

## COMMENT

### Point of View.

**Dr. Robert Phillipson**

#### **A focus on monolingualism short-changes the needs of students**

**International Schools education driven by profit overlooks the importance of mother tongue-based multilingual education, argues Dr. Robert Phillipson**

**Some of the information in this Point of View derives from *Second language learners in International Schools* by Maurice Carder, with Patricia Mertin and Sarah Porter, published by the Institute of Education Press of University College, London, in 2018.**

The worldwide international schools market is undergoing a massive expansion. Prior to the pandemic, there were more than 10,000 international schools, with around 5 million students. Ninety per cent of these schools are exclusively English-Medium Instruction (EMI), and they tend to be expensive, catering for the privileged.

However, these schools also face a number of challenges, often related to the fact that they are run much like schools in the UK or the US. This includes a failure to build on the cultural and linguistic diversity of students. Empirical evidence from many countries also exemplifies the widespread marginalisation of ESL staff by managers who are generally

monolingual and do not understand language issues. At the same time, English-only policies ignore the real needs of the estimated 50 per cent of students who are seen as deficient.

Then there is the question of the influence of accreditation bodies. ESL professionalism was undermined when the International Baccalaureate (IB) was restructured in 2005, putting in place a Director from the business world, rather than from education. 'Second' and foreign language learning were conflated into 'acquisition'. Presumably, EMI international schools that are UK-oriented are less affected by the Americanisation of the International Baccalaureate, but its graduates are equally oriented towards the global economy, rather than the needs of their countries of origin.

Another factor that occurs all too often in EMI international education is that the value and importance of maintaining mother tongue development is overlooked. One ambitious goal could be for languages other than English to have equal status and importance with English. This may be realized in some continental European countries, where students evolve effective bilingualism, but in some countries, students who are educated exclusively in EMI schools end up being unable to communicate effectively in their mother tongue.

My experience tells me that Scandinavians with a strong grounding in their mother tongue thrive in upper secondary international schools. One can hypothesize that some privileged Malaysians and Chinese, who make a successful late transition to EMI education, retain a strong local orientation and mother tongue competence.

On the other hand, I have been reliably informed that in the United Arab Emirates, local students who have been through an international school system arrive in higher education with inadequate language competence in both Arabic and English. Introducing EMI education in Qatar in state schools has led to equally disappointing results. There is also scholarly evidence, for instance from Spain, that primary English is not an unmitigated success story: quite the opposite.

Given this, we need to ask whether Anglo-American expertise is really relevant in all such contexts. In fact, educational 'aid' worldwide does not have a strong record of success. This may be because British and American policies in Africa and Asia have aimed at strengthening English rather than promoting multilingualism, which is the social reality.

British ELT has always been underpinned by some key tenets – monolingualism, the native speaker as the ideal teacher, the earlier the better, etc. – which have been diagnosed as fundamentally false and instead act to underpin linguistic imperialism.

In fact, the research evidence on mother tongue-based multilingual education is unambiguously positive. EMI education in postcolonial contexts that neglects mother tongues and local cultural values is clearly inappropriate and ineffective. It would be important, given the prominence of international schools worldwide, and the demand for competence in English, to investigate such issues more widely.

There are already analyses of how neoliberal think tanks with corporate sponsorship in the US and UK, and a profitmaking agenda, are promoting the privatisation of education worldwide, with the backing of entrepreneurial academic advocates. The way English is being globalised, and whose interests it serves, requires constant scrutiny.

There have been ELT voices calling for a paradigm shift away from monolingualism. But if ELT professionals mostly lead monolingual lives, or if they have no experience of becoming proficient in languages other than English, are they ever likely to understand the complexity of the learning tasks that they are committed to?

One of the intriguing aspects of globalising Anglo-American expertise is that ELT is not a high-prestige profession in either the US or the UK. In both countries, there are still unmet English language needs for children and adults. In addition, foreign language learning is much less widespread and effective than elsewhere.

It is true that there is a massive demand for English worldwide, to which many factors, from trade and tourism to regional integration, contribute. Maintaining the value of western investments and influence in the decolonisation period led to the mushrooming of departments of TESOL and applied linguistics since the 1950s. The demand for English has been orchestrated by western governments and their allies worldwide, and key bodies such as the World Bank.

So, why hasn't more been achieved? Ignorance, bias, and irrationality are all factors, along with native speaker myths, and resistance to change. Governments have tended to clutch at a quick fix, such as importing native speakers, or starting English ever earlier, either as a subject or as the medium of instruction, in the hope that this will make the learning of English more effective. Such demands should be challenged by the ELT profession, when both the demand and the response are unlikely to be educationally, culturally or linguistically well-informed.

What is definitely needed is inspired leadership in schools, in partnership with parents, so that international schools can play a dynamic role in equipping young people to function well in a changing multilingual world.

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