

## BOOK REVIEW

*Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics*, by David Block, John Gray and Marnie Holborow. Oxford: Routledge, 2012, 168 pp.

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Despite the wide spectrum of issues that have been addressed in applied linguistics, the authors of this book claim that the "economic and material bases of human activity and social life" have not received due attention from researchers (p. 4). In addressing this concern, the book set out to "reorient interdisciplinarianism in applied linguistics" by foregrounding the impact of political economy and neoliberal ideology on language, language teaching, teacher education and the conceptualisation of globalisation and identity in applied linguistics (p. 4). These are addressed in six elegantly presented chapters. Compact in size and number of pages, the book is quite unassuming except for its title *Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics* which promises the challenging task of linking two fields whose connection is not immediately apparent.

The book begins with an overview of the notions of applied linguistics and neoliberalism and the debate in the literature on what each one constitutes. The discussion that follows situates the link, or the lack thereof, between neoliberalism and applied linguistics in the existing literature. The reasons for this include the understanding and application of neoliberalism within applied linguistics; the concept has been used interchangeably, inaccurately in the authors' view, with "globalisation, globalism, or simply, capitalism" (p. 7). The difficulty in pinning down neoliberalism is discussed further in Chapter 2 leading up to the perspective adopted in the book in unravelling the connections between neoliberalism and language, i.e. neoliberalism as an ideology. In the following chapter, the neoliberal meanings that loom large in the public sphere are examined, noting the wider use of certain keywords from the economic field and the construction of meanings in new contexts. In her discussion, Holborow argues that beyond the economic sphere, ideological tensions emerge, thus preventing the central concepts in neoliberal thinking from being fully appropriated in the new settings.

Approaching neoliberalism as an ideology, in Chapter 4, Block problematizes the existing connection that applied linguists make between globalisation and identity as they focus on culturally-based theories and limit the notion of identity to certain social constructs. Culturally-based theories resonate with postcolonial discourse which is seen as an approach to address issues of identity,

race, ethnicity, gender, nation building, the construction of national identities and "relationships between power and knowledge" (McEwan, 2009: 23), allowing for discourse of decolonisation and negotiations. Despite this, Block argues that such theories are insufficient in addressing contemporary language learning and teaching concerns, in a world dominated by a culture of marketisation where knowledge and education are being packaged, branded and sold as a product. He warns of the realities that are overlooked by applied linguists in the current global context and argues for a shift from culturally-based to economically-based constructs which he believes will lead to "different emphases when applied linguists turn their attention to identity". In relation to this, Block argues that class has been marginalised in identity-based research in applied linguistics and draws attention to the evolving understanding of class. The traditional notion of class based on income, education, and occupation seems to have gone away but in reality, as Block explains, class is alive. It has taken a different shape and must be framed differently because class in "the world in which we live is capitalism-as-usual plus constant and fast-paced social change" (p. 80). Referencing Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field and symbolic capital (1984; 1986) and taking cue from recent work by sociologists, Block argues that the notion of class in applied linguistics needs to be framed as a multidimensional and complex phenomenon in language research.

An important element to the recalibration of the concept of class is globalisation, and a phenomenon that factors into this is the function and impact of the global spread of the English language. It is a dominant linguistic element in globalisation and is often an issue of contention in discussions on identity in postcolonial discourse, yet the centrality of English is not given much emphasis in the chapter. As a crucial agent of globalisation, the English language is a catalyst of change at the individual, social, political, economic levels of society and has been claimed by many as a commodity, possessing both economic and social value. In many non-native contexts, particularly in highly stratified societies, English has been and is frequently associated generally with groups possessing more social, cultural, or financial resources (Nielsen, 2003), all of which are linked to class.

The above brings the current review to the issue addressed by Gray in Chapter 5 on the construction of English through the representations of celebrities in ELT textbooks produced in the UK for consumption in non-native contexts. Neoliberalism as an ideology is demonstrated in Gray's analysis of the textbooks where he found that since the 1980s "the incidence and extended treatment of celebrity increases dramatically" and the kind of celebrity most featured whether real or fictional "is of the achieved kind" (p. 99). Labelling them as "globally disseminated artefacts", Gray contends that the textbooks that have emerged over the last few decades, through the discourses of celebrity, "construct English as a condensation symbol of wealth, individualism and extraordinary professional success". The construction of English as an elite language however is neither new

nor surprising. Studies in non-native English contexts that examine the intricacies of identity construction in relation to the English language and socioeconomic orientations employing Bordieu's framework have shown that members of these communities consider English in their context as "the privilege of members in high-status groups, where knowledge of English allows them the access to better employment opportunities and the potential to move up the social scale" (Attamimi and Hajar, 2011: 187). English, in these contexts, in other words is linked to the group members' social aspiration, which ultimately translates into the construction of identity involving class.

Gray's point in discussing the ideology behind the representation of celebrity in the textbooks that he analysed nonetheless is important and well-taken. He argues against this trend in ELT textbook content and points out that the inclusion of stories about celebrities in the textbooks, although accepted by some has been frowned upon by others in the field of ELT including textbook writers and teachers. These books merit close scrutiny as "there is recognition that teachers in many contexts have misgivings about the appropriateness of celebrity-based content" (p. 110). His analysis of the textbooks exemplifies the drawbacks of globalisation and political economy on language education, prompting those in the field the need to rethink the nature of ELT textbook content. He concludes by reminding us that ELT in any context "is perforce a political activity" and calls for an awareness among teachers and applied linguists of the nature of ELT, particularly "the nature of the tools that are used to carry it out" (p. 111).

Elsewhere, Gray (2002) has argued against the "one size fits all" model of ELT textbooks. Mass produced by ELT industry giants for non-native consumption globally, these "global course books" were designed to meet international market demands. Gray claims that the content of these books shifted from native settings such as Britain to more international contexts in meeting "a growing sense on the part of the publisher of English as increasingly global language" (2002: 157) causing many of them to resemble each other in terms of content. The main problem with the homogenisation of these global course books "is the absence of the *local*" which teachers generally believe learners need help to bridge the world of English with their world (Gray, 2002: 164). One way of bridging the global and the local in ELT is by glocalising the cultural contents of textbooks, whether they are published for native or non-native consumption. The concept of glocalisation is crucial in discussing the synergistic potential of the global and the local, and is considered a product of intercultural communication which assumes intercultural knowledge, awareness and competence. Premised upon crucial factors such as attitudes, knowledge, skills and critical awareness (Byram, Nichols and Steven, 2001), the objective of the intercultural communicative framework is to produce an intercultural speaker, a holistic personality. The framework favours an approach that enriches a learner's sense of identity in learning another language.

What are the implications of glocalisation of cultural content for ELT? Sharifian considers "the dual parallel process of globalisation and localisation of English as the 'glocalisation' of English" (2016: 2). Glocal content includes resources from various cultures including the target culture and the learners' culture, and studies in ESL contexts (e.g. Hajar and Shakila, 2013) have shown that glocal content embraces the global while acknowledging the local. The inclusion of diverse cultures in ELT transforms language learning as it allows learners the opportunity to explore and evaluate social, political, and economic understandings, both local and global. This process can help learners widen their cultural window. Despite this outlook on glocalisation, Block in discussing globalisation and economy in Chapter 2, argues that "glocalisation, itself originally formulated as a way of balancing views of the relative influence of the global and the local, by now needs to undergo a process whereby the two poles which constitute it are recalibrated and rebalanced" (p. 60). In Block's view discussions of glocalisation of language and other areas are often culture-centric, losing sight of the neoliberal thinking that may be at work. He argues that culturally-focused perspective is dominant in discussions of globalisation and language, even in notable works such as Phillipson (2009) and Heller (2011), that Block claims make reference to "current economics-informed views of globalisation", but whose emphasis eventually changes to language and identity, hence re-establishing "the dominance of culture over economics" (p. 62).

The authors' attempt to show the link between neoliberalism and applied linguistics is again demonstrated in the final chapter in the book where Gray and Block argue on the marketisation of language education based on their observation of two teacher education programmes namely the British Postgraduate Certificate of Education and the Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults. The authors claim that the programmes have goals that contradict the "reflective" model of teacher education. They argue that the processes in learning to teach that are valued in the reflective model are undermined in the two programmes "under the weight of the neoliberal imperative" (p. 142). This reality is indeed daunting because when a "technocratic-reductionist approach to education", particularly one involving ELT is accepted in its native context, it is inevitably a license for it to be implemented and capitalised in non-native contexts.

It is undeniable that in the era of globalisation, the influence of neoliberal thinking is dominant in programmes which cater to the ELT market demands. In many non-native contexts, the social and economic demands of globalisation, particularly the need to communicate in English has created an ELT industry that is driven by capitalism. In the wake of this glut, the quality of teaching, not to mention, the quality of programmes and materials has been compromised. In Malaysia for instance, competition in the market to supply ELT materials by local

publishers, has seen the production of English language materials with mistakes in spelling and grammar, causing much furore among parents. This trend in the ELT supply market raises many concerns that need re-thinking by the powers that be, as well as educators and researchers in the area of language learning and teaching. Clearly, the neoliberal imperative is alive in non-native ELT contexts, however, this is not alluded to in the book. So, the only shortcoming of the book, if any and worth mentioning, is the lack of reference to non-native ELT contexts, where the neoliberalism challenge is painfully evident.

The book *Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics* is indeed a welcome addition to the field of language research and applied linguistics. The issues of contemporary capitalism, class and economy in current language concerns that are foregrounded by the authors provide a compelling argument for the reorientation of "interdisciplinarianism in applied linguistics" which they suggest at the start of the book. In demonstrating the impact of political economy on issues in applied linguistics such as language teaching and teacher education, the authors inspire applied linguists to consider issues of language from another crucial perspective. This book is thought-provoking and its title, *Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics* is indeed justified by the re-thinking that is demanded of applied linguists in considering contemporary language issues that emerge under the inevitable impact of globalisation.

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