



Whatever Happened to the Anglosphere?

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Abstract

The paper is based on the postulate that no educational process occurs in a vacuum. Social and political context is a vital component in all institutional learning, and language learning is no exception. If students are not merely users of language but social agents, and we recognise the desire for effectance, then this context becomes all the more important.

The so-called Anglosphere represents a significant level of context: claims that English was a world language, the language of science and economics, or the language of popular culture rendered it automatically relevant. We teachers enjoyed linguistic privilege in which our subject was both the medium and arbiter of change.

Recent technological developments have transformed the globe, and increased opportunities for learning and teaching, offering hugely diversified means of experiencing language and practising it. Channels are different and often multi-modal, information is excessive, lexis and grammar are open to hyper-experimentation and the interconnected complexity of human actions present new tasks (and responsibilities) for language, as consensus breaks down and facts lack authenticity.

This paper suggests that language teachers have a unique responsibility to equip learners to navigate this environment, and this implies a significant reset in our assumptions – as to the role of English and as to the actual language we share with our students. The Anglosphere is changing fast – modes of communication, the political and social consensus, the reach of English, and this, coupled with technological change, could render Ostler's prediction of the last lingua franca reality. The paper closes with a series of suggestions as to the kinds of activities and learning experiences we should use and encourage (e.g. to reduce cognitive biases and develop discernment skills) when the privileges of the Anglosphere are perhaps becoming a thing of the past.

Keywords: *anglosphere; language teaching; consensus; discernment*

1. Introduction

All education has a social aspect, whether this is the immediate context in which it occurs or the prospective element that it invariably implies, preparing learners to navigate diverse situations in their future lives. Indeed, this social aspect is all the clearer in language teaching, where the very stuff of our lessons implies social interaction, and we strive to equip our students with the linguistic resources and richer repertoires that enhance social skills. At the same time, there is a wider social and political context that constantly impacts on teaching. What happens at the geopolitical level alters perceptions of the potential usefulness of our subject – the currency learning English will have in future. If our students are to be true social agents [1] with efficacy in the world then our language must be relevant to social needs, a genuine help to its speakers in achieving social and economic goals, and an aid to personal self-expression.

2. Changes in the Anglosphere

A significant, and rather hidden level of context for English language teachers in the recent past has probably been the 'Anglosphere'. We have been fortunate in teaching a language that was automatically considered of vital importance, scientifically, economically and culturally [2]. English was presumed to be a global language, if not *the* preeminent global language, and so as teachers we could rely on inevitable motivation in many of our students. The high-water mark of this phase of language history was probably reached in the early years of this century [3] when a world led by English-speaking nations was imagined to be destined to greater and greater influence from an Anglo-cultural 'centre' consisting of the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, along with various other nations, listed rather inconsistently (is Ireland, for example, a member?). Critiques of this state of



affairs were not lacking: Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism [4] being the most trenchant; but the English as Lingua Franca movement can also be seen in this vein [5]. However, even these criticisms tended to reinforce a sensation that English was at the very centre of things – there might be debate about how English should be learned and used, but its centrality was assumed, and teaching practices and course materials reflected this.

Since the first decade of the 21st century the geopolitical context has transformed. The Brexit vote in the UK and Trump's first election victory in 2016 heralded a significant change in the Anglosphere – all of a sudden, its two senior partners expressed a desire to withdraw from an international leadership role that had become almost axiomatic (witness Trump's outspoken hostility to NATO and the UK's difficulty in negotiating with the EU). Meanwhile the growth of sovereigntist movements has undermined the global ambitions of English and contradicted neo-liberal ideas of free trade and international cooperation. If the Anglosphere still exists, either as a geopolitical project, or merely as a network of linguistic and cultural understanding, it is certainly very different from ten years ago [6].

3. Meanwhile Technology Continues Apace

We are all aware that our classrooms are being transformed by another contextual change: technology impinges on human learning more now than ever before. Developments in translation software and AI, along with different modes of communication now available, offer huge opportunities for us as teachers, but at the same time challenge us because the very context of language use is nothing like before.

Language is at the heart of AI technology with LLMs being the basis of near perfect imitation, while the products of these automated systems are largely linguistic in form. This means that our students have massively diversified means of experiencing social interaction, instantaneously and with multi-media complexity. These new channels are the locus of hyper-experimentation in language use, and highly interconnected.

We might be tempted to assume that these technological advances lend English another advantage, having a head start as the so-called language of technology. But experience with the internet shows that technology does not impose a monolingual environment, and translation systems such as DeepL [7] allow wide access to information across language barriers even for users with limited linguistic resources. Ostler's prediction [8] that English will be the *last lingua franca* suddenly seems very persuasive. At the same time, there is growing sense that English has become the language of fake news as much as it is the language of science.

4. The Implications for Teaching

Teachers, and language teachers in particular, have an obligation to prepare students for this linguistically rich, but socially demanding environment. Students will need highly developed critical skills and an ability to deal with an abundance of text, as well as a well-honed instinct to spot the inauthentic, if they are to be effective social agents in the post-digital world. It is vital that they are aware, for example, of *how* an instant translation is produced by an automatic translator, so as not to be blindly dependent upon it, and instead able to critique the final version. It is in language lessons that we can give learners the tools to navigate the hyper-information age.

This will require a significant and far-reaching reset in our assumptions as language teachers. Productive skills might be largely superseded as AI will be able to write emails and reports effortlessly. On the contrary, skills of reading, interpretation, selection and editing will come to the fore. Higher-level discursive analysis will be more important in order to evaluate texts and sources of information, and pragmatics, only recently an explicit part of general English lessons, may need a substantial overhaul in order to be a truly effective tool in the analysis of post digital linguistic behaviour. And all of this against a challenging international background where the commercial value of English may not be the passport to privilege it once was.

4.1 Implications for the Classroom

Rather than panic in the face of significant change, we can reflect on the opportunities a new world presents. Technology offers new tools and geopolitics a new context for our decisions in the classroom. There are various activities we may choose to enable our language learners to cope. AI translators offer virtually instant translations and so give us the chance to teach students to evaluate and compare differing linguistic choices. Dividing a class into groups using different automatic translators will make for potentially highly productive language discussions. AI generates text easily



and so offers plentiful sources of language: our instructions as to text type and genre required will allow us to emphasize the characteristics of each one. Here a particularly important subskill can be learned: *prompt engineering* will become one of the most important basic language skills. The ability to obtain exactly the text (or image) you require is dependent upon your precision in wording your prompt correctly. Again, language skills will be fundamental. Tasks encouraging a multi-modal approach to communication are easy to create, and can be fulfilling for students: illustrating fairy stories using AI graphics; producing translingual texts; perfecting 'Instagram(mar)' by helping students produce Instagram posts; working on videos (subtitling, or even ironically subtitling them); using smartphones to create video clips, audio messages etc.

Practice is now infinitely available to students using chatbots as indefatigable language partners (both in text and audio), and it is worth mentioning here how highly pragmatically aware contributions to interactions by chatbots have become. For CLIL, spotting the errors in the convincing but inaccurate texts often produced by AI could be a valuable revision activity.

Conclusions

The intense technological and geopolitical transformation we are experiencing will have many unforeseen effects, but as teachers we cannot use this as an excuse for failing to prepare learners for a new epoch. Instead, we have to adapt to a situation which will result in classes that are essentially the opposite of the traditional modernist conception of education. Discernment will be more important than writing or speaking skills, a class may be engaged in many different tasks at any one moment during a lesson, the teacher will not command the undivided attention of students and there will be multiple, rather than a single channel of communication.

But even more important will be the challenge to underline and exemplify the absolute importance of translanguaging and multilingual skills. We have to reveal to our learners the necessity of hearing and experiencing more than one tongue if we are to be considered educated. Our role will thus be to reduce the narrative assumptions and cognitive biases that are encoded in a language (e.g. "the halo effect" in Anglo-Saxon cultures [9]), and to work with the pragmatic implications of any communicative moment (a tweet, a mail, a voice message, a podcast etc.). Students need to help to avoid monolingual inadequacy and also to regain trust, which is a necessity in learning. A reassessment of where the English language stands in all this, considering whether its economic and cultural importance will continue unabated or become stymied in future, is one of our responsibilities as language teachers.

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