

English and Academic Research: A Growing Need

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Dr Al-Khatib in the call for papers presents us with an alarming picture; a ‘rapid decline’ in enrolments in English language degrees, humanities heading ‘over a cliff,’ the prioritisation of career over education combined with a lack of opportunities for English graduates, all leading to a loss of purpose. We are offered two paths; diversification or attrition. We can’t, however, ignore the fact that the English language plays an important part in maintaining and propagating the globalised, market-driven worldview which is so damaging, not just to studies of the humanities, but to perceptions of the role of education itself, and which is contributing to the decline in studying English at this level. In my view, rather than succumbing to these market forces and participating in an impoverished approach which promotes a sterile, functional version of English only useful for competing in a global job market (or indeed globalised academia), we should instead be advocating *more* research and wider academic engagement to keep up with, understand, and in many cases mitigate, the role of English at global, and, especially, local levels in a changing world, and the why, how and what of its place within education systems and the educational sciences.

To this end, this forward to the current volume of CALR Linguistic Journal will start by considering some of the challenges and discourses facing education in general, along with the place of English within those discourses and Educational Sciences, and then look briefly at three examples of growing research areas that consider not just how English is best learned and taught, but its role within specific social, political and educational contexts.

Education, experts and facts

We appear to be living in a particularly difficult time for education. Prevailing political and social currents promote seemingly contradictory, but equally damaging influences; the hard pragmatism of market forces, leading to the devaluation of education as an end in itself, and a greater trust in feelings over facts, leading to a distrust of ‘experts.’ In his article, “How Feelings Took Over the World,” the political economist William Davies argues that while suspicion of expert elites is nothing new – he mentions that Hobbes himself worried about the

‘closed’ nature of scientific societies – new modes of access to information are exacerbating the problem:

The promise of expertise, first made in the 17th century, is to provide us with a version of reality that we can all agree on. The promise of digital computing is to maximise sensitivity to a changing environment. Timing becomes everything. Experts produce facts; Google and Twitter offer trends. As the objective view of the world recedes, it is replaced by intuition as to which way things are heading now. This nervous state offers more emotional stimulation and sensitivity, but for the same reason it is unsettling and disruptive of peaceful situations. Meanwhile the question of who might be seeking to trigger specific feelings and why lurks in the background. (Davies, 2018).

While social sciences have generally moved on from the desire for “a reality that we can all agree on” towards a deeper understanding of knowledge and its construction, and the recognition of “a changing environment,” there is clearly a need, more than ever, for a critical counterbalance to “intuition,” and continued close examination of intuition itself. For education, this calls for more, not less, research, and the strengthening of links between research, policy and practice, as well as continued efforts to understand the nature of learning and knowledge. Unlike what some policy-makers would have you believe, it is not enough, as Chris Woodhead put it, simply to focus on ‘the drive to improve teaching and strengthen leadership’ (Ofsted, 2000, p. 21).

Why research English?

I’ve recently been reading the French education researcher Charlot (based in Brazil and written in Portuguese (Charlot, 2006)), who presents four *discursos* (discourses) that he sees as obstructing not just research into education, but even the view of education as a subject worthy of serious study, and which resonate with the issues around English raised in the call for papers. In fact, as he points out, these perspectives emphasise the need for deeper understanding, rather than diminishing it, and they provide a useful framework for considering the importance of research into English learning. In my attempts to summarise, I’ve simplified them to the essence of the ideas that I feel relate particularly to English within Educational Sciences, hopefully not at the expense of distorting Charlot’s original intentions.

1. *Countering popular myths and generalisations*

Charlot's first *discurso* is in fact a group of three that he feels diminish the status or value of Educational Sciences. *O Discurso Espontaneo* is familiar to anyone working in education - everyone has an opinion, because everyone has experienced education in some form. He considers this a problem not just in terms of misunderstanding by those outside the profession, but also for students of education who arrive with pre-conceived ideas that they then create research projects to prove. Popular opinions around English are innumerable, including the importance of a good level of English in order to 'get on' in life, the need for native speakers and native speaker models, the importance of learning through immersion, the need for children to be exposed to English at an early age, and so on and so on. As Charlot notes, these opinions often form political currency, and need to be backed up with evidence. *O Discurso do Pratico* says knowledge is only useful if it has a practical use, and opposes theory and practice as though they are on opposing sides of the argument. This is the argument that sees English only as a means to employment or international education, rather than a field of study, and fails to recognise the need to understand, for example, psychological, social and political factors that both affect and are affected by English. *O Discurso de Anti-Pedagogos* argues that there is knowledge, and there are people, and that all we need for learning is to introduce them to each other. i.e. pedagogy is either considered unimportant or a simple affair. This can be seen clearly in two common practices in ELT – the continued employment of relatively untrained native English speakers as teachers, and the use of English Medium Instruction, as though simple exposure to the language is the best way to learn.

2. *Addressing the complexity of learning and teaching the language beyond pedagogy and classroom practice, and strengthening links between research in schools and higher education institutions*

In contrast, *O Discurso Pedagogico* considers the study of education to be pedagogy alone. Charlot makes it clear that he sees the worth of studying pedagogy, but argues that it isn't a field of knowledge, because it is essentially a way of putting a set of values into practice – i.e. pedagogy depends on your view of education (and life), is situated in a time and place, and on its own, is 'unscientific.' Woodhead, in the reference I used above (Ofsted, 2000), exemplifies this discourse when he suggests that all we need to do is "improve teaching and strengthen leadership," and laments "the emptiness of educational theorising." This presupposes a universal version of good teaching, and agreement on the nature of education,

and also tries to tap into common teacher complaints, heard in English language classrooms as much as any other, about the ‘interference’ of ‘experts’ who have ‘never set foot in a classroom.’ Ironically, it also diminishes the teaching profession, by underestimating its complex, evolving nature, and the wider research that goes into not just the process of learning, but also understanding the way in which research, policy and practice fit together, and continually change. The key issues around English right now are not just based on how it is learned, but how it relates to people and society, how it affects local language and culture, and roles in both oppression and emancipation. All of which, of course, also have implications for the classroom. I’ll look at some of the English-specific areas that go beyond pedagogy in the later section on areas of research.

3. Investigating the unique role of English, including the significant impact it has on both other languages and the study of other subjects

Os Discursos dos ‘Outros’ (of the ‘others’) are perspectives on education from other disciplines. Charlot highlights psychology and sociology as two areas that sometimes lead research into education, the implication being that, while they clearly continue to be of huge importance, researchers in those domains have their own ends, which tend to be different from researchers who are specifically interested in education. English is largely in the same boat as the rest of education in this sense, but can also suffer from being subsumed by another, more homogenising ‘discurso dos outros,’ where it is treated in the same way as other foreign languages. As a dominant lingua franca, it has taken on a unique character and requires different approaches to research, policy and practice, including a much stronger focus on mitigating against the negative effects it can have on other languages and cultures, not to mention other subjects and education systems in general.

4. Localising global themes

Charlot identifies two areas of *discursos politicos*. The first is the *discurso militante*, which has a tendency to let the macro obscure the micro – i.e. even though we might recognise that neoliberalism and inequality are the major issues which deny people a fair education, it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t look at the quality of teaching in a particular context. On the other hand, he cites the powerful, controlling influence of international organisations, who through emphasis on words such as ‘quality’ and ‘assessment,’ can create agendas that become part of public discourse and are often followed by generalised, market-driven solutions. The challenge for the researcher is both to provide evidence of what is needed in a

particular context, regardless of these influences, and also to avoid having their area of investigation defined by funding or popular interest.

English language policy is a common political football, and 80-odd years after the British Council was founded, with part of its mission “to promote wider knowledge of the English language” (British Council, n.d.), it finds itself in the position of needing to instead promote research which in fact challenges assumptions about the benefits of English. A British Council report (Erling, 2015) on links between English and economic gain in the Middle East and North Africa finds that, “without targeting the long-embedded inequalities in terms of gender, ethnicity and the urban-rural divide, education in general – and English language education in particular – is not likely to provide disadvantaged individuals with the resources that they need to catch up,” and, “Offering education through English as the only medium seems likely to act as a further hindrance to learning.” It’s worth noting that this possibly risks falling under the first macro/micro tendency that Charlot mentions above – a good reason for more localised research!)

Teaching can also suffer from assumptions about learning that might not suit a specific context. For example, Clifford and Hutt report on a 2014 headline in the Myanmar Times: “Child-centred education a failure – experts.” (Clifford & Hutt, 2015). The headline itself is a misleading simplification, but as the authors show, it results from misguided attempts by international organisations, over many years, to implement a learner-centred teaching in Myanmar without sufficient consideration for the culture and education system. They advocate an approach which builds on the more traditional skills the teachers already have, and encompasses more direct teaching. Meanwhile, in an article by Don Watson, Burmese educationalist Win Aung argues that critical thinking has a longer history in the East than many have recognised, and shouldn’t be considered a predominantly Western concept (Watson, 2015).

Three research areas in need of attention

Charlot warns us against “pseudo-evidence, the commissioning of research by public institutions, funds and scholarships for teams of researchers,” in dealing with international organisations. Bearing in mind who I work for, here are three inter-related areas that I see as particularly current in terms of the need for research into English language education.

English Medium Instruction (EMI)

Of the ten research papers selected for grants at the ELT Research Awards last year (British Council, n.d.), 5 were related to this thorny issue, highlighting the perceived need for further understanding.

In his excellent paper, *English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries: a British Council perspective*, John Simpson outlines the British Council position on teaching other subjects through the medium of English (Simpson, 2017). He points out that, despite the fact that there is little or no evidence to support the widely held view that EMI is a better or surer way to attain fluency in English than via quality language teaching, many governments and institutions continue to see EMI as a solution to language learning needs in low to middle income countries, and he highlights the importance of mother tongue instruction; “Important research findings show that if young students in low- or middle-income countries are taught in their own or a familiar language, rather than English, they are more likely to understand what they are learning and be more successful academically (including in L2 as a subject) with benefits to education, the economy and society.” He continues, “The Medium of Instruction debate is complicated and multi-faceted, requiring further research with a particular focus on classrooms and teaching/learning processes.”

Lines of research are numerous. Many countries have already taken the EMI route at some level. What can be done to support them, and when might an EMI approach be considered appropriate? What impact does EMI have in the longer-term on local languages and wider culture and identity? What is the place (if any) of English in multi-lingual classrooms, and what are the skills a teacher needs in those contexts? Simpson’s report outlines principles and a wealth of references to act as a starting point for a researcher looking to investigate local policy and practice.

Language, resilience and migration

The British Council’s *Language for Resilience* report (Capstick & Delaney, 2015) on Syrian refugees and host communities identifies ways in which language is an essential component in enhancing the resilience of individuals, communities and institutions. Robust evidence of what works in these areas is needed to support future interventions, as well as broader research to understand the role of languages in migration more widely. In the introduction to

an upcoming second report (due to be released in November), Capstick explains the need for better understanding, not just at policy level; “Everybody makes decisions about which languages to use and when. We do not wish to restrict the realms of language policy and planning to the macro- social level.... Employers, head teachers and families all make decisions about language use.” Research in this area can have a direct impact at all levels. Some examples (from many identified in the reports) of areas that need ongoing, contextualised research are:

- Language policy and cohesion
- The role of host schools and teachers
- Multilingual pedagogies
- Language in the home
- Trauma and language

English, core skills and curriculum design

The TEFL model has overstayed its time... Persistence in using it can only support centripetal trends that consider “native” English as the norm and the target of learning. (AlKhatib, 2016).

In her paper looking at Masters programmes in ELT, AlKhatib argues that institutions in the ‘expanding circle,’ and Lebanon in particular, still follow models from the ‘inner circle,’ such as the UK and the US, and should move towards “a more ethnolinguistic and culturally rich English.” In essence, the vast majority of English language learning is with an English as a Lingua Franca (or English as an International Language) purpose – only a small minority of those who learn English are likely to need it principally for interacting with native speakers (Crystal, 2012). This calls for a shift, not just in what the language itself looks like, but in how it is approached as a subject in individual contexts. As above, policy makers, teachers, learners and society at large need to be aware of how English affects issues like multilingualism, language and identity and so on.

As a lingua franca, English is increasingly associated with “core,” interdisciplinary skills such as critical thinking, collaborative working and intercultural awareness. For example, the new curricular framework for Brazil asks students to reflect “on aspects of interaction between cultures in a way that will encourage fraternisation, respect, the resolution of

conflicts and mutual appreciation between peoples” (British Council Brazil, 2017), and attempts to identify related competencies such as those below:

Ability code	Description of the ability
(EF07LI21)	Investigating the approximate number of people using English as a foreign language in the world, in order to analyse the extent to which the language is used.
(EF08LI20)	Examining factors that could make understanding difficult between people of different cultures who use English as their mother tongue or as a second language.
(EF09LI18)	Analysing the importance of English in scientific development (the making, publication and discussion of new discoveries), and in economic and political activity worldwide.

(British Council Brazil, 2017)

These “abilities” need considerable thought in terms of understanding what they actually mean in practice, and research is needed to help teachers through the confusion and resistance they might feel at implementing the changes. They can be seen as generic across cultures – i.e. they focus on the international aspect of English, without mentioning Brazil – but it is easy to see how they could be turned into reflection on the role of English at a local level. While understanding of its cultural and imperial links, past and present, to the countries of its native speakers is vital, if English is to become a true lingua franca, it can no longer be treated as inseparable from the cultures of the inner circle, and must be approached as a part of local culture and identity.

Final thoughts and conclusions

As someone who lives abroad, almost every day I am embarrassed by someone who apologises for their (often excellent) level of English, despite the fact that it is evidently considerably better than my Portuguese/French/Arabic etc., as though there is an expectation that they should be fluent, and that I will judge them against the way I communicate as a native speaker. I am equally ashamed, when, pathetically giving up on my attempts to make myself understood, I ask “Fala inglês?” or “bte7ké englize?” and am met with a cold, “Of course,” or, worse still, I’m interrupted before I even get to that stage, by the instruction, “Speak English.” If, as the call for papers suggests, English degrees are no longer attractive to “an elite stratum of society,” maybe there is a perception that English is now merely a functional life skill, like cooking, or driving a car, and therefore not suitable for university-level study. This is of course, a success of linguistic imperialism, where English is somehow seen as an intrinsic part of being ‘modern.’ But aside from the minor inconvenience of it

hindering my attempts at learning second languages, it also hides the fact that, for the vast majority of children, learning English remains a struggle, and that over-emphasis of its role in gaining employment, or improving the economic competitiveness of a country can be to the detriment of education in general, and levels of English can even be a barrier to entering higher education in the country of a student's birth, let alone progressing in academia and reading and publishing research. There is the need to better understand the balance between the benefits and threats of English as they relate to local contexts, and of course for continued focus on improving English language teaching with an aim to reduce the difference between the haves and have-nots.

In terms of its position within Educational Sciences, English is now present in virtually every education system in the world, and this shows no sign of changing. As such, it should be approached in relation to the rest of the education system, including consideration of the areas of local philosophy, history, sociology and psychology that impact on its study. Many of the issues raised through Charlot's discursos are caused by generalized assumptions, myths, and half-understood theories which ignore local contexts, not only damaging identity, but getting in the way of successful learning. As AlKhatib (ibid.) points out, understanding and expertise in what it means to learn English in Lebanon shouldn't be held in the UK, but, by necessity, the vast majority of her bibliography on English as a Lingua Franca, Global Englishes and so on, is written by researchers based in native speaking contexts, and a disproportionate number are native speakers themselves.

If a priest tells you there's no salvation outside of religion... well, yes, his job depends on it. Pierre Bourdieu (Carles, 2001)

It won't surprise you to hear me say that we need more support for local researchers and local English departments, and better integration with other areas of educational and social sciences, to understand the wider implications of learning English as a Lingua Franca, and how it fits into areas like multi-lingualism and the use of mother-tongue. This is not diversification (and definitely not attrition), but a renewed, locally-driven focus, which investigates the impact of English on individual identities and society, what that means for language policy and practice, and how that can contribute to international understanding of the role of English. It may be hard to imagine, but perhaps if English is no longer owned by former colonial powers, we can foresee a situation where English is not a symbol of

neoliberalism, but rather a tool for building international solidarity. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos, 2016) suggests, “the progressive transformation of the world may also occur in ways not foreseen by Western thinking.”

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