American government protects their capital interest (805). One the one hand, it perpetuates the notion of their domination over other nations. In other words, those countries will set the standard, and other countries are to follow those standards. On the other hand, this domination will serve as a tool to keep inequalities among countries in the world. In this case Philipson (1992, in Waseem and Alawiya, 2013) believes that "English [is] the language of international capitalism where policies of English language promotion are linked with political-economic and cultural policies... [taking] the provision of texts book and the granting of scholarships is seen a means of forwarding these objectives (805)." The threat that this provisioning might pose is the books and the scholarships might be loaded with the donating countries hidden agenda, which is not necessarily compatible with the recipient countries national interest and national objectives.

Conclusion

The proliferation of language awareness as a way to foster learners better command of English should be looked upon with a critical eye. Language awareness is beneficial to make students become autonomous learners that they are ready to learn more about the feature of the language. Its effectiveness also lies in student being voluntarily curious and sensitive about how the language is supposed to use that it meets the standard which have been set for it. It is also might mean about the learners perception and experience of the language. However, language is not just simply grammatical rules or the correct expression to say one thing or another. Within language, power, ideology and identity are vested together. Language is a potent tool of one person to dominate or subjugate another person like in the case of the English language. To see this entanglement of language and power and it can shape one's identity, one needs to be critical. In this case language awareness alone is simply insufficient because it is not equipped with the ability to ask the question of how and why in a language use there is power at play.

For this reason, teachers of English in Indonesia should be well-versed in critical language awareness. This approach relies on critical discourse analysis to show the power at play in the language use and at the same time strengthens language awareness. In this case, teachers should be aware that the teaching of English in Indonesia should not undermines the national language and culture. The presence of English in the school curriculum is simply to prepare learners to have a competitive edge in our globalized world. *Kurikulum 2013* clearly mandates that English is taught to enable students to introduce the richness of Indonesia's

culture and local wisdom. Therefore, students must be trained to have language awareness to the betterment of their command of the language in order to effectively represent Indonesia. Yet, students must also be trained to be critical as not to be interpellated with hidden assumption inherent within the English language.

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