

Cultural Relations Collection

Edited by J.P. Singh



English in Cultural Relations

Martin Rose



English

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The British Council

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Foreword

I am delighted at the release and publication of the first contributions to what I hope will be an important collection on cultural relations and the mission of the British Council. Not always easy to describe and at times even more difficult to measure, when you see cultural relations in action you know what it is about: working over the long term with individuals, communities and institutions in a spirit of mutuality.

Our mission is not only about what we do but also how we engage. This is what distinguishes a cultural relations approach from other forms of public or cultural diplomacy. It is about activities and opportunities, but it is also about how relationships are formed and nourished. And in our case as the British Council it happens in over one hundred countries, working with the English language and through cultural engagement in the arts, education and skills.

This collection provides an overview and analysis of diverse examples of this distinctive cultural relations approach and how it is used to further the British Council's charitable objects, and how the approach benefits both the UK and the people with whom we work. The ways of working apply whether convening the global leaders of international higher education, or building partnerships with civil society organisations or artists within a single country. The cultural relations thread also applies across the British Council's largest programmes, including those such as English Language teaching which deliver income.

Over the past decade the British Council has been consolidating its activities in order to increase the commonality across different countries and regions. Yet a cultural relations approach will always necessitate some variety, because mutuality involves degrees of exchange, co-production and adaptation to local needs. An example in this collection shows how in 2016 within Shakespeare Lives, a global programme celebrating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and operating to consistent global production values, a small, country-based arts investment in Nigeria saw the production and touring of a locally relevant Shakespeare play performed in Nigerian Pidgin.

The collection also reflects on the long view and includes two contributions which draw on historical investigation to understand the British Council's role over many decades in Burma/Myanmar and the Soviet Union/Russia, drawing on deep scholarship of post-colonialism and the Cold War respectively. It is to be applauded that the editors and authors allow such critical reflection, avoiding the risk of self-congratulation and enabling organisational learning and growth.

Reading these contributions together as a collection reminds me that while all these different areas constitute cultural relations in their own right, together they add up to more than the sum of their parts. Hard work in one area leads to networks and builds the trust that enables the British Council to undertake activities in different areas and with diverse kinds of partners.

It is not always easy to quantify cultural relations or the impact of an individual institution like the British Council over the arc of time and geography. Today, great effort is put into evaluating both the programmatic and organisational impact of our work. Yet the methodologies to assess the effects of multiple decades of engagement are still developing. Friends made, understanding gained and trust increased are things we know to be important. Proving their worth is harder.

Historical investigation helps, but in the end, as Martin Rose says of cultural relations in his essay in this collection: "It has been said of diplomacy that its success can be measured by wars not fought.... The same might be said of the British Council, though it operates at a more human level with individuals and communities rather than nations." Seen in this way, cultural relations is as much about the absence of negatives as the presence of positives. Cultural relations delivers the calm, reflective response as well as the bustling, creative one. This collection, authored by both well-known scholars and authoritative practitioners shows both. And it does so in a way that I hope you find to be accessible, enlightening and compelling. I commend it to you with enthusiasm.

Sir Ciarán Devane,
Chief Executive, *British Council*

Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

The British Council is often viewed as an organisation that ‘does’, and it does a great deal, but it is also a ‘thinking’ and learning organisation and in recent years has begun to increase its investment in commissioning, using and sometimes undertaking research. It does so for three key reasons.

As an organisation that provides thought leadership in cultural relations it is important that the British Council contributes to, demonstrates and shares a thorough understanding of cultural relations, and of how this approach contributes to the United Kingdom’s attraction and trusted connections in international relations. It does this, for example, through regular studies on the influence and measurement of soft power that track perceptions of the UK, particularly among young people across the world.

Second, we commission and undertake research as trusted expert practitioners in the thematic areas in which we work: in the arts, international education, English language teaching and assessment, and activities undertaken largely with young people in communities and civil society organisations, such as through the Active Citizens Programme. In each of these areas we convene informed debates based on the provision, sharing or curating of new knowledge, in many cases disseminated in well regarded publications and series.

A third reason is to increase the evidence and understanding for ourselves and others of what works to generate cultural relations impact and why. We seek to demonstrate engagement of the highest standard to supporters and partners, while also building our capacity as an organisation to benefit from using research and evidence, both our own and work by others’, in order to make strategic decisions, engage global stakeholders, and exchange knowledge. Together, each of these research areas contributes useful new knowledge to further our charitable purpose through generating new insights and understanding in areas relevant to our work, in turn enhancing our ability to influence policy or to impact debates.

This cultural relations collection arose out of an early initiative when the British Council first established the small research team that would become part of the new global function led from the Research and Policy Insight Directorate. In commissioning a series of in-house and external studies it had three key aims. The first was to clarify our understanding of cultural relations as an encompassing venture that permeated all our work, whether specific to a sector or not and whether income generating or not. Here the contributions on English language and on assessment are particularly illustrative. The second aim was to provide an opportunity to country offices and regional teams, through a competitive bidding process, to commission research on initiatives that were able to illustrate a cultural relations approach in action at a local level. The fascinating contribution on Shakespeare in Nigerian Pidgin stems from this call. A third aim was to grapple with the challenges of understanding and demonstrating impact when reviewing the British Council’s work in an area of activity or in a country over a long period of time. The contributions on science diplomacy and on Myanmar fit here and demonstrate the richness of reviewing cultural relations over time, alongside the challenges of making assessments across the long arc of history.

This cultural relations collection has provided an opportunity to show the work of the British Council in its rich diversity, linked by this common thread and demonstrating that as with the best partnerships, mutuality in approach often produces things that are not what were originally designed, which are often better as a result and that sometimes grow in ways over which no individual or organisation has control.

Dan Shah
Director Research and Policy Insight
British Council

Editor's Note

Language and imagined community go together. Historian Benedict Anderson (1991) provided this explanation for the birth of nations in Europe; the rise of the vernacular printing press allowed communities to imagine political boundaries along linguistic lines. Recent scholarship has extended Anderson's thesis to the imagining of a global community through a lingua franca, namely the English language (Grewal, 2009). A national or a global language does not obliterate difference and conflict within a community. By the same token, it also allows members of a community to communicate, the first step toward empathy, trust, and understanding.

Facilitating the spread of English language has been an important part of the British Council's strategy toward fostering intercultural relations since its foundation in 1934. During the 1941–1993 period, the British Council's collaboration with Cambridge resulted in a more instrumental approach to teaching and testing of the English language. In the 21st century, the British Council's role in facilitating the spread of the English has returned to its 1934 purpose toward fostering cultural relations and is linked to Britain's soft power and attractiveness (Weir and O'Sullivan, 2017).

This contribution by a former British Council professional and scholar provides an in-depth analysis of the factors that facilitate intercultural relations through the English language. The author does not ignore the hegemonic aspects of a dominant language but shows how trust and reciprocal cultural relations can nevertheless arise. Moreover, in the current context (dominated as it is by digital communication and artificial intelligence) modes and manners of communication in English as it perpetually meanders and morphs, slip inexorably from anyone's control – itself a characteristic of contemporary cultural relations.

*'I'm working in Homash. Do you know it?'
said one young woman to me. 'They speak
by regurgitation. Pellets embedded with
enzymes in different combinations are
sentences, which their interlocutors eat'*

China Miéville, Embassytown

Introduction and Background

There is no simple way of accounting for the place and impact of English in cultural relations because there are so many different Englishes; and because, for the British Council, English has two very different roles. On the one hand it is the language of cultural relations, both a super-highway, and counter-intuitively a barrier, to intercultural communication. On the other, it is a tradable commodity which is coveted by millions of consumers and would-be consumers across the world. These two roles might be described as *English-as-Vector* and *English-as-Commodity*. It need hardly be said that the two overlap, and that navigating that overlap is a crucial challenge for any anglophone cultural relations organisation, amongst which the British Council is the premier. Both roles embody considerable risks as well as great potential benefits and staying within the overlap requires deft and thoughtful helmanship.

The first, *English-as-Vector*, is a treasure and a handicap. A treasure, because English is a vast, omnivorous language, spoken in some degree by as many as 1.5 billion people, greedily absorbing new words and new concepts, constantly reformulating itself, finding supple and imaginative ways of expressing thought – a lingua franca that allows, or seems to allow, instant communication between its speakers across the globe; but a handicap, because it is mentally all-enveloping and can all too easily become a trap which closes down the possibilities offered by other languages. Barry Lopez (1986, p. 274) wrote of Hopi that it is “a language that projects a world of movement and changing relationships, a continuous ‘fabric’ of time and space. It is better suited than the English language to describing quantum mechanics”. That kind of insight is very hard to generate and sustain in a world in which English and only English is more and more widely spoken, and in which Hopi is not.

The British, especially the English, are notoriously averse to language-learning – the declining figures for second language competence in the UK are shocking, however much interpretative gloss is applied to them: two-thirds of young Britons are incapable of holding even a simple conversation in a language other than English (*Languages for the Future*, 2017). This language-poverty is common to the Anglophone world, where the very universality of English breeds a widely held assumption that other languages are not really necessary – at best a *nice-to-have* rather than a *must-have* – and that the effort spent in learning them is more profitably deployed elsewhere. Everything that can be said can, it is widely believed, be said in English. This supposition has important ethical as well as practical implications for the British Council’s work, and if it were ever to become accepted would be a clear repudiation of the mutuality that underlies cultural relations.

The promotion of linguistic diversity and multilingual competence is though, as it should be, an acknowledged element of the British Council’s mission, because English monoglossia at the expense of other languages is dangerously like species extinction. Nonetheless this is not as clearly understood as it once was. The language-competence of British Council officers who come from the UK around the world has dropped off dramatically in the last thirty years, in large part because of the serious reduction of non-English language-training (though also perhaps because of the pre-existing language poverty of young Britons): there is a strong streak of rugged scepticism about the importance of foreign languages not just in the UK as a whole, but within the British Council itself. By reflecting, in this dimension, British society, the British Council is doing something perfectly understandable, but that ‘something’ risks undermining its capacity for intercultural understanding and for cultural relations.

By contrast, *English-as-Commodity* has a superficial simplicity to it. There are reckoned to be about 600 million people currently studying English around the world, on top of perhaps 900 million native and second language speakers. One recent estimate of the potential further market for English learners in the next five years consists of a scarcely comprehensible (and perhaps scarcely credible) 718 million people; and the same study maintains that the current \$28 billion per year value of this global market is likely to increase by 80 per cent over the same period (Global English, 2018). Clearly it would be irresponsible not to take this market very seriously: language-teaching is a core activity, perhaps the core activity, of the British Council, and the revenue that it generates sustains the cultural relations enterprise at a time when unhypothecated government funding has sunk to around 14 per cent of the organisation's budget. But it would also be irresponsible not to reflect strenuously on how this business intersects with cultural relations: is it in itself a 'cultural relations activity' as well as a business? Is this answer consistent across the board, or do different facets of the *English-as-Commodity* business have different cultural relations impacts? Above all, when we claim cultural relations impact and value for English-teaching we need to ask: to what extent is this intrinsic, and a genuine claim, and to what extent an ex post facto justification for a commercial activity? Understanding and exploring these questions is a prerequisite of success in cultural relations.

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What are cultural relations? The phrase has been used in many different ways, not always with understanding – a recent study notes glumly that “there is no universally agreed definition of cultural relations” (*Cultural Value*, 2018). Cultural relations, (hereafter 'CR') dawdles at the edges of 'Public Diplomacy' and 'Soft Power' and loiters at one end of 'Full Spectrum Diplomacy', sometimes primly, sometimes promiscuously, often seeming to seek the protective cover of the latest doctrine fashionable in government. The phrase describes the whole infinitely various fabric of unofficial international contacts between people and institutions around the world. When it is purposefully practised, as it is by the British Council, I suggest that CR has three fundamental characteristics: it is non-governmental, it is long-term and it is mutual.¹

This is of course an untenably purist definition, not least because the British Council is willy-nilly very closely linked to government as a Non-Departmental Public Body with its 'grant-in-aid' budget (however small) allocated through the Foreign Office. It was easier to maintain in the days before the internet, when the British Council provided a slow portal through which CR between countries largely passed. Those days are gone, and CR has become an anarchic ocean of infinite and instant micro-transactions in which the place of national cultural institutions is less clear. Today, more than half the world's population has access to the internet (a figure expected to rise to 60 per cent by 2025) and they all conduct their own varieties of CR, mostly through smartphones. Universities, orchestras, libraries, aeroplane enthusiasts, proselytes, pornographers, scholars, Scrabble-players, terrorists, writers and sports fans communicate freely without mediation, if not always clearly, and as often as not in English. Before long the technological stampede of AI and automatic translation will transform the access to this virtual CR world of those who don't speak English and won't need to.

Although the British Council's governmental alignment remains clear and strong, and although its operational cycle is increasingly tied to short-term funding and reporting horizons, those three characteristics are worth remembering at all times. They are not absolutes: a study of attitudes in the Middle East more than a decade ago stressed that in respondents' views the British Council was clearly close to government and embassy, but its behaving maturely and with balance, like the BBC, as *though* it were independent, was a good second best (Barakat, 2005). Essentially the CR role of the British Council is a performance done with integrity, bridging the pressures that are put upon a very hybrid institution. Its CR supports and embodies national policies without necessarily directly advocating or delivering them, and it does its best to work with one eye on a longer time-horizon than any government 'of the day' or an ambassador on a three or four year posting.

¹ I outlined this at greater length in an earlier essay (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004).

Above all, the British Council understands CR as a two-way street, a long-running and constantly developing network of consistently managed relationships that works, if it works, because of the trust engendered by mutuality. The greatest of all failures in CR is to forget this core truth: that listening is as important as talking; and that trust is to be earned, not built. Steven Shapin (1994), the great historian of science, described cultural relations beautifully in these words, which he actually wrote about trust:

Trust is, quite literally, the great civility ... It provides a set of suppositions about self, other and the world, which embed trust and which permit both consensus and civil dissensions to occur. A world-known-in-common is built up through acts of trust, and its properties are decided through the civil conversations of trusting individuals ... The ultimate incivility is the public withdrawal of trust in another's access to the world, and in another's moral commitment to speaking the truth about it: those who cannot be trusted to speak reliably and sincerely about the world may not long belong to the community of discourse. It is not just that we do not agree with them; it is that we have withdrawn the possibility of disagreeing with them.

CR is about maintaining that civil universe of trust in which effective and fruitful dialogue takes place between people of very different cultures. The "civil conversation of trusting individuals" is the British Council's bread-and-butter, and for our purposes a good part, but not all, of it is conducted in English.

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In terms of language, what does this mean? The terms of CR are set, in practice, by the micro-transactions, the Brownian Motion, of the cultural ocean. At present these resolve themselves into a number of key facts. The first is that English is a world language, no longer the property of Britain or the US or any other nation: almost twice as many people (610 million) speak it as a second language as it has native speakers (370 million); and as many again (600 million) are studying it at one level or another. Online, 54 per cent of the world's most visited ten million home pages² and 55 per cent of the web's content is in English,³ though both figures are probably declining slowly.

But only 25 per cent of the web's users speak English at all,⁴ which indicates one of the strongest 'remote' pressures today for learning English. The appetite for acquiring the language is gigantic. The only world language spoken by greater numbers of people (1.1 billion) is Mandarin Chinese, and the number of Chinese speakers studying English (currently estimated at 400 million) compared with the number of English speakers learning Mandarin, suggests that Mandarin is not yet in a position to compete for the place that English holds. In terms of internet content, Chinese is reckoned (with various statistical caveats) to account for 1.6 per cent of the top ten million websites in the world (although China has a very specific internet environment, meaning that top websites by traffic are not necessarily comparable). There is a sort of linguistic osmosis at work across this discrepancy, which will presumably not last for ever, but which is a powerful motor today.

There is a widespread assumption that 'to know me is to love me' – in other words that sharing a language leads to communication, that communication is by definition positive and that learning a language brings with it both the cultural infrastructure of the language learned and a positive disposition to native speakers of that language, their culture – and their country. A recent writer suggests that "the British Council positions its work in English Language Teaching as contributing to intercultural communication – the promotion of understanding between people of diverse nationalities and cultures – as well as to economic and cultural enrichment ... worldwide" (Erling, 2016). That hypothesis is worth testing, and a good place to start is the question of Great Britain's own position in relations to what we still often think of as 'our' language.

It isn't, of course. English mutates fast both vertically (between generations) and horizontally (across cultures and nations). Anyone British of a certain age who has listened quizzically to their children's English or with quiet pleasure to the English spoken by an educated Indian or Japanese or Chinese friend will know that their English is as labile and expressive as the English that he or she speaks, but it is not quite the same language (and we can't speak it without risking parody and error).

² Source: 'Historical trends in the usage of content languages for websites'. Retrieved from https://w3techs.com/technologies/history_overview/content_language (accessed on 22 September 2019).

³ Source: 'Usage of content languages for websites'. Retrieved from https://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language/all (accessed on 22 September 2019).

⁴ Source: 'Number of Internet Users by Language'. Retrieved from <https://www.internetworldstats.com/> from Miniwatts Marketing Group, (accessed on 22 September 2019).

Even between native English speakers there are quite deep differences – the differences that Bernard Shaw (supposedly) played with when he spoke of England and America as two nations separated by a common language. I recall with wry amusement the first time a senior Canadian official suggested to me that I bring my family ‘cottaging’ with him and his wife the following weekend. But these are the Near Abroad of linguistic difference, and Shaw’s *aperçu* holds good on a global scale: a Chinese speaking to a Mexican in English is speaking a language that is no longer ‘ours’ at all. It has been called ‘Globish’, to distinguish it from the English spoken by anglophone native speakers: it has a life all of its own that is quite beyond our control.

Arguably, mutuality is more readily achieved in Globish than in the Queen’s English, with all its social and cultural markers and its centuries-long baggage-train of hierarchy and deference; but native speakers are not automatically easy or fluent in it. It is hard for them to enter the level playing field of ‘non-anglophone’ English for reasons that are not just linguistic. This distance, this veil drawn across the corridors of our own English language, can be very disconcerting; but the question of what sort of English we teach is crucial to the British Council’s success as well as its self-understanding.

One area where the question arises forcefully is the fast-growing business of EMI, or ‘English as Medium of Instruction’. EMI is the teaching not just of English, but in and through English, often as a second language: it is a massive and fascinating experiment in education through a second or third language which is, as one recent writer says, “pandemic in proportion” (Chapple, 2015). It is an extraordinary phenomenon, and one which troubles many observers: unlike other disciplines (CLIL, or Content and Language Integrated Learning, for example) which are methodologies in which any language can function as the ‘L’, EMI is indissolubly linked to English, “with all the geopolitical and sociocultural implications that this may entail” (Dearden, 2014), and the substitution of another language – French for example, as in FMI, is just as specific and just as problematic.

‘EMI’ describes two rather different, linked phenomena. The first is the adoption of English as the medium of instruction in the education systems of countries across the world where English is not a first language (and in a number of countries where it is a first language).

This is done for many reasons, but above all to give a competitive edge to their students and labour-force in today’s dog-eats-dog international economy of knowledge and production, where English-speaking is seen as a marker (even a proxy measure) of high quality education and IT literacy. The second phenomenon is the rapid change in HE classrooms and lecture-halls across the world, where vastly expanding international student flows are leading in the UK (for example) to “EMI programmes where anglophone users of English are likely to be in the minority or absent, including many postgraduate programmes ...” (Baker and Fang, 2019). Both phenomena provoke justification and concern: there are clearly significant benefits (though to whom these benefits accrue is not always clear), but there are also strong downside risks, and both pose serious ethical questions.

The motives for the take-up of English by foreign education systems are pretty clear. There is a strong awareness of the fiercely competitive environment in which not only individual graduates and workers, but also whole national economies, must prepare to compete. English is widely seen as the entry-ticket to an international and open-ended economy. The private sector is generally the driver, offering an ‘edge’ to its students over those in the less privileged public systems (Dearden, 2014). The urge to better one’s children through an education that is, however slightly, above the average is very strong; but there are both cultural-political and pedagogical problems. Culturally, the detachment of education from the native language is contentious, particularly at school level, and ‘language nationalism’ is a constant backdrop to such efforts. It is not always rational, particularly in countries where there is already a sharp hierarchy of languages, but it is powerful. In Morocco the tenacious and class-driven monopoly of French (FMI is the name of the game in elite schools and faculties in many former French colonies) is itself in competition with Arabic (the language of the ‘Arab nation’ and of Islam) and there were tremendous scenes less than a decade ago with members of the Moroccan parliament waving their order papers and shouting in furious protest at the teaching of French and demanding Arabisation, despite the fact that a surprising proportion of MPs were themselves illiterate in both. The reception of any non-native language of instruction is coloured by the colonial experience and the emotional, cultural and political freight that the language carries. It can be a strong negative, or the opposite – and taking the Moroccan example once more, it is notable that attitudes to English are hugely positive precisely because it is not the language either of the colonial power or of the post-colonial ruling class.

It forms a neural bypass around the socio-political blockages in a sclerotic and inequitable society (Rose, 2014).

This leads us to another major drawback in EMI, the widespread perception that it reinforces class hierarchy and privilege by giving preferential access to those able to pay, and those able to support classroom learning at home. It can also reinforce, or undermine, deliberately or accidentally, ethnic hierarchies: “The official use of English in Rwandan schools may create new inequalities because it benefits the Tutsi who are more likely to have English Language backgrounds” (King, 2011). It may, in other words, offer a leg up, but that leg is more readily available to those with their other leg already firmly planted – those with privilege and money – than to those without. It also poses pedagogical problems. This is hardly surprising, perhaps particularly in multilingual societies with underlying and tightly linked problems of illiteracy. In Morocco (where King Hassan II famously observed that “My people are illiterate in five languages”) the traumatic problems of illiteracy caused by attempting to teach reading through classical Arabic (*Fusha*) to infants whose native languages are Darija (colloquial Maghrebi Arabic) or Berber (any one of three major dialects) are obvious, and made no easier by the fact that all the most desirable and economically useful university education is in French. In consequence Morocco is a country disfigured not just by what the French call *analphabétisme* – illiteracy – but *illettrisme* – an aversion, or failure to read by those who more or less could (Rose, 2014). Elsewhere there are equivocal reports: “In Hong Kong recent large-scale studies tend to suggest that EMI may help with L2 learning, but is not necessarily beneficial to academic progress,” writes Julie Dearden, adding disarmingly that discussion of the linguistic objectives of such programmes is necessary “if it is not to *remain* [my italics] a sclerotic practice with limited benefits” (Dearden, 2014).

The conflation of language objectives and academic objectives is a particular problem: it would be surprising if EMI didn't confer some language benefits, but it depends on high quality teacher-training which is often not available and on a restructuring of whole education systems to accommodate the classroom and post-graduation needs of students at all levels. This is frequently impossible. Airy optimism often glosses over the fact that six to eight years of English ‘as a subject’ (EaS) are generally reckoned to be necessary before successful academic study through the language, and “the evidence-based position on Mol (Medium of Instruction) taken by major donors and development partners is one that supports a mother tongue-based multilingual education model of basic education”. As for the British Council, the 2006 ‘Juba Statement of Principles’ emphatically recognised the crucial importance of the mother tongue, stressing its central role until academic linguistic competence is achieved. “Fluency in English is best served through strengthening the teaching of EaS. Therefore, EMI at primary school level in low or middle income countries is not always beneficial nor is it a policy or practice [the British Council] supports.”

There is very little suggestion in the literature that whole swathes of pupils from schools and universities across the world are automatically better disposed to the UK because their education has been conducted in English. But the movement of students out of their own countries and into receiving university systems should perhaps have greater impact. Although there is a growing body of theory asserting that English language should be seen as a route to a non-national, or transnational, sense of self (often described as ‘intercultural citizenship’), that bridge is not easy to cross. Chinese learners in China may view English “less as the language of the ‘other’ and more as part of the intercultural and multilingual, or translanguaging, resources of its users” but “study-abroad experiences do not guarantee development in intercultural awareness and citizenship”, and not infrequently have the opposite effect (Baker and Fang, 2019). There may very well be the opportunity to develop non culture-specific skills through non-specific English, but if the cultural experience of the host country is diluted or effaced by the absence of anglophone natives, it is not clear what – apart from fee income – the benefit to the UK actually is. Certainly, the figures for student satisfaction in Britain for 2019 show the Chinese to have the highest proportion of students to feel unprepared for their British university (29 per cent) and the lowest to feel well-prepared (49 per cent) (Neves and Hillman, 2019).

There has been a reaction in some countries where EMI has progressed too far for the comfort of natives, who see their own language and education as being diluted and marginalised. EMI has begun to be challenged in Qatar and Hungary (Dearden, 2014); and a pushback is underway in the Netherlands where government proposals are being developed for compulsory Dutch language lessons for overseas university students (who study overwhelmingly in English). This last has provoked an intriguing degree of outrage from some Dutch HE leaders, who seem to find it hard to explain in intellectual or educational terms why it is that the anglicisation of large swathes of their education system (as opposed to fluency in English on the part of Dutch students) is good in other than cash terms (Matthews, 2019).

So, the question of whether EMI serves cultural relations is a vexed one. In a mechanical sense, clearly, inasmuch as it improves command of the English language it facilitates communication both between second-language speakers of English and between native and second-language speakers. But the vast majority of learners, whether or not they are in EMI – those 400 million Chinese studying English for example – will probably never have the opportunity to communicate ‘interculturally’ in English. And the student in Britain is increasingly insulated from the experience of British life: “much of the preparation for student mobility assumes a correlation between the language of instruction in an institution, a local host community and a national culture and language ... [but] such connections can no longer be taken for granted” (Baker and Fang, 2019). And as this paradox continues to develop, it seems dubious that ‘mass’ EMI will do much to serve CR – or indeed to serve the more pragmatic aims of promoting, through CR, the longer-term economic and security objectives of the UK.

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This is a core paradox. On the one hand the spread of English allows much ‘easier’ communication between people across the world for whom it provides a common language (though it plays its part in undermining a British capacity to communicate in other languages); but on the other, the very ubiquity of English and its progressive deculturation make it less effective as a CR vector. Or rather, to be more precise, the ‘O2O’ or ‘Other-to-Other’⁵ CR that it promotes is less and less British, and the goodwill accruing to the UK, because it is the source of language-training, is more and more attenuated. The question therefore is whether the objectives of the British Council and the British government are served by this process of dilution. It could be argued that the more altruistic objectives of the British Council are served by ‘O2O’ CR (though I have quite serious doubts as to whether there is really much in the way of planned cultural payload in the teaching of Globish), but that the assumptions about national promotion through language are not. If this is the case, it is becoming more and more difficult to remain, credibly, in the overlap between *English-as-Vector* and *English-as-Commodity* – the epicentre of CR through language.

It has been worth lingering over EMI because it is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the notion that language exposure and learning, in themselves, breed affection and affinity with a sort of assured automaticity. It is instructive, by contrast, to fish from the British Council’s past another example of English as quintessential cultural relations which gives a very different and less equivocal account of the power of the English language.

This comes from 1989 and the years immediately following, when the Communist bloc – Russia’s empire in East and Central Europe – came tumbling down. What followed was political, economic and cultural dislocation on a scale that hadn’t been seen in Europe since the end of the war, and the response from the West was large-scale support in reconstruction. Britain offered, through the Know How Fund (KHF) and the Joint Assistance Units (JAUs), among other forms of support, training in the financial service industries, central banking, political process, economic and industrial management, stock market creation and other areas; and the British Council moved fast to establish a moral and practical infrastructure of language.

⁵ The present author’s phrase: it seemed unfair to write about English Language Teaching without adding at least one acronym of my own to the forest of TLAs in which the vast herds of ELT students roam and graze.

Reading about it thirty years later, it offers a stark contrast to the EMI boom. For a start, there is a refreshing diffidence about the way it is described. “Those with academic integrity,” says an evaluation report of 1996:

are rightly cautious of establishing simple cause-and-effect relationships between language-teaching and the long-term development of the education and economy of a nation; even so there can be no doubt that such widespread language teaching and the accompanying developments of teacher training and curriculum planning will have widespread effects on the infrastructure of the society as a whole (Pugsley and Kershaw, 1996).

That is really an epitome of cultural relations; and the report is a handbook of the cultural relations impact of English, unfolding a clear understanding of several fundamental principles: the most important of these is that the English language is *not* just a commodity, but an immensely powerful vector of change, value, principle and solidarity, “a symbol and means”, as the authors put it, “of cultural diversity and economic links with the rest of the world”. The possible long-term advantages to Great Britain did not escape those planning and implementing this huge range of language programmes – they were all deeply involved in the FCO-led Know How Fund and all that hung from it, to the extent that Ann Lewis of the FCO commented later that “we were rescued by the British Council” (*Transformational Diplomacy*, 2013) – but the British Council’s on-the-ground priority in its language and education work was to provide the continuum of solidarity, shared practice and international fellowship that English represented, while doing what they could to consolidate English as the lingua franca of post-Russian East and Central Europe. “English represented for millions of people a release from the constraints of past political regimes. It provided access to English-speaking cultures worldwide, notably those in Britain. It provided a means of communication with all those speakers of other languages whose one common language was English.”

At one level this is not wholly dissimilar to the EMI rationale: but at another it is fundamentally so. There is not a word here – in the British Council’s account of its actions – of soft power, or security benefits, or the prosperity agenda. To be sure, these notions were *present avant la lettre* in the thinking, but for those who delivered it, the key words here are cultural diversity, release, access and communication – along with networking, welcome, solidarity and professionalism. The destination was the same as that planned by diplomats, but the route was different, and the ethos of the journey very much one shaped by cultural relations.

Interestingly this cut both ways. Lord Waldegrave, who had been an FCO minister with responsibility for this area, talked eloquently (if a little quaintly and perhaps a little more aristocratically than a Council officer might have done) about the ethos of return, of welcoming East and Central Europe back into the family:

Here we had people who were the people Paddy Leigh Fermor had been staying with, or sleeping with, in 1934. They were part of the old family of western nations who were trying – after a nightmare period of first Nazi occupation and then Communist occupation – to get back to where they would have been; most of them anyway ...

It doesn’t seem very likely by 1989 that there were actually more than a very few of those who Leigh Fermor had been staying or sleeping with 55 years before still trying to get back to where they would have been – but the point is aptly enough made. For those who received the education, training, books, language opportunities and international access that the English programmes represented, there was no doubt about their impact.

There was a widespread sense of joining an international confraternity of the speakers and the teachers of English, an experience carefully fostered by the British Council. “For someone coming from a small, often unknown, country,” said a Romanian teacher, “it is a comfort to know that there is a way in which I can be a member of a big family.”

⁶ The address of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

⁷ The London offices of British Council until 2020.

The Russian language was dropped like a hot potato – compulsory Russian was eliminated from the curricula of all East Bloc countries between 1989 and 1992. The British Council for its part did everything it could to provide what one respondent called “an oasis of peaceful and warm western culture in a cold town” and another, simply, “a fairy tale”. It was inclusive, welcoming and accommodating – and it was transformative. “If change is to be implemented,” said another teacher, “then foreign language classes are a propitious means of learning and developing democratic ideas” (Pugsley and Kershaw, 1996).

So, what then is the difference between the hell-for-leather stampede into EMI and the rapid-response rollout of English (and management training and academic and training links) programmes in post-Communist Europe? The most obvious is the nature of the offering. In Eastern and Central Europe, what was offered was training, support for transformation and an ethic of international solidarity built around language. The emphasis was not on teaching students directly, but on training teachers to do so, and supporting them with materials, books, professional organisation, contacts and long-term encouragement and support. It was, in fact, an act of social and cultural reconstruction through English, with profound impact on thinking, organisation and practices well beyond the teaching profession. It was a cultural relations initiative in the purest sense – largely non-governmental at ground level, long-term and mutually beneficial – on the coat-tails of which material benefits rode. English was a vector for far more than simply language. Crucially everyone, from Downing Street through King Charles Street⁶ to Spring Gardens⁷ saw it as “the restoration, post-Cold War, to the European family, of a range of countries that were once part of it” (*Transformational Diplomacy*, 2013). It worked as well as it did because it was at the same time both a pragmatic and an ethically driven enterprise which empowered, in the case of the British Council, staff and contractors on the ground to improvise magnificently within an understood framework.

Conversely, the EMI explosion seems to work largely from the top downward: accounts of EMI programmes in-country centre on ministries of education, and while they undoubtedly can have pedagogical benefits, it is clear from the literature that in practice these are often dubious. Local political agendas are very often not cultural-relations focused (the Moroccan English Baccalaureate is a case in point, initiated by the Ministry of Education to provide political cover for the expansion of its French equivalent); and can have negative impacts on literacy, social equity and academic achievement. As for EMI in the sense of the feeding-frenzy of international competition for globally mobile students, it often seems that *commodity* comes an easy first, with *vector* at best an afterthought. A vignette of this slightly squalid business is provided in 2014 by the then French minister of education, Geneviève Fioraso, proponent of a policy of wider English use in French universities, who asked: “Which is the largest student-exporting country in the world? India. How many Indian students do we have? 3000.” She concluded: “*Nous sommes ridicules*” (Floc’h, 2014). She might as well have been talking about tractors, or diesel engines or sheep.

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There are many examples of effective *English-as-Vector* work. A good one is the long-term existence of the English School in Madrid, an institution that has been criticised by British Council detractors for being socially exclusive, a business peripheral to the British Council’s core mission, but which after the fall of the Franco regime demonstrated its worth by turning out quietly to have educated most of Spain’s post-Franco liberal establishment in English – non-governmental, long-term and very mutual. A serious problem with much successful CR work of this sort is its obliquity, and its resistance to short-term quantitative evaluation: the notion of a consciously planned chain of contingent outcomes as represented by a ‘Theory of Change’ is seductive to planners and funders but often fails to account for the greatest successes in CR, which are difficult to quantify and frequently surprising even to their authors. When the Romanian teacher quoted above talked of “an oasis of peaceful and warm western culture in a cold town”, she was describing something vital, evanescent and precious, but hard to plan.

⁶ Where not otherwise stated, quotations are from this source.

In Baghdad before the 1990 Gulf War the British Council in Waziriyah was an extraordinary place, not because of its having been written into a Theory of Change (it would have been quite a Theory of Change that charted the Iraqi environment over the next two, let alone twenty, years) but because of the unplannable and somehow autonomous atmosphere of inviolability that it developed, as one of the very few places in that city where a young man and woman could go respectably together – and where they felt relatively safe from the ubiquitous police listeners who infested every other public space. A kind of magic circle. After leaving Baghdad, I set up the annual Anglo-Italian conference in a Charterhouse at Pontignano, which the London correspondent of *Il Sole 24 Ore* described a decade later as “a place where British and Italians speak differently to each other, of course – but just as important, a place where Italians speak differently to one another”. That is the deeper potential of an English language classroom too, a place where the underlying nature, tone and ethic of conversation is subtly transformed. At its best it is magical, and it is pure cultural relations in action.

It often seems that there is an inherent tension, a contradiction even, between the progressive denationalisation of English and the determination to credit it with serving national objectives, bearing national ‘values’ and earning benefits for Britain. All these assertions are still, of course, possible and true, but only to a diminishing extent. The ever-growing global and non-national role of English militates against pure national benefit: there remain of course national benefits to be sought and won in certain kinds of work, but the centre-of-gravity is inexorably pulled towards quantity and monetisation.

That doesn’t stop us talking about values, those elusive qualities that the English language allegedly delivers along with communication skills, like the crabs and starfish in a ship’s ballast-tanks.

That of course is the quintessence of a good teacher: she conveys a sense of consistent meaning, importance and value (in the singular) through whatever she teaches, as much by method and personality as through content. In this, cultural relations practice is very close to really good teaching. Excellence in both is in large part the creation of an atmosphere and a safe place where people communicate in ways they did not know they could, discovering things that may have immediate and practical relevance, but which reveal deeper truths about the way of being of the teacher and the society which she in some sense represents.

A colleague described to me recently the cultural relations impact of exams in an East European country immediately after the fall of Communism: “The earth-shaking discovery was not the exam itself, but the fact that they weren’t allowed to talk during it: after a lifetime of making sure through collaboration that no one failed at the hands of the system, they were being introduced to competitive individualism.”

In much the same way it strikes me that the defining characteristic of British society is a negative: it consists of all the places, like the Baghdad garden, and activities from which the state – the government – is absent. One of those revelatory details, which I have watched have an impact on people in many different countries, is the discovery that not only do Britons not have to carry their driving licence with them in the car when driving; but that if stopped by the police they have 72 hours to present it at a police station. This is entirely trivial in England, but an astonishing discovery to Iraqis, Italians, Egyptians and even Canadians. If the British Council wants to convey the singularity of British culture in the classroom, it is incidental details like this, or the right to form private associations, or the national abhorrence of identity cards, that should be discreetly visible through its language work – not beekeepers and bowlers, or bleached and non-specific Globish neutralities. These are the sorts of specificity that could shape our language teaching if we wished really to use English as an effective, but non-political, vector.

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It has been said of diplomacy that its success can be measured by wars not fought: that its scarcely visible role in averting disaster is at least as important as its positive, tangible achievements. The same might be said of the British Council, though it operates at a more human level with individuals and communities rather than nations. The three characteristics of cultural relations that I listed above – that they are non-governmental, long term and founded in mutuality – are what gives the British Council its leverage in helping to mend the damage to men, women, families and communities that have been deeply bruised by conflict. If, as has often been argued, the core ethic of cultural relations is trust, the patient earning of which is the British Council’s real underlying business, then reconstructive work in societies where trust has been terribly damaged is the quintessence of its cultural relations work.

Such work has a pragmatic side: programmes in several North African and Levantine countries have been designed with local partners on the basis that encouraging social cohesion and opportunity for the marginalised can diminish the attraction of radical ideologies and nip violence in the bud. But there is a wider and less instrumental approach too, exemplified by the work the British Council has done in the countries surrounding Syria with some of the seven million or more refugees from the Syrian bloodbath. This work is a real test for cultural relations, and at the heart of it is language.

English of course is vital and is where the British Council's great language expertise lies. But here there is a clear acknowledgement (which we have already seen) that "all of the languages that migrants speak and write contribute to their capacity to interact with other cultures in different socio-linguistic contexts". In other words, English may be the British Council's *métier*, but it is one of many languages that all serve the same need; and as one student put it, "each language means that one man becomes more powerful". Arabic-speaking Syrians who are stranded by war, with little prospect of return, in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey very often need new linguistic tools to manage their own integration into work and education; they need to keep a grasp on their mother-tongue, without which nothing will make much sense and their loss will be incomprehensible and unprocessable; and they need the cultural payload that comes with good teaching in order to express, describe, digest and begin to resolve their predicament. This is all well and judiciously expressed in a remarkable report called *Language for Resilience*, published by the British Council but covering a wide and multi-lingual territory that Syrian refugees are struggling to navigate (Capstick and Delaney, 2018).⁹

It acknowledges that the immediate need for the almost four million Syrians in Turkey is to learn Turkish; and for those in Lebanon (somewhere towards two million), French as well as English. But it stresses carefully that all languages are useful, and that children growing up in exile must also maintain and develop their native Arabic, without which not only self-awareness, but the learning of other languages, and literacy itself, will suffer:

"Both home languages and their additional languages matter." This sophisticated and humane understanding of the role of language rests on a theory of 'resilience' which has been developed in recent years. Resilience is the ability to bend with, survive and digest trauma at individual, family and community level. Resilience is what allows people to survive unimaginable experiences, the deaths of family members, destruction of homes and communities and spring back. All accounts agree that language is a vital part of resilience.

It has obvious and practical applications: above all, without the language of the country in which a refugee is hosted, she is cut off from employment and education opportunities. But language does much more than give this access. Continuing education in the mother tongue encourages literacy (in this and other languages), but it can also provide a redemptive shared experience with other dislocated people – a sense of doing something together which is community-building and at the same time therapeutic. And as the report stresses, "language learning activity may create safe spaces to work through the effects of trauma and loss". This, as I observed earlier, is at the heart of successful cultural relations – the making of safe places, magic circles, in which things happen that could not happen elsewhere. As one young Syrian put it simply and movingly: "It is the way to salvation."

It is also a pure and energising vision of language in cultural relations, and the fact that the language which is performing this range of functions is as likely to be Turkish or French as it is English, is the mark of that, suggesting an altruism and an understanding which is not always the leading characteristic of *English-as-Commodity* but which represents the best of *English-as-Vector*. This work occupies with comfortable precision the overlap between the two which is the Golden Spot of cultural relations impact.

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⁹ See for example François Grin (2008) *Applying Economics to Language: What are the Relevant Questions to Ask?*

¹⁰ Martin Rose (2014) explores the case of Morocco.

In *The Future of English*, published in 1997, David Graddol peered into the twenty-first century world to outline the coming language landscape and English's place in it. He saw a world in which:

The language will grow in usage and variety, yet simultaneously diminish in relative global importance. We may find the hegemony of English replaced by an oligarchy of languages including Spanish and Chinese. To put it in economic terms, the size of the global market for the English language may increase in absolute terms, but its market share will probably fall (Graddol, 1997 and 2000).

And he saw an English with a fast-evolving ownership structure – one in which native speakers will become less and less central, as second-language speakers of English become majority shareholders. This remains broadly true, I suspect, and indeed we are well along the road to Graddol's destination. But it is interesting that he chose to speak "in economic terms". There is no doubt that any language, and particularly a world language like English, has a profoundly economic dimension to it. 'Language economics' is the subject of much theoretical writing⁹ and any British Council director overseas will develop a subtle understanding of the language landscape of her country of responsibility in which economics have an important place. English is a desirable good for education, employment, migration, marriage, diplomacy, social media and other spheres. She will also understand the political dimensions of language – the burden of colonial or imperial history that impregnates language choice, the hierarchies of power that such choices enshrine. In Iraq, Belgium, Canada, Morocco and even Italy I have tried to tease out for myself the reasons behind the attractions and aversions that English or French generates, the inadequacies that come as birthright with a native language that isn't cock of the heap.¹⁰ What becomes inexorably clear is that there is nothing neutral about language choice, nothing neutral about mediums of instruction – and that a language that stands apart from the rigidities of historical-cultural power, as English does for instance in francophone North Africa, has a moral as well as an economic role to play.

So I turned with interest to the final section of Graddol's book, 'The need for an ethical framework for ELT'. It is frankly disappointing. He nods, and rightly, to the responsibility towards less widely spoken languages caught in the headlights of the steamroller that is English; but his main thrust is business-related, couched in terms of 'bottom lines' and 'brand management'.

The ELT industry will have to respond to changing international social values. This would bring a major exporting activity into the same framework which is now expected to regulate training activities with other countries and would help to ensure that the reputation of Britain, of the British people and their language, is enhanced rather than diminished in the coming century.

Here I see the tension of vector and commodity resolved almost entirely in favour of the second, with ethics essentially a subset of brand management. Indeed, the phrase 'cultural relations' appears not once in the whole book. This may be a mark of the time, almost a quarter of a century ago, when the book was published; but my feeling is that it reflects a thoroughly pragmatic, utilitarian and business-focused approach to ELT work, which skates across the massive potential for *good* (if I may be permitted that thoroughly ethical word) that English language teaching can represent, without compromising its capacity to pay its way.

Conclusion

I began with an epigraph taken from China Mièville's novel, *Embassytown*. It is, I think, a fundamental text for all involved in cultural relations, a profound and playful examination of language in an intercultural context and of the pitfalls of learning languages without understanding their real meaning; as well as of the huge ethical responsibilities that come with interference in the language of others. At the centre of the book is a language called 'Language', which allows only an absolute correlation between utterance and truth, which makes physically and linguistically impossible both metaphor and simile – and lying. But all around it, dominating an infinity of lesser languages is an overarching lingua franca spoken across galaxies. It is called Anglo-Ubiq. And it remains our responsibility, as cultural relations practitioners, to promote Anglo-Ubiq with sensitivity and self-awareness, conscious at all times of its destructive and constructive power, its potential as vector of good things and bad. And to leave ample space for those who speak 'Language' – or communicate in enzyme pellets.

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