The Profesorados – basing themselves on an erroneous view of what constitutes standard English – place excessive pressure on trainees to produce RP. Negative consequences of this tendency are outlined and a possible course of action suggested. Attitudes to RP are linked to the role of, and attitudes to, foreign experts in Argentine ELT. An attempt is made to link all of this to broader debates about the role of foreign countries in Argentine life.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this talk is to try to make some sense of the notion of linguistic imperialism in the context of that part of the Buenos Aires English language teaching (ELT) world with which I am familiar. I will start by outlining and commenting on some of the theoretical proposals, go on to look for evidence of linguistic imperialism in the local context and finally make some recommendations of my own for ELT in Buenos Aires.

LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

Much is made of linguistic imperialism these days. Robert Phillipson (1992) first properly opened up the field. It seemed, at first, that here was someone who could cut through the suffocating banalities usually offered to explain the success and spread of English in the world and tell us what was really going on. Phillipson certainly leaves his readers with few illusions about the spread of English having just “happened”. For him the world has to be seen in strictly bi-polar terms with the rich northern ‘centre’ nations – the United States and
the United Kingdom in particular – conspiring to protect their own interests by imposing their languages and culture on their poor southern ‘periphery’ counterparts. His analysis, though it ‘…raised themes hitherto unaired within English language teaching…’ (Holborow 1999:74) seemed rather too black and white to be really credible.


Pennycook offers a view of language, society and pedagogy that, on the face of it, is much more sophisticated than Phillipson’s. On closer examination, however, it turns out to be no more convincing and, in some respects, less so. Pennycook’s problem is that his postmodernist critique of thought and practices in applied linguistics and ELT – effective enough though it is in places – is based on a relativist epistemology that contradicts its own performance. One cannot credibly attack others for claiming universal validity for their views while implicitly claiming it for one’s own. Furthermore, in the postmodernist hall of mirrors, where there is no truth – only ‘truth’ – it is doubtful whether any tenable concept of justice can be sustained. The moral force of Pennycook’s critique is thus also undermined.

However inadequate attempts to theorise it have been, we all know that there is something going on with the role of English language in the world. I will now turn my attention to what exactly that something might be in the context of Buenos Aires.

PRONUNCIATION
It struck me soon after I arrived in Buenos Aires that I had never met English teachers anywhere so concerned about their pronunciation. “Splendid!” you
might say. Professionals concerned to maintain professional standards, anxious to set a good model for learners, etc. Well, yes, up to a point. It gradually became clear to me, however, that excessive pressure was being placed on trainees in the Profesorados to produce RP. The consequences of this include the following:

1. Other English pronunciation standards tend to be ignored.
2. Excessive reverence for native speakers of RP, especially teachers, regardless of their skills, qualifications or experience.
3. Form tends to be valued over content. Those who can produce a high-quality imitation RP tend to be looked upon with approval.
4. Everybody worries themselves sick about producing trivial errors. After a conference presentation an acquaintance was congratulated on her lovely pronunciation, not a word was said about the content of her talk.
5. Trainees and teachers are thus effectively infantilised, eternally aspiring to an unreachable and pointless goal.

What is to be done? A broader solution is offered in the next section. However, in the area of pronunciation alone serious consideration should be given to Jenkins' proposal for the development of ‘...a pedagogical core of phonological intelligibility for speakers of English as an International Language...’ (2000: 123). This would set attainable, realistic goals for trainees and would be a first step towards putting an end to the cultural cringe alluded to in points 1 and 2.

STANDARDS
To what can we attribute the local obsession with RP? Again, a possible broader explanation will be offered in a moment. However, it seems to me that the immediate culprit is the idea that standard English consists of RP plus a strong dose of grammatical rectitude. Consequently writing tends to be, at best, neglected, and at worst, viewed as an opportunity to put trainees through their grammatical and idiomatic paces. Mastery of grammar is a
necessary skill for the proficient writer but alone it will not suffice. Failure to address the issue of content emasculates trainees’ critical faculties and helps make them vulnerable to the latest pedagogical fad arriving from London or Los Angeles. The ability to write a cod-literary story bursting at the seams with idioms does not a professional and independent-minded professional language teacher make.

It is my contention that viewing standard English as essentially a written form -- with writing understood more broadly than as just an agglomeration of grammatically correct sentences -- would give trainees a more realistic objective for their production than trying to achieve RP-like pronunciation. It would also help them develop critical skills vital for their professional futures.

FOREIGN EXPERTS AND LOCAL ELITES
So what are we left with? Phillipson and Pennycook’s very inadequate theories purporting to explain the role of English in the world today, the certainty that the role and spread of English in the world is not a phenomenon that can be explained only in terms of rational individual choice, and finally, a range of beliefs and practices with which we are all familiar in the local ELT community. What sense can be made of them?

Let me start by returning for a moment to re-examine the question of imperialism. It is generally held to be something that is done to “us” by “them” and to be sustained and propagated by force, broadly defined. Among the more notable consequences of this view is that “we” are all victims regardless of our station in life. And if “we” are all victims then the responsibility for our predicament lies elsewhere rather than with ourselves and attempting to change this situation is useless since “they” have a monopoly of power. What I would like to suggest is that things are not quite as simple as that. Assuming such a thing as linguistic imperialism exists and plays a role in the spread of English, then it does so with the connivance of local elites and it is sustained
not by force but by an ideology which helps maintain the position of those elites and contributes to the development of subjects willing to participate in their own subjugation.

How does this work in practice? I have already indicated what effect I think the emphasis on RP and failure to attend to meaning has on trainee teachers. There is more to it than that though. Argentines of all stripes are given to lamenting the supposedly nefarious influence of foreigners in their affairs. All the more surprising then the degree of bowing and scraping done before alleged foreign experts in ELT. At last year’s FAAPI conference it would have been easy to get the impression that the English language is something that can only be accessed by the grace of middle-class, middle-aged, white Englishmen jetting in for the weekend with all expenses paid by their publishers. I did not see all the contributions from these people but the ones that I did see were notable for their high ratio of platitude to insight and the patronising manner of their delivery. There was also, in at least one case that I saw, what could most charitably be described as a marked confusion between commercial and academic aspects of the presentation. Several teachers expressed dissatisfaction to me privately about the quality of these talks. None of them spoke up at the time. Why? Fear of that dreaded pronunciation mistake perhaps…

I think it would not be going too far to suggest that teachers and trainees ask themselves the following questions after the next presentation / book launch they attend: “Was the speaker remotely familiar with the reality of the English language classroom as I experience it?”, “Was the presenter trying to promote an expensive, new, imported coursebook, or other new material that did not appear to represent any great advance on the one they were trying to promote last year?”, and finally, “Was one of my main reasons for attending the fact that the speaker was from the United Kingdom and/or a native speaker of English and would I have attended if the exact same points had been made by someone from Lomas de Zamora called Carlos Gómez?”
I cannot conclude without making some mention of the role of the elite Profesorados, “the Joaquín” and “the Lenguas”. Before I say anything else I should say that I am married to a “Joaquín” graduate and that I have great regard for both of these august institutions. However, I have already indicated that I think that there is more to producing a professional English teacher than producing graduates who speak a good imitation RP.

What concerns me here however is a sneaking suspicion that the very prestige of these two institutions tends to militate against the raising of overall standards in the profession. Why? Because I have the impression that if you are a “Joaquín” or “Lenguas” graduate then, in terms of the local world of ELT, you have it made. Your professionalism and competence will remain unquestioned throughout your career regardless of your actual abilities or the efforts -- or lack thereof -- you make towards professional development. If, on the other hand you are foolish enough to graduate from somewhere else then woe betide you. Everyone who is anyone in the local profession, regardless of what they say to your face, will regard you as a second class professional and in spite of your competence as a teacher, the level of your English, or the heroism of your struggles towards professional development, you will never be fully accepted as an equal. Of course some lucky souls manage to break through this professional apartheid -- “Oh, she’s not from the “Joaquín” or the “Lenguas”, but she’s really very good” -- but surely they are exceptions that prove the rule. Perhaps I exaggerate. But not much.

CONCLUSION
I realise that the interpretation I have offered here could be accused of being sketchy and impressionistic. Regardless of its defects, I would suggest that it is not entirely divorced from reality and will strike a chord with many of you. I also realise that some will say that as a foreigner who only came here in January of 1999 I cannot possibly know what I am talking about. I trust they will apply the same salutary scepticism to the claims made by foreign
publishers at the next book launch they attend or the ideas of the next “revolutionary” imported language learning technique they hear about. Finally, I realise that I may be accused of peddling outdated Gramscian-Marxist ideas. Well, I plead guilty to that. I would just ask you to consider if they really are so outdated.

In any case, some things are clear. There is no World Bank of English Words and no International Grammar Fund before which Argentines have to present themselves, cap-in-hand, begging for the resources necessary to use English. The English language is the property of all those who wish to use it. Trainees must leave the Profesorados with a good grasp of standard spoken and written forms but, just as importantly, also with the self-confidence to use and appropriate English for their own purposes. No one here cringes before the Spanish of Madrid and neither should any English teacher feel that their mission in life is to be an ever more exact phonological imitation of a tiny percentage of the native English speakers who live in the south-east of England. Above all, there is no point in English teaching professionals -- in their capacity as citizens -- complaining about the various ills allegedly visited on Argentina by foreign countries and international institutions if they do not first make an effort to put their own house in order.

(2089 words)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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