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Being ‘the villain’

Globalization and the ‘native-speaker’ English language teacher

Elizabeth J. Erling

Introduction

In this chapter, I will look back at a particular point in my early career as an English language teacher in the 1990s in Seoul, South Korea. Using auto-ethnography as a lens, I will consider the role of English language teachers and the ELT profession in globalization. I will revisit some of the uncomfortable moments that I faced during that time in terms of the global spread of English, the palpable demand for English teaching I sensed and the way in which I was positioned as an English language teacher. As I transverse through my career as an applied linguist, I continually relate concepts and theories that I encounter to my experience in South Korea – which means that they continue to gain meaning for me. In this chapter, I will attempt to highlight some of these, including linguistic imperialism and the role of the native speaker English teacher. I will explore how I was affected by the spread of English and the idealization of the native English speaker in the global English teaching industry. It is my hope in doing so that readers will find ways to relate their own experiences to the discipline of applied linguistics, no matter in which stage in their career they currently find themselves.

The qualitative research method of auto-ethnography is a particularly suitable lens for this endeavour as I am attempting to explore my personal experience of English language teaching and connect it to wider cultural, political, and social understandings of globalization

and applied linguistic issues (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The intended goal of sharing these experiences is to sensitize readers to issues of the personal and professional development of native speaker English teachers: those who have sometimes been framed in the literature as the villain, the egoist, the privileged and the beneficiaries of the spread of English as a result of globalization (de Almeida Mattos, 1997; Barratt & Kontra, 2000; Holliday, 2005). While not wishing to take emphasis away from the privilege accorded to native speakers of English (Piller, 2016), my intention is to show that, in the context of market-driven globalization, this so-called privilege of native speaker English language teachers is riddled with complexity, and that this privilege is often accompanied by essentialization, commodification and sometimes even exploitation. Using auto-ethnography provides insight into the complex, and sometimes contradictory, mix of effects of the globalization of English and their impact on the individual level.

So who am I? I consider myself to be an applied linguist and English language teacher and teacher educator. I was born in the United States and am perhaps an idealized native speaker, as I come from a white, English-speaking, monolingual family. I spent my formative years in the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan area and attended Georgia State University for my undergraduate studies in English literature and German. I spent two years studying and working in Germany during that time. After graduating I taught English in Seoul, South Korea for two years. I then undertook my graduate and doctoral studies in applied linguistics, and have worked in universities in Germany and the UK since 1998. The time I spent in Korea (1995-1997) was a period of my life that has warranted intense reflection throughout my career. During my first few months there, I felt bombarded by new experiences and impressions that I often struggled to understand and was both bewildered and fascinated by them. I also felt relatively isolated. When out and about in Seoul, I was often stopped on the

street by people who wanted to try to talk to me or have their photo taken with me. I found it difficult to find people who I felt were genuine about being my friend. I often felt like they were just trying to get language practice or wanted to be seen with someone blond and white. As I walked through the small streets of my neighbourhood, on the way to various schools or houses, people stared and pointed saying ‘*mi-gook saram*’—a word which means ‘American’ but is regularly applied to any foreigner. Children in my classes asked to look into my blue eyes and more than once I was asked for a piece of my hair. What helped me to cope with isolation and disorientation was keeping detailed journals, writing letters (this was before the internet!) and taking lots of photos. As a result I have a rather vast ‘data base’ of documentation of this period of my life which I have used for reflection and analysis. When reading through these reflections, I have noted the reoccurrence of certain themes that link with theories and topics in applied linguistics and I draw on some of these in this chapter.

Globalization or 세계화: The increasing demand for English in Korea

Not recognising this at the time, I can now see that the situation and context that led me to work as an English language teacher in South Korea in the 1990s was part of trends implicit in globalization. While there are debates about when globalization began (see Robertson, 2003), it was certainly on the rise in the mid-1990s when I had just finished my Bachelor studies and was looking for employment. The economic market was increasingly internationalized and, along with this, there was an increase in transnational movements of capital, people, ideas, beliefs, knowledge and news. Travel and digital communication were becoming more accessible and affordable, which led to greater movement of people and ideas (Urry, 2007). Though I had not yet discovered it, the internet was fast developing and I opened my first email account at an internet café in Seoul in 1997. Societies started being seen as part of networks of interaction and interconnectedness (McGrew & Lewis, 1992).

The increased contact between communities that has come about because of globalization involves more people communicating over more language boundaries and therewith increases the need for a common code. For a various set of economic, social and political reasons (which have been explored by many, e.g. Bailey 1991; Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997), English has increasingly been the language fulfilling the need for a global **lingua franca**. Of course, this increasing demand for English means that there has also been an increase in the need for English language teachers. With international travel becoming more affordable, and the concurrent dawn of ELT programmes like the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme in 1987 (see Breckenridge & Erling, 2011), the 1990s saw an increasing number of young people from countries where English is a dominant language setting off to teach English, travel, see the world, and gain some teaching/employment experience.

The Republic of South Korea was not exempted from the event of globalization. The country, which had long been labelled the “Hermit Kingdom” due to its isolationist policies, opened itself to foreign influence as never before with the event of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. This also put pressure on the country to apply democratic reforms, which resulted in the election of President Kim Young Sam in 1993. Kim introduced 세계화 (*seggyehwa*) – commonly translated as ‘globalization’ – as the cornerstone of Korea’s international trade policy, contributing to the country’s rise as one of the four ‘Asian Tiger’ economies through rapid industrialization. The term *seggyehwa*, which implies the internationalization of economic relations, also evokes strong nationalist sentiments, calling on South Koreans to pull together to gain leadership in the international community. Such essentialized notions of national identity intended to secure national unity in the face of international integration but they also encourage the essentialization of ‘the other’ (Said, 1978).

Through the opening doors and the policy shift towards internationalization, South Koreans were increasingly exposed to ‘other cultures through the media as well as international visitors. Even in the two years that I was there (1995-1997), I noticed the number of ‘foreigners’ increasing and other changes in the country’s style and character as it was increasingly exposed to ‘western’ culture. All of these socio-political shifts resulted in the heightened perceived need for South Koreans to further improve their English communicative skills. English was increasingly demanded for employment and higher education, and offered in schools and private language schools. The national curriculum for English was reformed in the 1990s, : the role for English was expanded attempts were made to implement communicative language teaching (CLT) (Li, 1998). Private language institutes teaching the language were growing exponentially, setting into motion what has been called an ‘English frenzy’ (Park, 2009). 학원, (hagwon), or private supplementary tutoring institutes (offering what is often termed ‘shadow education’), became increasingly popular in Korea and beyond (Bray & Lykins, 2012). In 2004, it was estimated that Korean households spent about 2.9% of GDP on private tutoring (Kim, 2004) and private investment in English language education in South Korea came to \$13 billion in 2009, meaning that South Koreans spend more than \$500 per person per year of English language learning (Piller, 2016: 188).

Though not consciously aware of it at the time, I can now see that I was part of this socio-political moment. In 1995, I was 23, had just received my Bachelor in English. I was living at home, I had no health insurance, my car was breaking down and there was only a six-month’s grace period before I had to start paying on the loans I had taken out to afford my university education. While temping as a secretary and data entry clerk in various companies in Atlanta, every week I looked in the papers for jobs as a teacher, editor, or something suitable for a

graduate of English. I had already done a fair bit of travelling and had lived and studied abroad for a year, so the idea of going somewhere else to work and live was not new or unappealing. Every week there was an advertisement in Education section of the job advertisements in the *Atlanta Journal* for English teachers in Korea. Every week I ignored it, having no connection to Korea or any power to imagine myself there. After months of not finding a 'serious job' and becoming increasingly frustrated with my situation, the ad became increasingly interesting. Eventually I responded and was offered a teaching position in South Korea without much ado.

I remember being both excited and scared to go to Seoul. Although I had always been rather independent, this was the first time that I was doing something completely on my own—without the language skills or the cultural knowledge to make things easier – and I had little security or protection. My situation was probably more precarious than I realized at the time. I later found out that the contract that I had agreed to was basically meaningless, the health insurance and housing promised to me were not forthcoming, and the recruitment agency who had mediated my employment disappeared without a trace soon after my arrival in Seoul. Over time, I realized that contractual issues were quite common among foreign teachers, and I knew people who were imprisoned or deported. Because of issues such as these, the US Embassy had for some time an official warning on its website against working in Korea (which has since been removed) that stated:

Due to the growing number and seriousness of problems experienced by American citizens teaching English in Korea, we counsel against taking such employment, even at reputable colleges or universities, except upon receipt of a favorable written referral

from a current American citizen employee. We receive several complaints daily from Americans who came to Korea to teach English. (from Balance, 2002, Para 9).

The experiences that they report on were similar to my own (and are also echoed further in the Blacklist pieces on Tokyojon's blog):

Despite contracts promising good salaries, furnished apartments and other amenities, many teachers find they actually receive much less than they were promised; some do not even receive benefits required by Korean law, such as health insurance and severance pay. Teachers' complaints range from simple contract violations through non-payment of salary for months at a time, to dramatic incidents of severe sexual harassment, intimidation, threats of arrest/deportation, and physical assault. (from Balance, 2002, Para. 10)

Having no knowledge of where I was going to work beyond what was stated in the contract (which turned out not to be true), I took a job in a *hagwon* (private language school) that was attempting to expand and increasingly employ 'native speaker teachers'. My contract was similar to many that were offered at the time: for one year, with a monthly salary, round-trip airfare, and lodging included. My airfare was withheld until the year of employment was complete. The requirements of the job were that I was from an English-speaking country and had a Bachelor's degree (with the subject matter not being important). Since I had studied English and German, I did have extensive knowledge of the English language and experience of studying foreign languages. While I had had no training or experience as a teacher, I was willing to learn and assumed that this experience would allow me some kind of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) into teaching. I also had a vague notion of eventually returning to higher education to do a Masters in TESOL or applied linguistics.

Being confronted with the idea of ‘linguistic imperialism’

Around the time that I was working in Korea, in the mid-1990s, the fields of applied linguistics and ELT were experiencing significant development– in response to the both the growth of varieties of English in various global contexts as well as the increase in English language teaching worldwide. It was when I started my Masters in applied linguistics, directly following those two years, that I was confronted with these ideas. I remember in particular that the work of Robert Phillipson stirred something in me. He put forward his idea of ‘linguistic imperialism’ (Phillipson, 1992), claiming that industries of ELT were complicit in propelling the hegemony of English. Part of this was a critique of English language teachers in particular, for their role in spreading the language, imposing their values, norms, pedagogies and language on less dominant cultures (see also Holliday, 2005).

As I wrote in my first assignment (Erling, 1997), this idea resonated with some of the moral dilemmas I had in Korea about my role in globalization. Some Koreans were concerned about the traditional national culture and language being eroded due to globalization and the spread of English, and I wondered about how I was contributing to this given that English language teaching was part of the policies intended to further open up and democratize the country. On one hand, I was uncomfortable that my presence in South Korea had potentially played a role in the destabilization of a traditional culture that I had learned to respect and appreciate, but, at the same time, I recognized that the opportunity of living and teaching there had given me possibilities to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries, making connections and friends, and this had allowed us all to challenge perceptions, learn and grow. So while engaging with Phillipson’s theory of linguistic imperialism did initially cause me some shame and guilt

(Rajagopalan, 1999), as I started to think about it more deeply, it also propelled me to follow Pennycook (2001) and strive to find ways to enact a pedagogically and politically engaged applied linguistics that responds to social and cultural issues.

The ‘native non-teacher’

It was not only the topic of linguistic imperialism discussed during my postgraduate studies that particularly resounded with my experience in South Korea. Having attended the University of Edinburgh, Alan Davies’ book on *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics* (1991; 2003) was very influential. Our study programme included a demystification of ‘the native speaker ideal’, i.e. the assumption that native speakers inherently possess a superior command of the language and intimate knowledge of the culture. I later explored research that legitimizes the contribution of non-native speaker English teachers and illuminates their struggles to be recognized as language teaching professionals who are on par with their native English-speaking peers (e.g. Braine, 1999; Medgyes, 1999). Just as new research was recognizing the multitude of identities and motivations that students bring with them to the classroom (e.g. Norton 2000), there were studies that argued for an end to the dichotomization and essentialization of non-native speakers teachers of English (e.g. Holliday, 2005; Liu, 1999).

I certainly recognized and accepted a need for an end to the dichotomization of native speaker and non-native speakers and for valuing the contribution of non-native speaker teachers to ELT. Thinking back to my experience in South Korea, I could see that ideologies of the native speaker teacher were behind the practices at the private language school where I taught. The teaching labour was split between the Korean English teachers, who taught grammar and explained rules in Korean, and the native speaker teachers who taught

communication. It was also certainly the case that Korean and foreign teachers were treated differentially by our employers. I am quite sure that native speaker teachers got higher pay plus had their accommodation covered. But they also had less job security and more concern about employment rights, deportation, etc. I could also see some validity in the critique of the native speaker teacher not being as diligent or well trained as their Korean counterparts. The Korean English teachers worked longer hours and showed more commitment to the school. My point is not engage in a petty debate about who had it better, as it seems like neither group of teachers had particularly ideal working conditions. I just want to point out that there were very different challenges for these groups of teachers – and that we each had to respond to different expectations coming from the school, the students and the parents.

Moreover, I could not help but note that while that critique of the native speaker teacher recognizes the multifaceted identities of non-native speaker students and teachers, it often does not accord the same value to the identities of native speaker English teachers. They are often lumped together in the discourse as unskilled, insensitive and crass, regardless of the cultural, ethnic, linguistic and professional diversity that can be found among them. Some scholars have even used pejorative terms to describe them, like the ‘professional egotist’ (Barratt & Kontra, 2000: 21) and the ‘native non-teacher’ (de Almeida Mattos, 1997: 38). The villainization of the native speaker teacher is well displayed in an excerpt from Holliday (2005) who describes native speaker English teachers as:

[A] professional group which, in order to find a status which it cannot find at home, propels itself into the professional domains of other education systems in other countries, while maintaining distance from them; and sees itself as liberally humanist

even when it blatantly reduces foreign colleagues and students to a problematic generalized Other. (Holliday, 2005: 29; for further critique of this, see Erling, 2006)

It has to be admitted that the first part of this description aptly describes some of the narrative that I have related above about the events that led to my teaching in Korea (not able to find the kind of job I wanted 'at home' and thus seeking employment in another country's education system). However, when I read this I was surprised at how native speaker teachers are framed in an active position. While it was true that I was distanced from my Korean colleagues, I felt that this was not on my own accord but that I was not expected (or particularly welcomed) to work or socialize together with them. My experience of this felt entirely passive, and I thought that I was adapting to local norms. It seemed that (as I will show below) some of the native speaker roles that I took on were imposed on me. I also noted that this discussion was told almost entirely from the perspective of the non-native teacher and student of English, while the perspectives of English language teachers from 'the centre' tend to be left out or considered unmarked (but see Breckenridge & Erling, 2011) – which is why I am telling this story.

Play with native

It also came as a surprise that the diverse group of native speaker teachers that I knew in Korea – who came from a wide range of backgrounds and levels of experience – were being portrayed as a homogenous group in the applied linguistics literature. So while this description did not map onto my version of reality, it did conform to the constructed and fixed ideal of the native speaker teacher that was desired and sought after in the context of South Korea. The more one conformed to stereotypical ideals of the native speaker – white,

blonde, blue-eyed, young, and preferably not Korean speaking – the more valuable one was to the employer. My employer, for example, used to hire me out to other schools.

I particularly remember one Saturday when I was asked to work at another school that was having its grand opening. The school, which was brand new and had yet to hire staff, wanted to create the impression that it had a cadre of native speaker teachers. The school was called “English Camp” and it had a number of themed rooms that were designed to simulate an ‘authentic’ English-speaking environment (whatever that is), e.g. the school room, play area, kitchen, etc. (for more on the phenomenon of schools like this, see Seargeant, 2005). The sign on the front of the school read: “English Camp is the place we can play with native” (see image X.1). I was asked to ‘dress up’ and when I arrived was asked to don a red sash and walk up and down the street in front of the school in order to attract passers-by and new customers into the Grand Opening event. I reflected afterwards in my journal that I felt like an “English prostitute”.

<Insert Image X.1 here>

Image X.1 English camp in Seould, 1995 (photo by the author)

Although I did not know what to call this at the time, I later encountered the term ‘commodification’ in work such as Monica Heller’s. It has been interesting to follow increasing discussions about the commodification of language as part of globalization, in terms of it being framed as a technical skill resulting in economic gain (see Heller, 2003; 2010). However, I have noted that there has been little discussion about how English language teachers are commodified as part of processes of globalization. While these teachers are made responsible for the spread of inequality and linguistic imperialism, there has not

been much work on how local attitudes and national ideologies work together with global trends to perpetuate their systemic ‘utilization’. Native speaker teachers in South Korea were often presented as the exoticized Other, unessential to the classroom, interchangeable and foreign – regardless of these individuals’ personalities, ethnic backgrounds and levels of motivation or experience.

Developing a professional identity

Being traded and marketed as a commodity – and positioned as being interchangeable in the classroom – ultimately had an impact on the development of my professional identity as a teacher. I quickly came to see that my experience (or lack thereof) as a teacher – or my desire to do ‘a good job’ – did not matter as much to my employers and students as my white skin, blue eyes and blond hair (for similar experiences, see Jeon, 2009; Simon-Maeda, 2004).

While I was motivated and tried to prepare lessons and think of new ideas when I first got there, I became increasingly frustrated. Instead of being able to work with one group of students over time, I was ushered from classroom to classroom, school to school (in my journal I referred to this as being ‘pimped out’). In fact, I was regularly asked to walk into lessons with no previous knowledge of the students or the teaching material and was expected to ‘teach’. My coping strategy was to develop a bank of resources that I carried around with me – games, flashcards, songs, etc. –so that I could use them with any group whenever needed. Sometimes I would bring photos from home or things to show and tell. Students would ask me about my life, friends, family in the US, and for this we would, of course, have to engage in real communicative activities.

When reviewing my journals I have noted with interest that I was frustrated by students’ lack of interest in their textbooks and by the fact that they always pressured me to play games,

sing or chat (when possible) with them. At the time, I did not recognize these as meaningful learning activities. The 'serious' learning was reserved for the English lessons with the non-native speaker teachers, who would explain rules and practices and undertake grammar and vocabulary drills. The irony is not lost on me that I now work in international teacher education to support teachers and teacher educators in various countries implementing student centred communicative language teaching techniques. Part of this is to encourage teachers to move away from the textbook and try out more communicative and creative activities, which are sometimes quite similar to those that I did in South Korea (those that I felt were illegitimate at the time).

Conclusion

My experience in Korea in the mid-1990s, while disorienting and sometimes lonely, gave me an experience of being 'otherized'. I experienced commodification and the feeling of being positioned as an English prostitute. Many teachers in a similar situation experienced exploitation and I too was unjustly treated at times. When I left the country in 1997, with hindsight I can see that the Asian economic crisis was lurking around the corner. The last company I worked for disappeared without paying me my final three months' salary. These experiences meant that in my further studies in applied linguistics, I was sensitive to discussions about linguistic imperialism and the privilege of the native speaker English teacher. While I do not deny that these debates are interesting and useful to engage in, I have always felt that they only convey part of the story. Privilege can lead to idealization, dehumanization, commodification, utilization and exploitation. And all these, in turn, can cause English language teachers to disengage from the profession. The way that 'native speakers' are portrayed in discussions about globalization and language affects their own

motivation, self-perception and professional ambitions and development, as well as those of learners.

I recently came across a blog called “Don’t teach in Korea” started by someone who had taught there. Despite the difficulties I faced while starting out as an English language teacher in South Korea in the 1990s, this is not a position that I would support. Teaching in Korea marked an important transformation for me, both in terms of my personal and professional identity. Despite the difficulties I faced, I have carried on as an applied linguistics professional and have used that experience as the basis for critical reflection and engagement with many of the ideas and theories that I have come across. I have also maintained ties with Korea, keeping a number of friends that I made at that time and developing others since. While there have always been moments when I have felt a sense of discomfort with my role in globalization, this has not resulted in me abandoning English language teaching, but has propelled an interest and intrigue and brought me to consider ways of responding to ideologies of English and its role in globalization (see Erling & Seargeant, 2013; Erling, forthcoming).

So while I would recommend that teachers who go out into the world to teach have more teacher training – and more security – than I did then; I also think that the field of applied linguistics has to work harder not to essentialize and villainize teachers entering the profession. We need to recognize these teachers’ potential to become critical, transcultural, multilingual English language teaching professionals. Through much of my career, I have been ashamed of my earliest teaching experiences. I have never wanted to admit that I started out as a rogue teacher, a cowboy, a native speaker who got a job based on idealized perceptions of language and ethnicity. Writing these experiences feels in a way like ‘coming

out'. I hope that laying bare these thoughts and experiences opens a space in which we can better consider how to better create pathways for native speaker teachers to move from their early, novice experiences in teaching to being critical applied linguistic professionals. Globalization and neo-liberalism is having an impact on us all, turning victims into villains and vice versa, and native speaker status does not protect teachers from hardship. Applied linguistics and ELT has an important role to play in ensuring the cultivation of empathy and communication across cultures, communities and careers – for native and non-native speakers alike.

Questions for discussion

1. What is your role in globalization and the spread of English? Are you comfortable with that role? What might you be able to do to enact a pedagogically and politically engaged applied linguistics that responds to social and cultural issues?
2. Consider an English language teaching context that you are familiar with. Are there different roles and expectations of native and non-native speaker English teachers? What ideologies are behind these practices?

Author profile

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