


The Role and Status of English in Spanish-Speaking Argentina and Its Education System: Nationalism or Imperialism?

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Abstract

There is a lot of controversy nowadays in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the context of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) regarding the status and role of English in non-English speaking countries, in particular in developing countries, as well as in English-speaking countries with a history of colonialism. In these settings, the discourse of English as a form of imperialism requires a reconsideration of the role and status of English in the national school curriculum in primary and secondary school contexts. It also requires the exploration of the connections with nationalism and national identity, for within this discourse of imperialism, English tends to be seen as detrimental to the national identity, which education explicitly aims to form and develop through formal schooling.

Keywords

Argentina, nationalism, imperialism, Malvinas war, English as a foreign language, identity

Much has been written about this topic in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The voices from many countries in the “periphery,” especially from Asia and Africa, have been heard. However, the Latin American perspective has been and still is underrepresented. Hence, I wish to make a contribution in this direction by describing the Argentine case. The aim of this article is then to reflect on cultural and identity issues, as they relate to nationalism within the framework of education, considering the current status and role of English in Argentina.

I start with some background information about Argentina, which the reader shall need to be able to situate the discussion that follows. Then I refer to the notion of “periphery” because it is central in the discussion regarding the role of English conceived in hegemonic terms, in particular in developing countries. I continue to present a brief historical overview of education in general, with a specific focus on primary and secondary education. This overview will be tinted by political and economic considerations, which have played a key role in shaping the direction of educational policies at the provincial and national levels in the country, especially in connection with nationalism. I illustrate with the example of the Falklands War (*Guerra de las Malvinas*) and its role in shaping the Argentine national identity in a school system that privileges compulsory English language teaching (ELT) in primary and secondary school since the new National Law of Education was passed in 2007. I conclude by pointing out the need for further exploration of these issues, in particular, how they are perceived and lived in “peripheral” countries such as Argentina.

A “Peripheral” Country, Argentina: Background Information

Argentina, or the Argentine Republic, is the second largest country in South America after Brazil. It has a federal system of government comprised of 23 provinces and the autonomous city of Buenos Aires. The Andes Mountains form the natural limit with Chile to the west. Paraguay and Bolivia are bordering countries to the north, and Brazil and Uruguay to the northeast. The Atlantic Ocean extends to the east, from the central province of Buenos Aires toward the south. Spanish, Argentina’s official language, has official status in all bordering countries with the exception of Brazil, whose official language is Portuguese. Preliminary results from the 2010 census indicate that it has a population of more than 40 million inhabitants.

Argentina can be described as a “peripheral” country. The term appears between inverted commas here because, even though it is accepted in the scholarly literature (Canagarajah, 2002, 2006, 2008; Canagarajah & Said, 2009, 2011), it implies the acceptance of the hegemony of “non-peripheral” countries, or the “centre.” Canagarajah and Said (2011) argue that terminology distinctions such as “centre” and

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“periphery” and “inner and outer circles” are reductive and no longer appropriate due to the effects of globalization. Nonetheless, considering that, until today and to my knowledge, no better and accepted alternative has been proposed in the literature, I adopt the term in this article with the pertinent caveats. I also agree with Canagarajah (personal communication, 2012), who expresses that, despite drawbacks, “centre” and “periphery” succeed in highlighting unavoidable power inequality relationships (in economic, political, ideological, linguistic, cultural, social, and other terms) that other terminology distinctions deliberately intend to hide.

The Argentine System of Education: A Brief Historical Overview

The description of Argentina’s system of education is a complex endeavor because of the many political, ideological, economic, cultural, and other forces that have played a role throughout history, and still do. I therefore claim no comprehensiveness in what follows because this account cannot be other than partial. Bearing this limitation in mind, the reader may benefit from knowing that Argentina was a Spanish colony until the Declaration of Independence in 1816, and that consequently, the Spanish language has been the national and official language since then. The 2010 census (Ministerio de Economía, INDEC, 2011) has shown that the majority of its population (more than 85%) is of European origin while only a minority is *mestizo* (mixed European and Indian origin; 8%) and Arab or Asian (4%). In this last national census, 600,000 Argentines (1.6%) self-identified as Amerindians. There exist several immigrant languages (Italian, German, Levantine Arabic, South Bolivian Quechua, Catalán, Mandarín, Japanese, Korean, Welsh, and others; Lewis, 2009) and as many as 16 or more living indigenous languages (Censabella, 1999). Guaraní is spoken in the northern provinces bordering Paraguay.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the Argentine State was definitely organized (López Armengol & Persoglia, 2009). Since then, it has fulfilled a crucial role in the unification and homogenization of the population through education, especially language education. This process of homogenization began with the enactment of Law 1420 in 1884, whose aim was to form and create the Argentine citizen. It did so by means of the spread of primary school education (universal, obligatory, non-religious, and free) and the obligatory military system. In the first half of the 19th century, Sarmiento, a key historical figure associated with education in this country, put in motion the imposition of the central culture and language and the elimination of difference (linguistic, social, cultural) represented by the *gaucho* and the several Indian languages alive in those times (Puiggrós, 1990). The aim of education was to reproduce the dominant culture in the younger generations—a culture that mirrored Europe, particularly France.

As Puiggrós (1990) explains, the Argentine education system was founded around this paradigm of education for linguistic and cultural unification and homogenization in the face of the increasing immigration flows from Europe. Other key characteristics of the Argentine system of education in its historical origin and development were an encyclopedic and selective secondary school, the strong social function of the teacher as an exemplar of the cultural and moral norm, and the isolation of the school from the family, community, and social networks of the society (Puiggrós, 1990, 1996, 2003).

This paradigm of homogenization continued to dominate the thought of politicians, pedagogues, and intellectuals during the 20th century (Puiggrós, 1990). The government adopted a repressive and overt intent of domination of thinking and behavior of the masses in the 1970s with the military governments.¹ The modern system of education toward the end of the 1990s also kept this intent toward conformity (regarding school routines, methods, accepted versions of disciplinary content, adult–young relationships, etc.; Puiggrós, 1990). At present, education is still seen as a driving unifying force and pillar in four interrelated fronts (Rivas, 2005), namely, citizenship (as it fosters values and provides students with the necessary tools for democratic life), social life (through the vision of school as a form of social inclusion and integration), economic development and well-being (contributing to the productive capacity of citizens), and cultural development (by fostering cultural understanding in the face of linguistic and cultural diversity).

At the beginning of the 1980s, the return of democracy after the military government of 1976-1983 brought about changes in education that got materialized in a new Federal Law of Education (Ley Federal de Educación No 24.195) passed in 1993. This Law, intended to modernize the Argentine school system, represents a transcendental change in the conception of education that had prevailed before, that is, the conceptualization based on homogenization and universalization, with a strong State, which I described earlier. This Law formalized the decentralization of education whereby the provinces began to be in charge of initial, primary, and secondary education whereas the State was in charge of university education, central education policies, and the control and evaluation of the provincial systems of education (Kweitel, Marongiu, Mezzadra, & Rodríguez del Pozo, 2003; López Armengol & Persoglia, 2009).

The Federal Law of Education did not succeed for a number of complex reasons, including political, social, and economic factors. As way of example, with the new decentralized system of education, 90% of the expenditures in the provincial budgets for education were destined to teacher salaries, which meant that little was left for professional development programs, equipment, maintenance, and infrastructure (Kweitel et al., 2003). This simple factor gradually led the system to fall down.

In 2001, a severe political and economic crisis transformed the scenario of the years to come. Unemployment grew to 21.5% in 2002 and the population considered to be poor raised to more than 50% in that same year. The national government was forced to implement wide-ranging social relief programs, the provincial budgets got constrained, and the possibilities of external funding narrowed. The country literally collapsed.

In December 2006, a new National Education Law (*Ley Nacional de Educación No 26.206*) was enacted. It regulates the right to teach and learn, included in the National Constitution, and considers education and knowledge as a public good as well as a personal and social right to be guaranteed by the State. The fundamental changes introduced by this law were the following: the compulsory status of education since age 5 until the completion of secondary school; the structuring of the national system of education in four broad areas, namely, Initial Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, and Higher Education; and the introduction of eight modalities, within one or more of the levels of education, aimed at catering for specific needs, be such needs permanent or temporal, personal or contextual, with the ultimate aim of guaranteeing equality in the right of education for all (Technical Professional Education, Artistic Education, Special Needs Education, Youth and Young Adults Permanent Education, Rural Education, Intercultural Bilingual Education, Education in Contexts of Deprivation of Liberty, and Home and Hospital Education; López Armengol & Persoglia, 2009).

The Strong Influence of Economic and Political Factors in Education

Within the federal system in Argentina, about 40% of the total public expenditures on the basic services provided by the State (education, health, security, justice) are decentralized in the provinces. Paradoxically, the national government collects about 80% of all taxes and then distributes resources among the provinces through a system of distribution called revenue sharing system, which was first enforced in 1935. While this system should ideally prioritize the criteria of fiscal equalization (which in fiscal and economic terms means that it should distribute resources according to the population, the per capita income and the land of each province), the variables that in fact determine how much a province gets depart significantly from those criteria. For example, political variables are crucial, such as the representation of each province in the National Congress (Chambers of Deputies and Senators) (Porto & Sanguinetti, 2001). Thus, what each citizen receives as investment in his or her basic education crucially depends on where he or she lives. While the State annually invests about \$1900 (Argentine pesos) on the education of a child or youth in Santa Cruz, Tierra del Fuego and Neuquén (Southern provinces), the amount lowers to \$850 if that child or youth is born in Salta, Misiones, Corrientes,

Chaco, and Tucumán (Northern provinces), for example (Mezzadra & Rivas, 2005; with variations depending on how much the national government collects each year). The unfairness of this system has been the center of considerable economic research (Porto, 2004; Porto & Sanguinetti, 2001), which has resulted in the recommendation of specific economic policies and alternatives in the allocation of resources within this system (Porto, 2004). However, to date, the provincial and national actors involved in the reform of the system have not been able to agree on a tax revenue sharing system that redresses such inequality. The scenario is complex because, as Mezzadra and Rivas (2005) point out, the system is tied to the specific political will of the governor in office as well as broader political forces on one hand and on the other hand, variations in the revenue collection efforts at the provincial and municipal levels and consciousness and responsibility in the allocation of resources that each province gets from the national government under this system.

One example shall suffice to show the strong influence of the political responsibility of the provincial governments in the financing of education. This example is the province of Formosa, which is one of the poorest provinces in Argentina but has a relatively “rich” State (1 of the richest 10) in terms of the resources it gets through the revenue sharing system per inhabitant. However, and paradoxically, it is also one of the provinces that allocates the least public resources to its education system. Issues of this kind clearly affect the quality of education and ultimately, the equality of access to education (Mezzadra & Rivas, 2005)—a right of all citizens under the National Constitution.

Language Education: Generalities

A bit of background about the region is useful at this point. Linguistic diversity is a reflection of South American multi-ethnic societies. Its territory is witness to more than 700 remaining native languages being currently spoken. There is also an increasing awareness in the region about the status of Spanish, its most widely spoken official language, as one of the potential “rivals” (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, p. 437) of English as the main international language in the future—something that Phillipson himself does not acknowledge (potential rivals for him are Chinese, Arabic, and German, for instance). Complex immigration and migration processes have given rise to communities where a number of foreign and/or second languages are spoken. South America’s long history of cultural negotiation and exchange between people speaking different languages reflects the intricate and inseparable relationship among the languages, cultures, and power issues present in the region. Linguistic and cultural diversity is a familiar phenomenon in people’s daily lives.

Recent years have seen new phenomena taking place in the field of languages, such as the development of intercultural bilingual programs in the region. There are programs of all kinds, with Spanish and Portuguese as L1 (native

language) and L2 (foreign/second language), local varieties of Spanish available throughout the area (something like “World Spanish”), indigenous languages as L1, and so on. International policies of protection and celebration of linguistic and cultural diversity have been influential in spreading international trends that cherish linguistic and cultural diversity in the region. At the level of research, continuous national efforts by CONICET in Argentina (the most prestigious scientific and technological research Institution from the National Ministry of Science and Technology) have led, for instance, to the creation of a Department of Anthropologic and Linguistic Digital Documentation. This Department is the result of an initiative to document four indigenous languages (*tapiete, vilela, wichi y mocovi*) in their ethnographic context from one poor province in the country called Chaco. This initiative belongs to a Program for the Documentation of Languages in Danger of Extinction called Dobes (Dokumentation bedrohter Sprachen; <http://www.caicyt.gov.ar/DILA>) funded by CONICET and Instituto Max Planck. In education, these trends have affected, and are still affecting, decisions at the national level in the teaching of native and foreign languages locally (i.e., throughout the region). Countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, and Colombia are placing increasing interest in revisiting how languages are being taught at different levels in their systems of education in compulsory schooling and higher education.

Narrowing the scope to the case of Argentina now, I have already mentioned that social, economic, and political factors are a significant determinant of literacy development (in Spanish and English) in this country. Even though the governments at different levels (municipal, provincial, federal) are growing increasingly aware of the inequalities in education brought about by these factors, on occasions, in their attempt to level these inequalities, the result has been that school instruction has disregarded the formal teaching of reading and writing on behalf of “social service.” Furthermore, while language education policies at the provincial and national levels emphasize the need to provide “equality of access” to education, they fail to take account of “equality of outcome” (McKay & Warshauer Freedman, 1990, p. 399; Warschauer, 2000) or “equality of opportunity to achieve” (McCarty, 2003, p. 149) for a variety of reasons.

Foreign Language Education: The Case of English

While the experiences in other areas of the world regarding ELT are well-documented (Bruthiaux, 2002; Clemente, 2007; Matsuda, 2003; McKay & Warshauer Freedman, 1990; McKay & Weinstein-Shr, 1993; Nunan, 2003; Tsui, 2007; Vavrus, 2002), the description of the situation in Latin American countries tends to be underrepresented. This scarcity motivates this section.

In view of the increasingly multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural classrooms nowadays, the growing importance

of cultural factors in language education and education in general, and in TESOL in particular (Atkinson, 1999, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 1999, 2003; Lazaraton, 2003; Siegal, 2000; Sparrow, 2000) has been widely acknowledged. Current conceptualizations of English as a language of international communication (Paran & Williams, 2007; Warschauer, 2000), lingua franca (Jenkins, 2006; Mauranen, 2003), or global language (Nunan, 2001) traverse the field nowadays. Different countries have dealt with this new scenario in various ways, with idiosyncrasies in how educational policies have been designed and implemented across the globe (Nunan, 2003). In this section, I shall present the Argentine case.

In Argentina, the teaching of English in schools began almost exclusively in the private sector through subtractive models based on a monoglossic conception of language learning (Porto, 2012). Many traditional bilingual schools grew in the 19th century to provide education to the children of the English settlers of those times (Banfi & Day, 2005; Tocalli-Beller, 2007). This British influence was very important in the country throughout the 19th century. Even though the Spanish and Italian immigrants outgrew the Irish, Scot, Welsh, and British immigrants in number, the latter shaped the identity of the nation through their business penetration in the railway and farming fields, among others (Maersk Nielsen, 2003). Between 1880 and 1929, Argentina prospered and emerged as 1 of the 10 richest countries in the world, benefiting from an agricultural export-led economy as well as British and French investment. The cultural influence of the British/English is present nowadays through cultural associations devoted to the teaching of English and the promotion of the British culture such as the British Council and the *Asociación Argentina de Cultura Inglesa* (Argentine Association of English Culture); through theater and cultural activities in English; and through sports such as football, rugby, tennis, yachting, polo, golf, and so on (Maersk Nielsen, 2003). Interestingly, the names of famous clubs in these sports reflect their British origin (Newell’s Old Boys, Boca Juniors, River Plate, Buenos Aires Lawn Tennis Club, and Yacht Club Argentino, among many others; Maersk Nielsen, 2003).

In the 20th century, private institutions copied this model of an English–Spanish bilingual curriculum, targeted mainly at the high income sectors in the main capitals around the country. In the public sector, although English was first introduced in the curriculum for secondary school in the 1960s, the impact of an education in languages was restricted to a limited population simply because secondary school was not compulsory then.

Despite the failure of the Federal Law of Education passed in 1993, described earlier in this article, the Law was significant in the field of foreign language education because English became a compulsory subject of the curriculum. This change affected the status of other foreign languages that used to be taught in high school in the 1980s, such as French (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). While 40 years ago and before, the local “rival” of English in school settings was

French, nowadays, French is in plain decay and being increasingly replaced by Italian, German, and, since the creation of Mercosur (a trade agreement among Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay), Portuguese. The scenario is different and more complex in the frontiers, or in immigration conglomerates, where different languages gain or lose power and prestige (e.g., Portuguese acquires strength in the Brazilian frontier, *Guarani* is omnipresent in the border with Paraguay, etc.).

The new *National Law of Education* (2006) prescribes the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in primary school and extends its obligatory teaching throughout secondary school. Since 2007, English is therefore taught compulsorily as from fourth form (9-year-olds) in private and public schools. A few new primary and secondary education curricula for English were passed in 2007 in several Argentine provinces—with a spreading effect that is having a nationwide impact. From this perspective, Argentina is a pioneering country in Latin America, whose example will be followed by other countries with similar characteristics in the continent. In well-off educational environments, English is offered as a service (indeed an expensive one) and is widely taught and learned from age 6 onwards (including college education) in private institutions and organizations in addition to the school time assigned to it by law through curricular documents. Disadvantaged populations, however, do not have access to education in English or in any other foreign language outside of school.

It is important to note that English is a dominant and prestigious foreign language in the country (Kanavillil, 2010; Maersk Nielsen, 2003; Tocalli-Beller, 2007). The prestige associated with English stems in part from the penetration of the English language and culture in the 19th century referred to before. At present, even though English is not an official language, it is predominant in business with foreign countries, in language education (with its incorporation in the primary and secondary school curriculum of most provinces), and in tourism. Following Maersk Nielsen (2003), the use of English in Argentina fulfills several functions. One is the interpersonal function, achieved through the prevalence of English in advertising, consumer goods (brand names of clothes, cars, perfumes, music, food, and many other areas), businesses, and so on. English is highly associated with auras of prestige, modernity, and sophistication. Another is the instrumental function, whereby English is used as a medium of instruction in some schools (e.g., bilingual schools), in teacher training colleges, at university in some graduate and postgraduate courses of studies, in EFL professional development courses, in international conferences in different disciplines, and so on. The regulative function refers to the fact that sworn translators of English are necessary to translate all the business and commercial contracts with foreign companies—contracts that, by law, must be written in the official language, Spanish. Finally, Maersk Nielsen (2003) states that the innovative function refers to the frequent borrowings

from English that are then nativized, for instance, in sports, computing, shopping, and advertising, among many other areas.

Therefore, Argentina can definitely be thought of as a country in which English is additive rather than subtractive (Phillipson, 2008b). Learners appropriate English, each one in their own ways, to face and negotiate the world, decoding its multiple systems of symbolic, social, and cultural meanings (Cots, 2006). The society at large, from educators to learners, parents, the population in general, teacher educators, researchers, authorities, policy makers, and curriculum designers, are all aware of the positive significance of English for their individual and social lives. In our setting, English has become a form of cultural capital, which learners will use together with other forms of social and economic capital, to open up to the world and have access to knowledge and information, health, education, employability, and social and economic mobility—through different resources and means (Byram, 2001). For our learners, English becomes a resource, a tool, that they will use not only within the school but also outside it (in the home, the community, and the society at large) to enrich their lives in different facets (linguistic, social, cultural, academic, and moral). English is empowering and instrumental to emancipation, allowing them to fight the inequalities of their own setting (poverty, discrimination, etc.) as well as the inequalities that they may be subjected to in the course of their lives as Third World citizens. This rationale behind ELT education rests on a human capital education model (Spring, 2009) to which I shall come back later. This scenario is concomitant with an undeniable process of *Americanization* observable through TV, films, and other symptoms (Phillipson, 2008a), although anyone here would argue that English is perceived in utilitarian rather than hegemonizing terms. In a way, the high regard for English by the local actors themselves in Argentina echoes descriptions by Matsuda (2003) in Japan and Vavrus (2002) in Tanzania.

Current foreign language education in the country is in tune with the latest developments in the field (in particular ELT). English teachers are in general highly qualified, having to enroll in 5-year graduate programs to be allowed to teach (cf. the short certification processes offered in the United States and Europe to teach English learners). While in the times of the Federal Law of Education (the 1990s), curricular prescriptions were product-oriented (i.e., they included competence standards intended to operate as a means of standardization), nowadays, from a theoretical perspective, the notion of culture is embraced as pedagogically and educationally relevant within foreign language education in this country. It is accepted that education in general and EFL education in particular are framed within specific sociocultural contexts. Professional development after graduation is seen as an integral part of current efforts to transform and revitalize education (Porto, 2003a). The underlying assumption is that language teachers have *the right and the*

responsibility to develop the knowledge and skills required to educate and prepare learners for the demands of the 21st century in language learning. Teacher development in the Province of Buenos Aires, for instance, is free, of quality, and provided by the State. Despite the foregoing, I must concur with Markee (2000) that in general, in the working of their everyday lives as educators, “teachers and teachers-in-training rarely pay much attention to the larger sociocultural factors that often determine what is possible or desirable in a given classroom” (p. 570). Efforts in this direction have been taken and are taking place (Porto, 2003a, 2009).

Freire has played a key role in this change of conception in EFL education, and educational perspectives in general in Latin America as a whole, by introducing the notions of transformation, agency, social awareness, citizenship, and education as liberation. Within language education in particular in Argentina, Freire’s influence has offered a fertile milieu for the foregrounding of the sociocultural, agency, intercultural experience and processes (beyond products). Recent curricular innovations (Barboni, Beacon & Porto, 2008; Beacon, Barboni, Porto & Spoturno, in press) and policy documents (Thisted, Diez, Martínez, & Villa, 2007) emphasize foreign language teaching as *educational*, that is, aiming at the learners’ *literacy* development, not only *language* development, and view learners as responsible, active, and conscientious citizens. The policy documents designed in the Province of Buenos Aires are the results of efforts under a recently created Office of Intercultural Education, framed under the National Law of Education 26.206 (2006), which promotes “policies of recognition that are the center of debates, policies and practices beyond the Argentine provincial and national contexts toward the Latin American context in countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Perú and Bolivia” (Thisted et al., 2007, p. 3, my translation of the original in Spanish).

Underlying this change in conceptualization from an instrumental-functional view of ELT to an educational conception is the influence of two world models of education in the country, the human capital education model, and Progressive Education (Spring, 2009). The main tenets of Progressive Education are education for active citizenship, social justice, and the protection of local languages, celebrating the students’ interests and participation. This model echoes Freire’s revolutionary conceptions. Some examples are UNESCO, United Nations for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa en América Latina* (PREAL), and other organizations that have traditionally been influential in educational thinking in Argentina, advocating a more humanistic view of education centered on lifelong, responsible, and conscientious learning and critical thinking and its value for democracy. These tenets have come to dominate language education policy (Thisted et al., 2007) and curricular developments (Barboni, Beacon & Porto, 2008) from the beginning of the 21st century.

Let me take, as way of example, the case of the Province of Buenos Aires, the most important and populated province in the country. One classroom in this province can host learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds such as indigenous children, the descendants of immigrants from neighboring countries, from Peru, Asia (Korea, Taiwan), or some African nations, the children of homeless farmers or rural workers in precarious conditions, children from neighborhoods stigmatized as low or dangerous, gypsies, migrants from other provinces, and so on. The culture matrix is clearly complex. Since 2005, educational policies are being continuously revisited to meet the educational needs of these learners in the 21st century. Changes in the formulation of educational aims, new definitions of student profiles when leaving school, and curricular innovations respond to the theoretical rationale that guides the Progressive Education model of education mentioned before. Central to this rationale are the emergence and development of new, changing social identities and, therefore, new social needs that have to be met by compulsory schooling. One current assumption is that schools should provide a common basis to allow a conscious and critical participation in society, that is, schools should foster literacy development with the ultimate aim of empowering students for active citizenship.

This new conceptualization of language education transcends the atomistic, de-contextualized acquisition of linguistic, non-linguistic, cultural, and other types of information and knowledge (dominant in the 1980s and the 1990s) toward a fundamental transformation of the learners’ actions and thoughts at a personal and social level (Chen, 2005; Widdowson, 1990). This view emphasizes the integral development of learners as individuals—a development that takes place when human beings reconcile new and challenging ideas with their pre-existing beliefs and values through diverse experiences with languages that lead to the multifaceted development of the self (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Vavrus, 2002). Teaching English in linguistically and culturally diverse settings goes beyond engaging in the phonics debate, learning about contrastive phonology English-(Spanish), having a repertoire of vocabulary-building, text comprehension (and many other) strategies, and the like. This practice-oriented instrumental view of language education that dominated the scene in the second half of the 20th century resulted in a narrow discourse about ELT that missed the point. What teaching English in linguistically and culturally diverse settings means is, in the first place and above all, encouraging *all* learners to create, maintain, and/or develop their unique identities (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Vavrus, 2002)—identities that are partly embodied in and partly projected by their use of the English language.

Concomitantly, the human capital education model views (language) education as a tool for learners to open up to the world and have access to knowledge and information, health, education, employability, economic growth, and social and

economic mobility—through different resources and means. In this sense, language education, particularly in English, because of its significance as a language of international communication, is seen as empowering and instrumental to development. This view prevails in the programs of cooperation and development in the region, financed by corporations such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. The influence of this model on intellectual thinking has been significant in Argentina as it is tied to the strong association between economic development and education in the history of education in the country. At the end of the 18th century, historical figures such as Manuel Belgrano (the creator of the national flag) represented this view; for instance, he founded navy, mining, and mathematics schools, among others. This generated a fracture between the traditional and colonial educational modality of the previous two centuries and the beginning of the modern school system in the first half of the 19th century (Puiggrós, 2003). These historical antecedents paved the way for the pedagogic neo-liberalism that dominated the scene in the 20th century—forces that regained strength in the 1980s and 1990s when education was tied to the economic rationale behind international financing corporations such as the World Bank. This led to the decentralization and privatization of education, the pyramidization and reduction of the teacher workforce, and a tight control by the national government through the imposition of common and unified curricula, instruction, and assessment (Puiggrós, 1996).

The Discourse of Imperialism in Argentina

English: Cultural and Linguistic Imperialism or a Form of Emancipation?

These conceptualizations of the status and role of English as an international or global language, or lingua franca, have deepened the discussion among TESOL professionals and academics about the discourse of imperialism in ELT, with passionate advocates and deterrents on both sides. Almost 20 years ago, Barrow (1990) and Valdes (1990) claimed that language teaching involved the inevitable transmission of particular beliefs whether overtly or implicitly. Holly (1990), on a similar vein, posited that English teaching might be a form of ideological and cultural colonization, that is, a form of indoctrination. This line of argument, based on the fact that English cannot be dissociated from the social, cultural, historical, economic, political, religious, and other relations in which it exists (Osler & Starkey, 2000; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Starkey, 2007), sustains that the cultural norms and values associated with English in specific sociocultural contexts can be transmitted and imposed as an expression of hegemony. One consequence is that the learners' cultures are "totally submerged" (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984, p. 15), constituting a threat to their national identities.

More recently, Chien-Hui Kuo (2003) warns us that "if multiculturalism cannot successfully create a space for subaltern groups, it simply becomes an accomplice to cultural imperialism" (p. 223).

In the field of TESOL, Barrow's (1990), Valdes' (1990), and Holly's (1990) argument above gets replicated in Phillipson (1992), who has been dwelling on the topic of linguistic and cultural imperialism for more than 20 years. The author talks of "the infectious spread of English within a wider language policy framework" (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, p. 436) and "triumphant" English as a result of processes of Americanization, Europeanization, and McDonalidization (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, p. 440). "These developments embody and entail hegemonising processes that tend to render the use of English 'natural' and 'normal', and to marginalise other languages" (Phillipson, 2001, p. 191). As part of the political, cultural, religious, military, corporate, and other organizations that have contributed and still contribute to such hegemony, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996) include TESOL. Edge (2003), Markee (2000), and others take up this matter, bringing forward the ethical and moral decisions and dilemmas that TESOL professionals, including educators, face nowadays given the scenario above. More recently, building on this previous argument, Phillipson (2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) questions the apparent neutrality of terms such as lingua franca and global English, which he says are flawed and ethnocentric, and strives to redefine English as "lingua frankensteinia" in an attempt to capture its devilish effects (Phillipson, 2008a, p. 250).

The uses of English in Argentina together with the historical overview of language education in general and ELT in particular in this country, which I briefly described in the previous sections, seem to contradict this view of English as a form of imperialism put forth by Phillipson. In general, the people themselves do not see English in this way. As I said before, English is additive rather than subtractive. Given these considerations, what does teaching and learning English in Argentina involve? English is being used as a means of self-representation among its speakers to symbolize, and make accessible, with more or less success, their idiosyncratic meanings reflecting specific and varied motivations for learning and using English in this context. English is de-territorialized (Atkinson, 1999; Widdowson, 1993) and belongs equally to all its users (Warschauer, 2000; cf. Phillipson, 1992, 2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). Kanavillil (2010) speaks of the nativization of English in Latin America and mentions the perceived need of English as something vital among Argentinians.

From this perspective, ELT has a profound impact on the personal and social lives of the Argentinians as well as on the future of the Argentine nation as a disadvantaged country. In an increasingly globalized world, or times of "informationalism" (Warschauer, 2000, p. 511), because of the pervasive cultural diversity of its contexts of use, the teaching of

English offers an asset that has not been duly acknowledged neither given as much consideration as necessary in the midst of the frantic, hot, and current debate in TESOL on imperialism. This plus point is that ELT in classroom settings in Argentina privileges access to and contact with multiple and varied cultures through the use of multicultural literature, especially with the new curricula for English in primary school passed in 2007 and probably in 2014 in the province of Buenos Aires, and similar curricula having been designed in other provinces.

English, Imperialism, and Nationalism: The Falklands War

These considerations notwithstanding, there exists a contrasting line of thought in Argentina, reflected mostly in the field of politics and international relations, that sees English in the terms described by Phillipson above, especially because of the current role of the United States in the economic, political, and diplomatic life of the country. Argentina has an ambivalent, double-sided love–hate relationship with the United States (Kanavillil, 2010), and one view in this tension encompasses the hegemonic role that the United States plays in economic, financial, political, ideological, and military terms (Borón, 2009; Boron & Vlahusic, 2009). In this setting, the rhetoric of imperialism highlights the profound evil impact of English on many Latin American countries and their inhabitants (Borón, 2009; Boron & Vlahusic, 2009). In Argentina, Borón (2009) argues that this evil influence has led to the crisis of a model of civilization that has resulted in social unrest, violence, xenophobia, and racism, among other diabolic forces. The rationale of English as “lingua frankensteinia” (Phillipson (2008a, p. 250), viable through the processes of Americanization, Europeanization, and McDonaldization mentioned before, gets replicated in the local context of Argentina, with deep implications at the economic, financial, political, ideological, and military levels. As Borón (2009) and Boron and Vlahusic (2009) state, these symptoms represent the visible top of a broader imperialist penetration through “mechanisms of domination and the multiplication of its [the United States’] devices of manipulation and ideological and political control” (Borón, 2005, p. 271; my translation of the original in Spanish).

One key historical event that has contributed to this negative ingrained view of the English language as well as the predominance of the discourse of imperialism in some sectors of the Argentine society is the Falklands War (*Guerra de las Malvinas*). This war was fought in 1982 between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, although the dispute regarding their sovereignty has a long history that dates back to the 19th century. The islands are located in the South Atlantic Ocean, to the east of continental Argentina. The 1982 dispute involved not only the sovereignty of the Islands but also their name. The Islands are locally known as

Islas Malvinas, formed by *Gran Malvina*, *Soledad*, and several other smaller islands. The war started in April 1982 under the ruling of the last military government of Argentina, and finished in June of the same year, with the triumph of the United Kingdom. It precipitated the end of the dictatorship in 1983. This has been the only external Argentine war since the 1880s. The conflict has resulted in a long history of confrontation with the United Kingdom, which dates back to the 19th century. Argentina sees the Islands as part of its territory, the Argentine people refer to the Islands by the local names in Spanish, and April 2 is a national public holiday in the honor of the soldiers who fought the war. There is a strong and pervasive sentiment of nationalism among the population associated with this historical event, which is taught in all primary and secondary schools throughout the country as a patriotic anniversary within the history of the Argentine nation. The war constitutes one of its *Efemérides*, that is, the historical anniversaries taught in schools that are intended to create and shape “the Argentine identity.”

The conflict as well as its past and present consequences (in military, political, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and ideological terms; see Pugh, 2011, for a more general discussion) is more complex than I am able to report here. For example, on June 17, 2011, David Cameron’s remark that for the United Kingdom, the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands is not an issue of negotiation prompted the President of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, to dismiss his comments as “mediocre bordering on stupidity,” and to call him “arrogant.” She stated on the news: “In the 21st century, Britain continues to be an obtuse colonial power in decline because colonialism is outdated and unjust.”² This brief scenario suffices to portray the associations with colonialism and imperialism that this historical event has for most Argentineans and the impact it has had on the formation and development of a national identity through its inclusion as an *Efeméride* in the primary and secondary systems of education at a national level.³ Similar intricate connections among politics, historical events, and their commemorations, nationhood, and the media have been pointed out by scholars in other countries such as China (Kuever, 2012), Chile (Tjaden, 2012), México (Hoyo, 2012), Ireland and England (Scully, 2012), Malaysia (Chung, 2012), and Canada (Mock, 2012) as well as transnationally as in the case of Romani/Gypsy organizations (Kapralski, 2012), for example.

Irrespective of the undeniable influence of Phillipson’s line of thought on the TESOL community, and the forms it has taken in Argentina mentioned previously, several scholars have called our attention to recurrent pitfalls. In a review of Phillipson’s (1992) book, Canagarajah (1995) criticizes the lack of a sense of the classroom and the individual dimension in the work. That is, Phillipson misses the insider perspective in the debate, he himself leaving in the background the voices of those who have been disadvantaged by the spread of English: “What is sorely missed is the individual, the local, the particular. It is important to find out how

linguistic hegemony is carried out, lived, and experienced in the day-to-day life of the people and communities in the periphery” (Canagarajah, 1995, p. 592) through classroom-based research and the study of the individual using insider methodologies. In subsequent work, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996) and Phillipson (2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) acknowledge the need to anchor English in the local cultures and classrooms in the periphery but do nothing to bridge the gap. For instance, he brings forward as evidence of imperialism a study in India funded by the British Council, an organization from the center that he himself argues perpetuates the hegemony of English (Phillipson, 2001). In addition, which areas of the world does the word “worldwide” encompass for the author (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, p. 429)? Who are the “world’s people” (Phillipson, 2001, p. 185)? Europe for the most part, touching on Asia and Africa incidentally and completely relegating Latin America to the point of non-existence. And when a peripheral country from Latin America such as Argentina gets mentioned in passing (Phillipson, 2008a), I can say as an Argentine academic and citizen that the argument and the evidence cannot possibly be more anecdotal, second hand, and untrue to reality.

What the counterargument in the discourse of imperialism has made clear, overall, is that English is not necessarily detrimental to the native culture(s) or the identities of its users (a point that Phillipson acknowledges to some extent). In this article, I have attempted to exemplify this counterargument. Widdowson (1993) argued contemporaneously with Phillipson’s (1992) book that English expresses the sociocultural identities of the members of the host country, as learners appropriate English to express their self and communal identities. In addition, English can be used by the disadvantaged “to undermine that superiority [the superiority of English institutions], foster nationalism, and demand equality and freedom” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 464), in other words, “it can also be deployed as a weapon of the dispossessed” (Warschauer, 2000, p. 516). The regulatory function of the State in this respect in Argentina, in particular in education through the National Law of Education passed in 2006, acquires significance because it sees ELT (and education in general) as a way of developing the potentialities of individuals to actively construct their future.

Identity Issues

It is at this point that the connection with identity issues in language education becomes visible. One specific aspect of the sociocultural dimension of ELT includes various features of the learners’ individualities or, in other words, idiosyncrasies in terms of ethnicity, gender, social class, educational, historical, and cultural backgrounds, religion, sexual orientation, physical appearance, special capacities, and many other factors. Put differently, it foregrounds information from different layers such as the home, the community, the school,

the university, work, church, club, and so on (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011) that reveals who learners are, what they believe in, how they live, and what family, community, and school environments make a difference in how they learn, how they engage in literacy activities, and what role language learning plays in their lives (Norton & Toohey, 2011). “Knowing students individually also involves knowing them culturally,” that is, having “articulated knowledge of who students are individually-culturally” (Atkinson, 1999, p. 643). The key lies in research methodologies that foreground this focus on the individual and the local discussed above (Canagarajah, 1995, 2006) as well as longitudinal research carried out in community-based or classroom-based settings (Vavrus, 2002) to obtain a “sense of the classroom” (Canagarajah, 1995, p. 592).

Identity matters in this discussion because it is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with language (Kramsch, 2003; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Identity matters because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and because people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positionings. This applies to all facets of individuals’ lives, that is, this conception of identity transcends the sphere of education. The example of the recent exchange between the prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the President of Argentina over *Islas Malvinas* is revealing of identity issues and positionings at national and international levels. Furthermore, because identity is fragmentary, multiple, hybrid, complex, fluid, shifting, and contradictory, it is always possible to paint many different portraits of the same individual depending on the relationships and interactions in the person’s life that one chooses to examine. So somebody can be said to be aggressive and shy, for instance, depending on the spaces he or she is in and the relationships he or she enacts within those spaces. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner despicably referred to David Cameron as “arrogant, mediocre and stupid,” but he is surely perceived in different ways in Britain and, certainly too, within Argentina itself. The key here resides in the fact that even though individuals build “a plethora of identities for themselves” (Bhatia, 2008, p. 269), many times, static identities are unconsciously cast on them through such labels (Chen, 2005; Chien-Hui Kuo, 2003). Specifically, about Argentina now, many labels have been used to refer to its people such as *third world citizens*, *socio-economically disadvantaged populations*, and to refer students of English in this setting such as *English learners*, *limited English proficient*, and *struggling English readers*, among many others. The topic of labeling is significant in a discussion of identity because labels are monolithic constructs that simultaneously lead to and result from stereotyping (Kumaravadivelu, 1999) and have an impact on a person’s complex identifications. Vavrus (2002) narrates her remarkable experience, certainly unimaginable to many, as a witness of explicit and extreme labeling in two private

schools in Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, where students wore labels with the words “Shame Upon Me” for having spoken Swahili rather than English at school (p. 377).

This example by Vavrus focuses on language, simply because this article is about language, but others explore different aspects of a person’s complex social identifications and groupings, and their connection with nationalism, such as Wilton (2012) in India. The author investigates the relationship among different aspects of a person’s identifications, in this case, dress and gender, and concludes that

while choosing to wear the sari does not always reflect a conscious choosing of the Indian nation, the clothing choices of Indian women do allow them to navigate complex social and cultural identities in their everyday lives and reflect the importance of the “everyday” within theorising and explaining the construction and maintenance of nations. (Wilton, 2012, p. 190)

Hence, one primary role of educators in this direction in the 21st century in this area of the world is to engage students in resisting such static identities. The start is the recognition that the “acknowledgement and acceptance of multiple, complex cultural identities—which must have its foundation in really knowing one’s students individually-culturally . . . should be a first principle of ESL teaching and teacher preparation” (Atkinson, 1999, p. 644). The fact that *resistance* is a strong word that may take different forms has been well exemplified by Kumaravadivelu (1999), who describes the subtle, calm but powerful resistance of a group of students to their teacher’s imposition of text selections from the American culture—a resistance that manifested itself in silence and lack of cooperation in the classroom.

Some research efforts in Argentina are congruent with the calls from TESOL scholars that have recurrently stressed the need for classroom-based research as well as research on how individuals in different parts of the world live their literacy experiences in English (and in any language for that matter). Issues of culture, identity, and literacy in EFL contexts in this country are ingrained in these investigations (Porto, 2003b, 2007, 2008, 2009). Research under way at present explores how a group of Argentine college EFL learners perceive, examine, and interpret the cultural perspectives explicitly and implicitly embedded in EFL reading materials and the process of interpretation within this cultural dimension. This line of research conceptualizes reading as social and contextualized practice and does not confine the cultural dimension to one aspect of an individual’s “integrated cultural identities” (Maloo, Rubin, & Neville Miller, 2006, p. 255), namely race, ethnicity, or nationality (occasionally religion). Instead, these studies adhere to a view of culture that takes account of the complex interplay of multiple and varied aspects of one’s individuality (Rosaldo, 1993) or, in other words, idiosyncrasies in terms of gender, social class, educational, historical, and cultural backgrounds,

religion, sexual orientation, political orientation, physical appearance, special capacities, and many other factors. Put differently, we acknowledge, together with Atkinson (1999), that cultures are not static characteristics of an individual’s cognition (are not an in-the-head phenomenon) but rather are shared by members of a cultural group, are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated through time and generations, and are instantiated (materialized) in cultural artifacts such as rituals, paintings, narrative, video, classroom discussions, student productions (written, oral, or other), and so on.

Some Limitations

As can be expected, many dark sides exist, and need to be acknowledged here, regarding the description of the status and role of English in Argentina that I have presented. These include a mismatch between theory and reality in many areas of education (due to many factors, including social, cultural, and financial aspects); the educational consequences of the increasing gap between the rich and the poor; the actual low performance of Argentinean students in standardized international testing; a lack of emphasis on early and adult education; high drop-out rates in primary and secondary schooling; the clouding of the “equality of access” to education (which all educational policies advocate) by the failure to take account of “equality of outcome” (McKay & Warshauer Freedman, 1990, p. 399) or “equality of opportunity to achieve” (McCarty, 2003, p. 149) for a variety of reasons; a crisis of recruitment and retention of qualified teachers for the public school sector; consequently, poorly qualified teachers for public schools (because of low salaries and the low reputation associated with being a school teacher in this country); an inflexible and ineffective system of teacher regulation (regarding salaries, compensations, leaves of absence); and a teacher culture in public school contexts that tends to be dominated by a lack of commitment and dedication, absenteeism, and strikes (cf. teaching as a “sacred vocation,” Hargreaves, 2008, p. 29).

A final observation is related with the huge and demanding task that EFL educators in this country face in the 21st century in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram, 2000; Lazaraton, 2003; Phillipson, 2001; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996; Sercu, 2006; Starkey, 2007). These demands may be hard, if not impossible to satisfy, especially for educators working in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Ideally, a lot would be required of the educators of these linguistically and culturally diverse populations (Byram, 2000; Sercu, 2006; Starkey, 2007): a solid background in the EFL/ESL field; some knowledge about and command of their learners’ native language(s) (for instance, in immigration conglomerates and indigenous communities); and some knowledge of and more or less predisposing attitudes toward their heritage culture(s) as well as the members of these cultures. The complexity of this scenario points to the urgency of finding pedagogic proposals that address

the needs of these diverse learners and simultaneously reduce the pressure educators experience regarding their knowledge of multiple languages and cultures.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reflected on the role and status of English in Spanish-speaking Argentina, in particular, as it relates to the creation and development of the Argentine national identity through education, especially foreign language education and English teaching. In so doing, I have touched on cultural and identity issues in the current international scenario of ELT in the context of TESOL in this country. The brief historical overview of education in the country has revealed the influence of political, social, economic, ideological, and other factors that have played a role, and still do, in shaping the direction of educational policies at the provincial and national levels. The focus on foreign language education, with particular attention to ELT, has led to a discussion of the notion of linguistic and cultural imperialism in this country. I have offered examples of contrasting views on the matter, tied to the Argentine case. I have shown how these views interrelate with identity considerations and issues of nationalism by exemplifying with a key historical event in the country, namely, the Malvinas/Falklands war. Overall, what surfaces is the high regard for English in this country, perceived as additive rather than hegemonic, despite specific political, ideological, and military instances that offer testimony of concurrent imperialistic views. I have pointed out that the description of specific educational realities, along the lines I have undertaken in this article, is congruent with the need mentioned in the bibliography to understand how education in general (and ELT in particular) is lived in peripheral countries, an example of which is Argentina.

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Notes

1. The periods of dictatorships were 1930-1932; 1943-1946; 1955-1958; 1962-1963; 1966-1973; and 1976-1983.
2. It is interesting to see how different newspapers in each country have portrayed the news. In each case, the headlines, as well as the content of the articles and the sections in which the news appeared (for instance, front page, world news, politics, news about America, etc.), portray different positionings

toward each politician, their countries, their personal identities, and the identities of the Argentine and British nations. See the discussion on identity in the next section.

<http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2011/06/17/stupid-america-blasted-over-falklands>

The Times, World news, "Argentina accuses PM of arrogance on Falklands" <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/>

The Guardian, Americas section, "Argentinean president ridicules Cameron over Falklands" <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/17/kirchner-cameron-falklands-british-row>

On the front page in The Independent, "Argentina condemns David Cameron remarks" <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/argentina-condemns-david-cameron-remarks-2298939.html?origin=internalSearch>

La Nación, front page, "Inusual dureza de la Presidenta con Gran Bretaña por las Malvinas" <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1382226-cont-malvinas-dura-embestida-presidencial>

Clarín, Politics, "Cristina: Los argentinos nunca creímos en los puntos finales, ni en derechos humanos ni en Malvinas" http://www.clarin.com/politica/Cristina-argentinos-derechos-humanos-Malvinas_0_500350202.html

Página 12, front page, "Sólo la arrogancia puede hacer creer que se puede poner un punto final a la historia" <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/ultimas/20-170221-2011-06-16.html>

3. The notion of "national identity" is present in the Ministries of Education at the provincial and national levels.

See the education portal of the Argentine State (*Portal Educativo del Estado Argentino*) <http://www.educ.ar/educar/site/educar/sobre-las-efemerides-escolares-la-escuela-y-el-siglo-xxi.html>

<http://portal.educ.ar/noticias/educacion-y-sociedad/efemerides-2010-los-derechos-h.php>

or the Ministry of Culture and Education of the Province of Buenos Aires

<http://abc.gov.ar/>

<http://abc.gov.ar/docentes/efemerides/2deabril/index.html>

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