A critique of the postcolonial English curriculum in former British colonies – Kenyan and Indigenous Australian contexts

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Introduction

In the colonial era, English curriculum and usage may not have received insightful critique and contestation. Now, in what appears a time of ‘re-colonisation’ there is more critical awareness of its status as a means of control and of distribution of social and intellectual capital. Education policy-making bodies, political bureaucrats, and learners and learning institutions in most governmental and non-governmental organisations are increasingly embracing English as the official, the formal, and/or the instructional language in their everyday businesses (Christie 1985; NSW Department of Education 1996; Ramani 28 May 2000). The growing body of literature on postcolonial studies reveals that the most powerful tool that seems to have taken homogeneous and universal mandates of ‘ruling the world’ is the discourse of the internationalisation of the English language (see, for example, Bhabha 1983; Fairclough 1992; Foucault 1980; Jenkins 1995; Lankshear and McLaren 1993; Luke 1996; Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1993; Pennycook 1994). These writers and critiques of postcolonial literature argue that the current usage and impositions of English language in most global institutions replay colonial relations (or hegemonies) and thus require more ‘critical’ studies. This project, therefore, aims to explore through semi-structured open-ended interviews, the emerging reading positions (perspectives and reflections) and discursive practices of teachers, curriculum officers, and key community members in response to the prescribed senior high school English texts. In particular, the research seeks to identify the perceptions that embody their selection (acceptance) or otherwise. Further, the research considers the teacher’s perceptions and reading positions around Indigenous (both oral and written) texts, as alternatives or adjuncts to English curriculum in the two countries. This is important because for a number of decades (see, for example, Ashcroft et al. 1995; Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986; Pennycook 1994), the debate on the politics and the question of language and literature – English or Indigenous language - has generated complex ideologies and schools of thought needing more study.

Even so, and as this study will reveal later, the once wide divide between those fighting to retain English language usage and those pushing to reintroduced indigenous languages/literature in the
Kenyan education system is becoming arbitrary and more of an unconscious desire than being ‘real’ and based on policy prescriptions. In particular, specific English teachers, who are the central reference in this study, have had to broaden their perceptions and views regarding English teaching (JEDHURE 2002; The Nairobi Journal of Literature 2003). Teachers’ roles have changed from being knowledge dispensers and/or powerhouses to “learning facilitators” (NSW Department of Education 1996) and aids to students’ knowledge acquisition. This calls for an analysis of teachers’ positions regarding the teaching of set texts and of the degree the prescribed English texts affect the professional attitudes (teaching desires, pleasure, and the love of textual analysis) towards the English language/literature in Kenya. These professional attitudes have been presented in this study by way of analysing some identified teaching discourses on how teachers perceive what the students, the community, and the education authorities (curriculum developers, teachers’ employer, and political government of the day) want.

Many teaching practices in Kenya and the NSW Higher School Certificate (NSW HSC) appear to be limited to teaching for the passing of examinations. There is less emphasis on the students extending the knowledge gained from prescribed texts to exploring the complex ways in which texts depict multiple reading positions and interpretations of the world around them. Further, these texts seemingly have helped to empower the English language therefore, subjugate and marginalize indigenous languages and literature. Through extended conversations and a critical discourse analysis of the competing ideologies, it is envisaged that this study will create (language) awareness among the education stakeholders of alternative positions around senior high school English texts.

The Background, the Contexts, and the Significance of the Study

As stated above, my concern, which also forms the overriding question in this study, is ‘Why English?’ Using Indigenous Australian and Kenyan contexts, I intend to carry out a comparative yet parallel critique of both the available literature and data from fieldwork (research community) on the impact of the English curriculum and English usage on cultural constructs of ‘new-colonialism’. The study will be comparative in the sense that I will explore the major differences between the approach to the teaching of English to the Australian indigenous people
and the Kenyan integrated approach of teaching English with ‘Indigenous’ Kenyan students. The
issues I will compare and critique will include; (1) English curriculum – the aims, and objectives
and content, (2) texts in contexts, (3) assessment, (4) contested teaching positions, and (5)
pedagogies (teaching practices). The study of each context will be both unique and parallel due to
different pedagogies employed in each place, colonial-timelines and the continuing influence of
‘western schooling’, and more importantly the “conceptual framework” (Thaman, 1988) of the
English syllabus in each of the two countries.

In presenting this analysis and critique of postcolonial English curriculum in the former British
colonies, a review of some works of English curriculum specialists and critics is presented in order
to justify the research approach, and to illustrate that the pedagogies of teaching the English
curriculum in Kenya and among Indigenous Australians may need rethinking by the education
stakeholders. My reaction to some of these works was that here there could hypothetically be some
specific technical and instructional approaches applicable in the Kenyan context. Of particular
importance are suggestions made by a number of key researchers in Australia and other countries
and annotated in the BoS English curriculum. These researchers include, Lankshear (1998) who
argues the goal of literacy as pursuance and achievement of “a universally literate populace who
employ literacies effectively in pursuing their various and shared social, cultural, and economic
purposes” (BoS NSW, 1999: 3). Lankshear reiterates that the discourse of literacy is complex and
“essential given technological developments which can integrate written, oral and audio-visual
modes of human communication” (p. 3). The contribution of Green (1997) to the BoS NSW was
the rethinking of “available rhetorics of meaning” that he argues is central in an English classroom
situation. Green says, “language is culturally constructed and its form imposes meaning on its
users”. According to Green, both perceptions have an impact on the way language functions, that
is, “meaning is produced in the dynamic interplay of thought, language and social processes” (BoS
NSW, 1999: 4). In another article, Green (1995) points out that English teaching in the recent past
has been marked by student concerns which may be for or against the destiny or sense of a
traditional role imposed by English learning and usage. Green argues, “classroom practice has
been changing slowly to reflect this concern and will continue to do so.... This shift to a
student-centred, socially critical English necessitates a ‘post-curriculum’ that allows a sense of
student agency here-and-now to coexist with traditional English content and goals” BoS NSW
1999: 4). Further, Mission (1998) demonstrated how different aspects of the narrative can be
traced. Mission explored such issues as whether narratives reflect or actively create the ‘self’, the ‘other’ and the world, and whether they express values or impose ideology. Farrell’s (1996) input to BoS NSW new English HSC Syllabus is the claim that to become competent in a discourse we must learn to assume the socially accepted ways of thinking and acting that come naturally to the participants in that discourse. Farrell explains that the “relationships between language and culture are not simple and linear, but complex and discursive. Culture influences discursive practice and discursive culture in turn influences all the cultures with which it comes in contact” (BoS NSW 1999: 12). Farrell continues to argue that teaching only the mainstream-valued practices entrenches certain discursive practices while marginalising others without examining the assumptions that underpin them. (p. 12).

As suggested by the above writers and critiques, I am proposing to critically examine the English curriculum in a senior high school where most students are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI) and compare it with the Kenyan context. The aim will be to provide possible alternatives to the prescribed ‘pedagogy’ and conceptual framework of the English curriculum and usage as well as critiquing them. My previous work (see Lang’at 2001) details the historic, educational policy, and political issues prevalent in the current education system in Kenya. In order to present a viable grounding of the extent to which the English curriculum has impacted on Kenya’s indigenous language/literature and further attempt to make relevant recommendations from the Indigenous Australian context, I have used my own passionate involvement and experiences. I have referred to my experiences both as a product of, disseminator of and ‘unconscious’ perpetuator of the ‘borrowed’ colonial English syllabus in Kenya. During my short tenure as a classroom English and Music teacher in a Kenyan high school (1997-2000), I was confronted with school rules and policies that required any student who was ‘caught’ or was heard speaking any language other than English be banished. As Ngugi (1986) wrote, English in Kenya became a ‘powerful’ language after British colonial rulers declared a state of emergency in Kenya in 1952. All schools previously run by the indigenous groups were taken over by the District Education Boards led by the colonial imperialist. They made English the language and all the other languages were labeled as ‘illegal’ and languages of the ‘uncivilized savages’. Although Ngugi’s descriptions predates the colonial period in Kenya, the current emphasis on English curriculum and usage in Kenyan schools could be termed a colonial ambivalence that transverses mere mimicry of former colonial languages. It is a consequence of making English a key domain and a means to
access white-collar jobs that in turn harbours a certain status in Kenya. In Kenya currently, I argue that indigenous languages and literature have been marginalized and subjugated. By putting much emphasis on the English language, the students are being denied rich and diverse historical, social and cultural insights that these indigenous discourses bear. Ueyno Gey Cosaan (in Ramani, 28 May 2000) cries out in a poem: “Our language is shedding tears all over because its children are leaving it alone”. Ramani goes on to argue that “a language ‘disappears’ not only because it is dominated by another, but also – perhaps above all – because people decide to abandon it and do not pass it on to their children” (Ramani, 28 May 2000).

In the first part of my literature view, I have attempted to explore the imbalances and discrepancies of the integrated English curriculum and how it has affected indigenous languages in Kenya. These discrepancies and the subjugation of the indigenous languages, I argue, are part of the vestiges of colonialism in Kenya. The so-called ‘integrated’ English curriculum has continued to endow the English language with undue powers hence suppressing and marginalizing the diverse historical values and attitudes that the various indigenous languages and literature could possibly foster in the younger generation. The integration has hybridized or in McConaghy’s (2000) terms, “assimilated” the traditional folklore resulting further in what I term a mismatch ‘interface’ (Ashcroft et al. 1995). Ashcroft et al. (1995: 466) describe this ‘interface’ as “[c]ombining elements from the historically dominated system (the African one) with elements from the historically dominant system (the English one), and acting as a constraint ... within the dominant system, while it leaves the dominant system relatively unaffected.” I propose, therefore, to explore the insight of this marginalize and subjugated indigenous literature by critiquing Kenya’s high school integrated English curriculum. As a means to providing a possible recommendation to the KIE, I shall carry out a parallel extensive review and critique of the BoS NSW’s new HSC English course and other Australian educational resources targeting the indigenous communities. The significance of this study will be:

♦ To provide a comparative yet parallel insight into the ‘two-world’ (the Indigenous Australian and the Kenyan contexts) postcolonial critique of the high school English curriculum in Kenya and among ASTI in NSW Tableland, Australia that is, the perceived impact of English literacy on indigenous languages.

♦ To explore using a “critical discourse analysis” (Balls 1994; Luke 1999; Luke
et al. 1993) the education stakeholders’ views on maintaining, renewing, and salvaging the engorging threat to the extinction of the indigenous languages and literature. Ondego (25 Feb 2000) points out, “of the 6000 languages spoken in the world, experts say over 50 per cent of them will either be extinct or endangered in the next 20 to 50 years”. On the importance of conserving the indigenous languages, Scollon and Scollon (1981) argue that in addition to speech, indigenous language is a vital tool in maintaining “cultural integrity” and that each language carries with it an unspoken network of cultural values. Scollon and Scollon conclude, “although these values generally operate on a subliminal level, they are, nonetheless, a major force in the shaping of each person’s self-awareness, identity, and interpersonal relationship”. (p. 89).

♦ To reconsider and redefine in academic terms the ‘popular’ beliefs, the social and “cultural hegemony” (McConaghy 2000; Said 1978) within Indigenous Australian and some Kenyan community groups. Every year, one of the Kenyan daily Newspapers presents a documentary on the Australian Aborigines and correlates their historical, social and cultural details with the Kalenjins and the Maasais of Rift Valley Kenya. While such documentaries have been presented over and again, little has been done terms of comparative research to ascertain or verify some of the editorial claims presented therein.

My short stay in Australia and especially my interaction with some Indigenous Australians has constantly reminded me of some of these past Aboriginal documentaries in Kenya. Being a Kalenjin from the Rift Valley myself, I have, in most cases, identified with some of the domestic endeavours of ATSI. I am, therefore, proposing to engage in an insightful exploration of dominant Indigenous Australian’s activities, both formal (related to the language studies in school) and informal (general language usage), relevant to current postcolonial perceptions and criticisms of the English curriculum and usage. Although, this study will be limited in both scope and content to critiquing the English curriculum and usage in two indigenous communities, the study will serve as an introduction as well as being a bridging postcolonial study between the two worlds. Both of these communities have been struggling to challenge the powers-that-be by recreating their identity, history, socioeconomic and cultural values that were once marginalized, subjugated and ‘stolen’ by the colonial imperialist (Bhabha 1990; Gale 2000; McConaghy 2000; Nakata 1995).
Specific Objectives and Key Research Questions

The above section presented a broad statement of the significance of the study. This calls for a detailed study of the historic colonial past and the new-age colonialism and the bureaucratic powers that have perpetuated them. The best approach for such a complex endeavour is to adopt what Gandhi (1998: 4) calls examining “some dimensions of, and possibilities for, the relationship between postcoloniality and postcolonialism in terms of the decolonising process”. In relation to my proposed study, it will be the ‘reassessment’ and critiquing of the postcolonial English curriculum and its usage in two contexts with similar histories namely, the Indigenous Australian and Kenyan contexts. The importance of employing the postcolonial theory, as Gandhi (1998), Luke and Luke (1999) and McConaghy (1998a, b & c, 2000) argue is to rethink ‘self’ and deconstruct the discourse of the “regimes of othering”. The need for historical “self-invention” and the urge to recreate or “to erase the painful memories” of the colonial era and its aftermath of ambivalence and subjugation of indigenous languages and literature can be seen as taking place in education systems. Throughout this study, I shall use the explanation of “postcolonialism” given by Gandhi (1998). Gandhi (1998: 4) defines it as “a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” with regards to the contemporary present and the implications to future conditions and trends.

In the Indigenous Australian context, I shall be looking at how the English curriculum and usage are deployed as a ‘racially defining’ tool, a tool that may ‘unconsciously’ be used to ‘discriminate’ individuals in terms of mastery, fluency and, competency rather than by skin-colour. I argue that while the restructuring of the new HSC English syllabus BoS NSW (1999) into five different courses namely: English (Standard), English (Advanced), English as a Second Language (ESL), English (Extension), and Fundamentals of English was a noble venture, the impact it causes on the indigenous languages and literature remains to be seen. Nakata (1995) and Mudrooroo (1995) point out that while it is good for Indigenous Australians to learn English in order to be able to deconstruct its ‘powerfulness’, it is important too for the Indigenous people to learn and maintain their own languages. On the same note, the Kenyan context of the integrated English syllabus for the high school calls for critical observation to ascertain the position of the indigenous languages
and literature in the syllabus and further to assess the perceived products of the integrated English course. Citing from the first part of the literature review, it appears that in neither of the two contexts have the curriculum content and the structure of teaching English language been fully discussed by curriculum critics. Rather, a number of education policy-makers in the two countries have explored employability and ‘political’ power, and the pressure on language teachers. The state of cultural confusion of high school students has also been mentioned in the literature reviewed. The question of identity, representations and empowerment of indigenous languages needs more attention. Green (1997) suggests adopting a view of meaning in English curriculum that reconciles the competing notions of structure and agency into a dynamic unity.

This study, hence, aims to explore the following specific questions:

1. How and why has the English curriculum among the indigenous communities (in Australia and Kenya) continued to receive ‘empowerment’ whether in its discourse, ‘pedagogy’, or its socioeconomic dominance over the indigenous languages whilst at the same time becoming a neo-colonial tool by which indigenous students are ‘racially defined’?

2. How, in broader postcolonial discourses, has the restructuring of the new HSC English course in NSW and the integrated English syllabus in Kenya affected the perceptions and views of the position of indigenous languages and literature in the Indigenous Australian and Kenyan contexts?

3. Do the education stakeholders in the two postcolonial indigenous contexts perceive that the states’ prescribed pedagogy, conceptual framework and content of the reintroduced English curriculum include possibilities for reconstructing the integrity and value of indigenous languages and literature?

4. Is the ‘new’ approach to language teaching among the Indigenous communities in Australia and in Kenya bringing about a type of historical, social and cultural intervention into the discourses of self-invention, revisiting and interrogating the postcolonial constructs of Indigenous people?
Methodology

A Conceptual Postcolonial Study Model

The above conceptual model illustrates the impact of a phenomenon, in this case the English curriculum, on the local and global socioeconomic and cultural community endeavours. The main indicators and variables of the model are the changes in time and the political, the economic and the social power factors (relations) that bring about social construction of reality in postcolonial countries. The model shows the value of assessing the historical past, the present, and future trends of the effects of English language on the indigenous and local languages of a given postcolonial country. It identifies the possible tensions and contradictions and the perceived significance of the English curriculum in the modern global community. Furthermore, this conceptual postcolonial model will provide a good basis to ascertain how and why English curriculum affects the educational systems in the two former British colonial states (Australia and Kenya). It will also shed light on the extent to which the former colonial-imperialists are still in control of the education and the economic structures in former colonies despite these colonies achieving political independence several decades ago.
Theoretical Approach

The theoretical approach for this research will involve a trans-national critical discourse analysis of issues and trends in postcolonial governments’ policy (prescriptive instructional pedagogies) and their implementation in multicultural educational institutions. The study attempts to reconstruct both the social and ideological outcomes of the influence of English as a medium of instruction and to consider the effect of the English curriculum on indigenous literature/languages. It explores the perceived power of the English language in the Indigenous Australian and Kenyan contexts. The participants will include education stakeholders, namely, the parents, and the teachers and more importantly the key education bureaucrats and policy-makers in the two countries. This study further seeks to present a comparative trans-national postcolonial understanding of issues such as cross-linguistic difference, identity, nativeness, gender, marginalization, regimes of ‘othering’, and so on.

Methods for Collecting Data

For the purpose of this research, I will use an interpretative discourse analysis method. This will include stakeholder interviews and participatory observation research as the primary data collection while historical resources (from museum, textbooks and indigenous research centres), newspapers, and reconciliation proceedings will be used as secondary data.

I have considered the methods above as the most appropriate means to investigate the key questions of this thesis. As the purpose of the thesis is neither to generalise nor ‘prove’ facts by way of statistical representation, critical discourse analysis provides a stronger methodology compared to the other quantitative methods. Cohen et al. (2000: 28) explains that critical analysis “seeks to uncover the interests at work in particular situations and interrogate the legitimacy of those interests”. Elsewhere I argue that uncovering ‘interests at work’ in the new restructured English courses in both the Indigenous Australian and Kenyan contexts “should provide insights into the underlying factors [and discourses] behind a project’s successes and failures” (Lang’at 2001: 62).
Luke (1999: 166) further explains that “discourses make a dense fabric of spoken, written, and symbolic texts of institutional bureaucracies (e.g. policies, curriculum documents, forms) and their ubiquitous face-to-face encounters”. Lee (1994: 29) adds:

A discourse has the power to create reality by naming and giving meaning to aspects of experience from a particular perspective. This power to create is always a ‘distribution’ politics; that is, what is deemed to be ‘real’ and ‘true’ determines what is included and what is excluded, so that what cannot be named may not be noticed.

I view Lee’s argument relevant to what I am proposing to investigate in this research. This research seeks to explore how the indigenous languages and literature in the two postcolonial situations may have been subjugated and marginalized through the new HSC English course in the case of NSW and the integrated English curriculum in the case of Kenya. The study will explore discursive discourses (interpretative views and opinions) of selected key education stakeholders in the two contexts. The main aim as stated earlier will be to consider the position of the indigenous languages and literature in the two countries. In particular, I intend to critique the English curriculum while aiming at providing relevant recommendations to the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE). Early this year (2001), the Government of Kenya began what they called “public contributions towards establishing a viable curriculum as recommended by the Koech’s education report of 1998” (Aduda 2001: 23). As a former English teacher with keen interests in indigenous languages and literature, and having been exposed to the BoS NSW’s (1999) new HSC English syllabus, I feel not only duty bound but more importantly in a better position to undertake a comparative study. I consider this research timely and if all goes well according to the time line provided at the end of this proposal, I will submit my contributions and recommendations within the specified time that is, early 2006 (PPS August 2001).

**Scope of the Study**

The research is restricted to critiquing the postcolonial English curriculum and usage in the Indigenous Australian and Kenyan contexts. These investigations will be carried out within the NSW New England Tableland region and the Rift Valley Province of Kenya only. The target
population will constitute selected students, parents and teachers and key education personnel as well as reviewing relevant historical and curriculum resource material in the two countries.

**Research Community**

In the Rift Valley Province (PVP) of Kenya, the Kalanjins, who have always been portrayed by particular Kenyan media as sharing a lot in common with the Australian Indigenous people, are the main inhabitants. Since Kenyan schools use a common national curriculum, I will collect my data from around the province. Because I am a member of the Centre for African Postcolonial Studies (CAPS) that has research centres in three districts of RVP, namely, Kericho, Transmara and Bomet Districts, I shall concentrate my data collections in these districts. The Kalanjin sub-communities living in these districts are the Kipsigis, the Maasai and the Sot respectively.

In NSW, I am working with the Armidale District (New England Tableland Region) Educational Personnel to establish the exact centres where I will carry out this study. I anticipate, however, that since this study does not aim to generalize the findings, I will choose a small manageable research community from both the Indigenous Australian and the Kenyan contexts.

**Ethical Approach**

There is a growing realisation that ethical issues in the conduct of cross-cultural research must be approached by confidentiality, honesty, responsibility and fair returns to the participants (Dobbert 1982). Apart from the required approval from UNE’s Human Ethics Committee that is in progress, I also intend to seek for NSWDET’s permission to work with schools in the New England Tableland region. Furthermore, I have made initial contacts with some specific education support personnel for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at UNE and in Armidale. These support groups include, Centre for Research in Aboriginal and Multicultural Studies (CRAMS), Oorala Aboriginal Centre and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (local representatives).
As part of this process of establishing insight and understanding of the ethical concerns among the Indigenous Australians, I have reviewed the ethical code established by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (1999). These ethical objectives include:

a. to share the study at all stages with the Indigenous people and gain their approval for all steps in the progress;
b. to seek voluntary rather than assumed participation;
c. to provide consent information to the individuals volunteering;
d. adopt a methodology that enables freedom of expression while guaranteeing anonymity;
e. to ensure that all findings are circulated fully among the Indigenous community and
f. to ensure that all information that would be of help to Indigenous students is circulated in schools.

**Emerging Trends**

Although the study is ongoing at the present, the following conclusions are drawn from the initial results from the Kenyan context.

It is emerging from the study that the Kenyan system, as evident in the English curriculum, is still preying on the legacies of colonial ambivalence and imperial mimicry more than 40 years after ‘independence’. The lack of innovative measures to locate literature within the context of the new ‘Kenya’, the politicisation of the process of text selections, and the lack of proper representation of teachers in the choice of curriculum texts has impacted significantly on the teachers’ fear of losing the desire, psychologically or otherwise, for their teaching obligations. Most literature teachers in Kenya seem to have lost (either consciously or unconsciously) their professional attachments to the curriculum material they teach, if indeed, they previously had them.

One may argue that neocolonial dominancy of the ‘haves’ over those who ‘have not’, be it within the education(al) structures, the book publishing firms and/or political/tribal party politics, has produced and reproduced sycophantic hegemonies that have affected and will continue to adversely affect teachers’ desires in relation to the prescribed classroom texts. The majority of the
literature teachers in Kenya appear to have been disempowered or silenced and their professional experiences and contributions marginalized by the very organs that trained and employed them.

It should be noted that once the teachers’ inner desire to teach is operating at a subliminal state (“I don’t care” phase), teaching pedagogies are routinised and the teaching tasks are reduced to mere fulfilment of duty. When this happens, a critical engagement with texts (by both the teachers and the students) and the aims and objectives of the literary texts in Kenyan schools will become “another” conduit for the ongoing internal-imperialism in the Kenyan education curriculum.
References


