

# The Globalization of English: A Personal Reflection from Costa Rica

*Ken Winograd  
Oregon State University*

In many developing countries, English is a metaphor for hope. It is the “strongest linguistic currency ...an equivalent of the American dollar, as something that needs to be attained in order to participate ...in a global market, [and it] has transformed the study of English from an instructional activity, a tool for learning, into an object of consumption” (Nino-Murcia, 2003: 122).

I just finished a year in Costa Rica, on sabbatical from my position as an education professor at Oregon State University. Although not a specialist in language teaching, I did some teaching of English in the shantytowns in and around San Jose, the capital city. In this essay, I do not describe my direct experience of teaching English. Instead, I share some of the tensions I felt as a teacher of English. Admittedly, my perspective is a bit muddled, as it should be considering my ambivalence about the globalization of English and its teaching, the focus of this article. I begin with the story of an impromptu meeting on a bus with a young Costa Rican man in pursuit of language.

I had just had an exhausting day in San Jose. Hot sun, wrong busses, missed turns, and conversations with *Ticos* who talked too fast. It is *hora piku* (rush hour) so the bus back to Heredia is crowded, but somehow I manage to get a seat. This seat is more like a sardine can, since I have to go into some perverse yoga move in order to fit. A twenty-minute ride is now sixty.

Eventually, of course, someone sits next to me, a strange event indeed when total strangers squeeze against each other, touching in an embrace but without eye contact or *amistad*. But this time, my squeeze partner looks at me and says, “Are you an American?” *Maldito!* I was praying for some quiet

so I could listen to my Spanish tape and zone out. Sweaty, hot and smelling quite foul, I begin visualizing the beach at Cahuita. But not for long.

“Why, yes,” I admitted. I hope he didn’t pick up on my look of disgust.

“Well, do you mind if I practice my English with you? Do you know much about irregular verbs? They are so hard. Can help me with irregular verbs?” The look on his sweaty face expressed one long pitiful “pleeeeeeeeeeease.” Of course I didn’t want to help him with his verbs, but he was so earnest, so whole-hearted and, besides, maybe he could speak some Spanish to me as well. I asked him about the irregulars he knew already and, after a few minutes of painful discussion, we moved on to what he really wanted: some open-ended conversation. I asked him, “What do you do?”

“What?” he asked.

“What do you do?”

“Oh, I work HP. A technician. I answer questions when people’s printers break.”

So you take phone calls from the United States,” I asked.

“Huh?”

I realized that he needed repetition when the words or the language structure were unfamiliar, so I slowed down a tad. I was able to relate, since I often need Spanish utterances directed towards me two times before I got it.

“Why...do...you...want...to...learn English?” I asked.

“So I can speak to anyone in the world and be anywhere in the world and able to talk to people.

English is the international language. And it's language of businesses. I can get a high paying job with English."

Bernard was his name, and he was about twenty years old. He finished high school but I am not sure if he passed his Bachillero exam, which qualifies students for university. He was in a technician training program, learning how to take overseas phone calls from buyers of HP printers who have technical problems. He was very passionate about this work. Language was not part of his training, however.

"I need someone to talk with. I watch television, like the Food Channel and the Home and Garden Channel." I recommended that he read English texts everyday, such as the newspaper, and translate unfamiliar words and study these. I also suggested he find and listen to instructional tapes.

"My plan is to be the *jefe* (boss) some day. The company will pay for my university so my plan is to study German, Portuguese, French too." He wanted to attend one of the private universities in Heredia at night so he could continue working during the day. "The company will pay 80% for university."

"Listen, Bernard," I said, "tell your *jefe* that I said that more language training should be part of your training. It'll make you more effective when people call you on the phone. Tell him I said this." He laughed. I was serious. His English, though considerably better than my Spanish, was not strong and I envisioned phone calls from printer-disabled customers in North America who, instead of focusing on computer problems, would get mired in linguistic snafus.

Bernard was unambiguously optimistic and passionate about his goals, the learning of English and the other languages. He was completely undaunted by the task of learning these languages. Given his age and commitment, I thought he could do it. He got off the bus before me. When I finally exited the bus, I felt invigorated by my encounter with this optimistic and passionate young man, but my excitement for this fellow was shadowed by a bit of concern.

There are thousands of Bernards in Costa Rica and throughout the non-English speaking world. The drive to learn English here is almost a national imperative. There are private English conversation schools in every city and even in small towns in Costa Rica. Universities require the reading of English as a graduation requirement. English is one of the areas of focus in private technical colleges. English is taught in public schools starting in the first grade, and increasingly English teaching begins at the kindergarten level.

Private schools, which now enroll 10% of the students in the country, market English heavily to recruit new students. Private schools typically offer at least two hours of English instruction, and it is often integrated into the teaching of the content areas, such as science and mathematics. Many of the private schools are truly bilingual, so the elite send their children to private schools where the courses

are taught primarily in English. When I ask parents why they send their children to private schools, their first reason is usually the "emphasis on English."

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English first came to Costa Rica with the immigration of West-Indies Africans in the late 1800s. They came here to work on the railroad linking the banana plantations with the Limon port on the Caribbean (Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005). Most of the descendents of these workers still live in the country, mostly in and around Limon, and most are bilingual in English and Spanish. While the parents and grandparents of these mostly Jamaican-Africans spoke only English, state-sponsored Spanish, as it is taught in the schools and spoken in the media, has resulted in 80% of African-Costa Ricans becoming bilingual.

While English was formally introduced in the high school curriculum in 1824, since the 1940s the reading of English has been a requirement for university graduation. The expansion of English teaching and an apparent consensus regarding the importance of English has occurred since 1990 with the emergence of the tourist industry and the influx of foreign investment and immigration of United States citizens. The discourse of English, particularly a discourse that valorizes the importance of English to the Costa Rican

economy and society, is dominant here and is typical of the strength of this discourse around the world. In the words of one Costa Rican educator:

Globalization has always been on the minds of our people. Last century, we became global by being one of the first nations to install electric lights.... We continue to be global into the next millennium by putting computers in the classrooms and teaching English to our younger generations, to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to become citizens of the world.

(Cabrera & Ancker, in Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005)

There are several factors driving the process of English as a national aspiration (Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005). The proliferation of the tourist industry since the late 1980s has resulted in a rapid increase in the numbers of Costa Ricans who need or aspire to speak English. Related to the increase of tourism, there has been a surge of retirees from the United States and Europe, and this has a similar effect on the motivation of *Ticos* to speak English. A huge number of international research projects are based in Costa Rican reserves and parks, so the influx of this largely English-speaking scientific community is another influence on the English movement here.

Of course, the central driving force behind Costa Ricans' motivation to learn English is economic and the desire for an improved economic position (Aguilar-Sanchez, 2005). Much foreign investment depends on the quality of the literacy of the local population, and international companies require, first and foremost, a critical mass of locals who can speak English. Besides having a local employment base that has technical skills, companies look for employees who can speak English. A large Intel plant came to the country in 1997, and it required that its employees be able to read, write, speak and listen in English. The Intel move in 1997 probably triggered an expansion of English teaching in the schools, which in this year moved English teaching to the elementary school, beginning in first grade.

Some authors, such as Aguilar-Sanchez (2005), take a technical/instrumental view of language learning and the teaching of English around the world. However, more critical perspectives recognize that the globalization of English is problematic, and it poses both dangerous and useful possibilities for world cultures. One danger here is a dimension of linguistic imperialism in the spread of English. Clearly, this spread of English into the cultural and economic life throughout the world causes alarm and anger among many people. For example, in the African context, Ngugi (1993) asserts:

A new world order that is more than a global dominance of neo-colonial relations policed by a handful of Western nations ... is a disaster for the peoples of the world and their cultures.... The languages of English (are) taught as if they (are) our

own languages, as if African had no tongues except those brought by imperialism, bearing the label, MADE IN ENGLISH (35).

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Others argue that English in the past had clear and obvious imperialist and colonial goals, like those pursued by the British in the 19th century and the US in the 20th century. Before the present neo-liberal moment (starting around 1980), English was explicitly linked to power and the imperialistic goals of these two English-speaking powers. The teaching and global spread of English "is distinguished from previous historical moments of linguistic expansion ... by the claim that ... it is not being artificially or externally imposed (Kayman, 2004, 3).

The teaching of English now, in developing countries, is divorced from its cultural components, for example teaching that is embedded in literature, so it appears free from ideological intentions. However, English is neutral "only in the sense that it no longer bears the mark of a colonial or imperial centre, but it functions as a tool to achieve economic development in the market" (Narkunas, 2005, 42). The dilemma for post colonial peoples is that they need English for practical reasons (for instance, to be part of new world economy, to claim a portion of new wealth), but the users of "market English" run the "apparently unavoid-

able risk of co-option, of acquiescing in the negation of their own understandings of reality and in the accompanying denial or even subversion of their own interests” (Kandiah, 2001, p. 112).

Phillips (2001) is especially critical of how world English is taught, and he argues that English can and should be embedded in local cultures and goals. English can strengthen the “local language ecology,” he suggests. However, the danger is when there is the promotion of “one language (English) and one culture (USA) at the expense of others, by means of the interlocking of linguistic imperialism with a system of production and ideologies that attempt to justify an economically expansive and exploitative world order” (Phillips, 2001, p. 193).

Phillips notes that most English language textbooks used throughout the world reflect a Western (that is, British or American) perspective on the world. Instead, he advocates for a version of English, called the Ecology of Languages Perspective, that is more democratic and pluralistic. “... it builds in its own linguistic and cultural diversity, attempts to ensure equality for speakers of all languages, uses the human rights system as a counterweight to the ‘free market’” (p. 193). Kayman argues that even the communicative approach to the teaching of English, currently the dominant pedagogic approach, which valorizes communication and marginalizes culture and history, still does reflect “cultural assumptions (that are) embedded in the ascribed situations, notions, and functions it is designed to serve.”

Clayton (2005) acknowledges that “... the hegemony of English (exists) with other hegemonic processes (diffusion of consent to the neo-liberal agenda, for example) [that enhances] a global class structure that, while flexible and dynamic, remains fundamentally asymmetrical and exploitative” (p. 132). However, he is critical of an overly deterministic view of Global English as a bad thing. English can serve the interests of nations, such as India, Malaysia, and Singapore, especially when there is a colonial tradition of English on which to build.

The globalization of English does allow world peoples to talk to each other. Another response to

linguistic hegemony is resistance, when nations or cultural groups fight or redefine the spread of English by, for example, promoting local, national or indigenous languages as accompanying languages in bilingual (Canada) or multilingual (South Africa) societies. However, the most common response to the spread of English appears to be accommodation, whereby the players make decisions to accept the hegemonic language(s) in some forms.

A piece by Nino-Murcia (2003) leaves one feeling ambivalent about the globalization of English. As others have, he noted that English competency in developing countries relates to the social and economic position of people. For example, the most privileged citizens send their children to bilingual schools or those expensive private schools that teach their curricula in English with native-English speaking teachers. A small group of elite is able to send their children overseas to perfect their English language and Western manners so they can fully exploit market opportunities.

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Most of the populations in the developing world (under the age of forty and those not in abject poverty) dream of English competency, which they view as the “ticket” to membership in the global market community. However, for the masses who do not have the means to attend private schools or travel overseas, learning English is very challenging and most tend not to progress to a level of functional proficiency. Still, I have met *Ticos* of modest means who have achieved some competency, although they have never traveled overseas or studied in a private school. These are individuals who are driven to learn English, and they typically will have engaged in auto-didactic strategies like watching copious amounts of television and movies and listening to music.

Regrettably, the public school English programs in Costa Rica and most peripheral nations focus on reading/writing (not on speaking), and these nations suffer from a dearth of teachers skilled at speaking English. The endemic examinations in English (after the 6<sup>th</sup> grade) are basically reading comprehension tasks, not infrequently written in stilted English and with poorly constructed test items. Besides, there are virtually nonexistent opportunities for most students to speak with native-English speakers.

In the end, the polarization of society's children into public or private education serves to reproduce groups of have-nots and haves, of course reflecting larger socioeconomic class relations: for the most part, students with family resources learn English and students without resources do not. In addition, I also wonder about the kinds of employment for which English qualifies most people who learn English in developing countries, such as working as clerks and waiters in tourist hotels or call-answering centers. The linguistic form needed for positions in most of the new economy is what Narkunas calls "market English," which is a bare-bones, minimalist, instrumentalist type of language that does not require cultural understandings or nuanced forms. Getting outside my privileged North American skin, I need to remember that, for them, these jobs represent an improvement over what they would be doing otherwise, like working construction, lugging boulders to make way for new roads or houses, and so forth.

I've seen references to the idea of the fourth world, segments of societies in both core and peripheral nations which have essentially been left behind economically. In rich nations and more so in developing nations, especially in Africa, there are populations rural and urban that are chronically poor, illiterate, and disenfranchised. In India, perhaps a large minority of citizens are benefiting from globalization and their knowledge of English. Still, there are 350 million citizens living in abject poverty, people for whom decent housing, health and education let alone English proficiency are remote possibilities.

Globalization leads us to envision transnational systems of government. While there is clearly a north-south order of things when it comes to economic haves and have-nots, and access to resources including English is differential within "nations," so it is useful to "locate English as working ... among co-existing groups with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and some degree of autonomy from each other" (Nino-Murcia, 2003, p. 122).

It appears that there are almost structural dimensions to the unequal playing field in the globalization of English, determining who is able to take advantage of it and who is not. For example, native-

English speakers from core countries like the US and England appear to have an advantage in the competitive international worlds of academia, research and commerce, since second language speakers (even the elite, professional classes in non-English countries) are never quite as fluid and subtle in their use of English as are native-English speakers. Then, the elites in the peripheral countries are at an advantage over their working class or working poor compatriots. Subsequently, the various levels of English proficiency that these groups are able to develop signal another inequality, which then enables the elite to access more resources and wealth than the non-elite. Finally, there are the masses of bottom feeders, the fourth world citizens, for whom English is unobtainable. This situation, in the end, severely disadvantages them in the new economy. For them, English will remain just a metaphor for hope.

What are the implications of all this for workers in the field teaching English, that is, well-intentioned language workers who are sensitive to the risks and dangers of cultural imperialism? For me, the answer lies with our

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students and their felt desires and needs to learn English as a vehicle to better their lives in the global economy. Many of our students live in near poverty, and English fluency can, indeed, facilitate a better job, more income, more security for them and their families.

I think to withhold the teaching of English because it offends our idealistic or principled notions of social/cultural justice is wrong, since it only serves to promote the interests of the elite who will learn English without me and without the neighborhood English programs that are set up for the masses. By learning English, these low-incomers have an opportunity to increase their leverage in the market and, perhaps, improve their economic chances and those of their progeny. Certainly, my curriculum and teaching will be more connected to local cultures and the personalities of my students, and I will avoid cultural language renditions that marginalize my students' prior knowledge, interests and cultures. Besides arguing for a culturally sensitive approach to the teaching of English, the only other pertinent task

is to promote English for everyone.  
Everyone. This is the least I can do.

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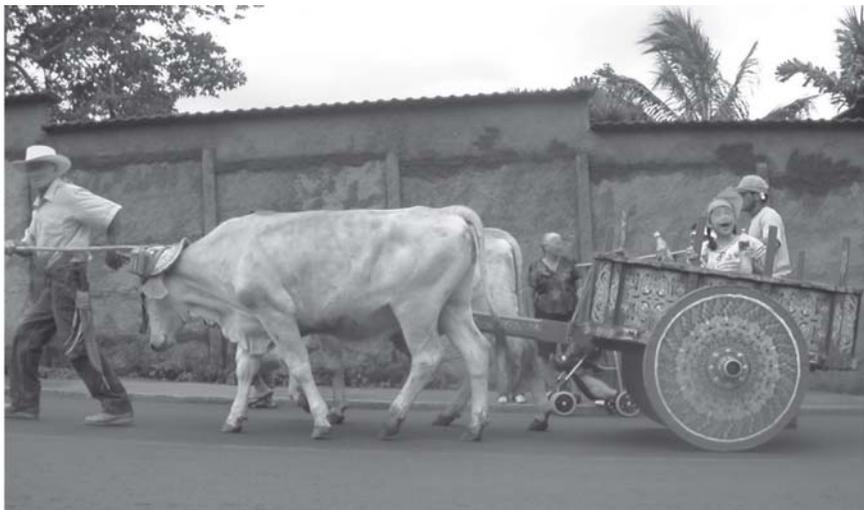


Figure 1. Oxcart Festival. Photo by K. Winograd

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*Ken Winograd has been on the faculty in the College of Education at Oregon State University since 1990, where he teaches literacy and research methods to graduate students as well as in-service teachers in Oregon. His current research interests include literacy and social justice, especially the effects of globalization on literacy teaching and learning.*