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Book Review

Why English? Confronting the Hydra, Pauline Bunce, Robert Phillipson, Vaughan Rapatahana, and Ruanni Tupas (Eds.), Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2016, 285 pp., \$159.95 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-1-78309-584-1 (hbk)

This highly recommended edited volume critiques the status of English akin to Hydra, a creature in Greek mythology whose heads multiplied upon decapitation. The chapter authors argue that English dominates and undermines other languages even when it is challenged in different forms and from different locations. The book has a broad readership—not only does it include academic inquiry but also presents multiple personal accounts. The book consists of 24 chapters and is organized into four thematic sections of hegemony, challenge, negotiation, and resistance against the English Hydra. Due to space constraints, only particular chapters are selected to suggest the key ideas of the book.

The first section of five chapters, ‘Hydra at Large,’ sets up the context of the expansion of and resistance to English. One of the key arguments is that the global spread of English is embedded in the “expansion of capitalism” especially supported by World Trade Organization, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Chapter 1 by Alamin Mazrui) as the institutional supports for ‘the spread and consolidation of English’ (p. 25) in Asia and Africa. In addition, the World Bank and IMF directed African economies into ‘world capitalist system’ (p. 25). Robert Phillipson (Chapter 2) revealed that there are continuities in Discourse on the promotion of English through British Council published books. The Discourse stresses that English remains the critical aspect of education, economic progress and social mobility. And in India (Chapter 5 by Mehdi Bousseba), the demand for “pure English” from western clients on accented Indian workers in call centers working on cheap wages. Chapter 1 suggests that the spread of English is not neutral but is implicated in the economic expansion (see Phillipson, 1992). Even though English does not always determine success (see Kubota, 2011), English continued to be discursively constructed as the critical support for success and social mobility. Chapter 5 indicates that linguistic imperialism remains an undeniable fact.

The second section, “Hydra Mythology” (Chapter 6 to 13), among others, problematizes the mythologies of English medium instruction, and the myth of it as the global language and its economic benefits (Chapter 6 by Ryuko Kubota & Tomoyo Okuda) within the broad frame of “global human resource”, and “neoliberal ideology” (pp. 81-83). The over-promotion of English, the authors argue, can only be resisted via “critical awareness of language, race, ethnicity, gender and social class” in diverse forms of “language education” (p. 85). In Chapter 12, Pauline Bunce discusses the teaching of English scripts that ignores language learners’ orthographic systems. She argues that the dominant approach to the teaching of English is based mostly on the learners of English with European languages as their first language but rarely takes into account of the learners from different linguistic backgrounds such as Chinese, Arabic, and Indian, which could pose a problem for students. She suggests enact the “phonological-skills development”, the progressive awareness of word, rhyme, syllable and phoneme (website of reading rockets) to reading as well as the need to examine reading process from neuroscience (p. 152). The authors of Chapter 6 and 12 prove that the domination of English can critically be negotiated in the macro and micro levels.

The third section “Confronting the Hydra” (Chapter 14 to 17) showcases multiple attempts to counter the hegemonic use of English Hydra at the national and individual levels. Chapter 15 by Kathleen Heugh et al. discusses struggles in making local languages the medium of instruction against the “English-French Bilingual policy” (p. 175) in Cameroon. The struggles were due to the government’s continued preference to English-French as medium of instruction. The government appeared to see the local languages as inferior to the two Hydra languages (English and French). In Chapter 16, Zubeida Mustafa narrates the destruction of Nadia’s dream to be a doctor, a Pakistani girl who is from a low socio-economic background. To pursue her dream, Nadia has to learn “an alien language” (p. 185), English. In Pakistan, English Hydra is perpetuated and strengthened by the hiring practices which favor the proficient English speakers, those from the privileged group. These two chapters suggest that resisting the hegemony of English is not easy as it has become institutional practice with the capability to marginalize local languages and underprivileged groups.

The fourth section (Chapter 18-24) discusses, among others, a reflection that TEFL is embedded not only in cultural but also in economic and political purposes. In this section, one chapter discusses the imperial effect of ELT and the shifting perspectives of Brazilian teacher educators toward a monolingual approach. Chapter 20 is Julian Edge’s personal reflection on TEFL. In this chapter, he shifted his perspective in teaching English after contemplating the attack on Iraq in 2003 by the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia due to “economic, cultural and political” (p. 232) reasons. On that case, Julian thinks that teaching English can serve as “imperial troopers” (p. 232) as it facilitates an imperial act. Addressing this, Julian critically calls for the contribution of EFL teachers to make “a better world” (p. 233) by relooking the materials used in the class along with their representations, policy decisions of language learning, and the teaching of language emphasizing compliance rather than protest. Chapter 23 by Clarissa Menezes Jordao discusses the status of TEFL as Hydra in Brazil, which has been influenced by the native speaker model and the monolingual approach. The situation changed after the British left the country marked by teacher educators’ bravery to perform their own agency. Their agentic act involves the examination of their own assumptions and learning of “different knowledges and practices” (p. 265) for their own teaching contexts. The latter chapter shows that critical pedagogy is beneficial for TEFL teachers in the expanding circle country.

In the afterword section, Ahmed Kabel summarizes the key points of all the chapters and call on educators to create “a more equitable linguistic order” (p. 269) through challenging the oppressive Hydra from multiple locations.

This edited collection presents rich and complex discourses on how the multi-headed English Hydra dominates and becomes hegemonic. It also documents varying counter-discourses and critical challenges directed toward the Hydra. The edited book also resonates with the argument that English is entangled in different fields such as colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism, critical pedagogies (Pennycook, 2020) and others.

This is a must-read book for educators who want to develop a critical perspective about English language education including the fact that English is interconnected to diverse fields where mostly they marginalize, exclude or dominate people, EFL teachers or local languages in the outer and expanding circle countries (see Kachru, 1992).

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