

## Language, education and neoliberalism: Critical studies in Sociolinguistics (a review)

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Language is an enabling tool. It is what gives you a unique selling point. It puts you ahead of the competition in the search for a job. Depending on the languages you speak, you can have a place in the globalised market place or stay in the backwaters. Education helps you get the diplomas you need to be recognised as a qualified language user. It is these diplomas that make you more attractive to the market. Therefore, education is a service industry that sets people on the road in their careers.

These are some of the notions that form the received wisdom explored in this work.

The book provides a wide ranging and, possibly to some eyes, eclectic mix of scenarios that consider and critique the view that the market place and attendant neoliberal ideologies have become the driving force behind education in general and

language education as the specific focus of this volume. The collection covers a range of contexts from higher education institutes to secondary education, migrant programmes and the work of volunteers. Perhaps fittingly for a book that explores neoliberal ideologies and their impact, the studies are truly international, ranging from the US to China via Mexico, Korea, the Philippines and Switzerland.

There are recurring themes: the commoditisation of education; language as product; language hierarchy. Similar impacts are described: the devaluing of plurilingual competence because it is not in the right language; a sense of shame among plurilingual speakers; the increasing precariousness of employment for those in education. For those of us working in education (the reviewer is a university lecturer in London) much of this feels very familiar. It is not just that

the systems established in the international market place have altered how education is structured, it is that the discourse has been changed to reflect this, which in turn reflects the beliefs that are held by many and reinforces neoliberal ideology. This is set out in the first chapter with three areas of resignification: education, language and the self. The current discourse places value on measurable results that can be put to use in the market place. We all are or have capital (human, social, linguistic). We therefore should invest in ourselves in order to remain competitive. To do so we need to capitalise on the resources we have at our disposal.

Each chapter offers insightful commentary on their particular scenario. What makes these commentaries perhaps more illuminating is the use of ethnographic methodologies. Extracts of first hand interviews with those involved – from company CEOs to the victims of language policy decisions – gives a clear idea of the attitudes that shape the debate and brings the challenges and problems into sharp relief.

The book comprises 12 chapters. Clearly readers can focus on scenarios and themes that are of greater interest to them, but there is value to be gained by taking the book in its entirety. All chapters are equally accessible.

Chapter 1 defines and discusses the concepts in

the title and serves as an introduction to the studies that follow.

Chapter 2 chronicles the rise of private English language tuition in China since the 1990s and compares this to the expansion of the teaching of Mandarin and the strategy of establishing Confucius centres. Both of these are presented as part of a neoliberalist marketisation in the country.

Chapter 3 takes us to Mexico and the challenges faced by a particular minority language community. Here the issues of language hierarchy are raised: the lack of value placed on bilingual competence when the competence is not between two 'important' languages; the impact on education policy; the appropriation of cultural symbols.

Chapter 4 Talks about the coke-i-fication of bilingual education – taking the US as the context – where bilingual competence has been embraced as a commodity in itself and has been appropriated by the dominant groups in society to the exclusion of minority, often immigrant communities.

Chapter 5 Describes the situation of EMI in South Korean higher education. Once again, the question of language hierarchy is raised; the need to speak English well; the massive investment on a national scale to achieve this; the increase in EMI

as part of an internationalisation strategy. Yet at the same time there is a national anxiety about never being good enough.

Chapter 6 takes the case study of Brazilian university students sponsored to attend English medium instruction in STEM subjects in Canada. Once more we see national investment in equipping future generations with competences for the global market place. Students' responses to the experience is documented to show that what was learned was not necessarily what was intended. The hurdle of second language mastery had not been fully understood by the policy makers.

Chapter 7 Looks at the NGO sector and what is described as ELT aid. It takes the case study of the US Job Enabling English Proficiency project in the Philippines, where task based learning using CALL (on an annual renewable license) either replace or supplement existing language training. The validity of the system itself and the wider question of return on investment are questioned.

Chapter 8 takes the notion of the individual learner investing in their own human capital and examines the context of migrants in Italy through an EU funded project designed to train entrepreneurship. Migrants are trained to become self-starting farmers. However, access to the course is determined by language ability rather than farming experience and no participants set up their

own business as a direct result of the course.

Chapter 9 stays with migrant communities and considers how refugee children are evaluated in a US school. This is set against the wider context of the No-Child-Left-Behind Policy and the need for schools to hit annual yearly performance targets which are measured by success in tests, with the possible sanction of closure of the school if targets are missed over a number of years. How one school chose to respond by outsourcing its English language training and the impact of this on the refugee children is detailed.

Chapter 10 returns to universities and the way resources are used in the provision of EAP programmes, specifically the growing tendency to reduce costs, resulting in what are termed blended professionals who are required both to manage and to teach and whose job security is constantly under threat.

Chapter 11 examines two institutions in the Swiss higher education sector, again looking at language hierarchy – this time with German as the high-status language – and the experiences of Italian speakers studying Law at a German speaking university. The mechanisms to attract students (language courses, conditions for examinations) are set against the challenges they report.

Chapter 12 draws threads together, summarises the discussions and raises questions.

Although the studies cover a broad spectrum, there is much agreement and commonality. Neoliberalism is described as slippery and difficult to pin down, but Brown's (2015) statement that it extends a specific formulation of economic values, practices and metrics into every sphere of human life, cited by Tabiola and Lorente, resonates through all the studies. Issues of language hegemony and its consequences find echoes in the work on English imperialism (Phillipson, et al.). The notion of human capital and the individual investing in themselves through learning a language resonates with work on learner autonomy (Benson, Dickinson, Nunan, etc.) as well as with the idea that individual progress can be seen differently in different cultures. Language policy is rightly described as an assemblage where consequences are not always foreseen. Perhaps more importantly the notion that we have all bought into the same myth is amply demonstrated in all scenarios, policy makers, providers and

learners alike.

In common with many works from a critical perspective, this collection does not offer many solutions. Those that are documented are at the level of local resistance to marginalisation as a consequence of policy decisions. However, this is an important collection in that it shows the interconnectedness of all aspects of language education. It shows how any new pedagogical development can be turned into a market, and how the discourse surrounding that market creates illusions for us to consume.

It is a thought-provoking cry for an alternative discourse where the values of language as a vehicle for social cohesion, as a means of preserving heritage and identity reclaim ground usurped by a mantra of market forces. Perhaps, as the book suggests, this has to start at the local level.