The struggle to teach English as an international language

Reviewed by Stephen Moore

The title of this book is eye-catching and intriguing as one anticipates the who/where/why/how of ‘the struggle’. It is emphatically not about jaded expatriate English teachers and their daily grind of teaching in foreign lands. Rather, it is a serious contemplation on the impact of ‘native-speakerism’ in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and the myriad implications that flow from its dominance. The term ‘struggle’ comes up repeatedly in this book, leaving the reader in no doubt that the issue is serious, ongoing and, to a large extent, untreated. Holliday’s treatment will unsettle those comfortable with the status quo, but offers hope to those who disapprove of the notion that native-speakerism is best. The remedy lies in perceiving and overcoming native-speakerist ideology and its pervasive and divisive ‘us versus them’ mentality, which is deeply embedded in the TESOL profession.

The book is part of the Oxford Applied Linguistics series, edited by Henry Widdowson. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the volume fits comfortably with, and complements, two other well-known volumes in this series, namely Philippson’s Linguistic imperialism and Canagarajah’s Resisting linguistic imperialism in language teaching. Holliday’s book consists of eight chapters: Chapter 1 sets out an alternative position to native speakerism (rather lamely named ‘Position 2’); Chapter 2 is largely concerned with the issue of culturism in TESOL and how it mediates between essentialism and speakerhood; Chapters 3, 4 and 5 examine how students of English have been ‘othered, misunderstood, and treated as culturally problematic’ (p 111); Chapters 6 and 7 explore the same issue as it relates to non-native speaker teachers; and Chapter 8 proposes a way forward, namely the concept of ‘cultural continuity’, which Holliday defines as ‘an appreciation of how cultural realities and practices connect and mingle to allow collaborative inclusivity’ (p 157).

Holliday uses notions of power, control and ideology drawn extensively from the work of Foucault and Fairclough to shine a light on what lies below the surface of ‘Western English TESOL’ in terms of ideological positions reifying institutional structures and teaching practices. He traces the roots of teacher-controlled learning to the tenets of audiolingualism, the technique in vogue when he began his English-teaching career, and argues that what passes for communicative teaching today is still largely teacher controlled. Holliday also takes aim at the corporatisation of TESOL and its
management and accountability-driven directives, which marginalise language learning and teaching issues. And many of the criticisms he levels at typical ‘language in development’ aid projects will resonate with anyone familiar with how Australia has channelled much of its ELT-focused overseas aid funding.

One of the book’s strengths lies in its ‘critical qualitative research’ design and the ‘thick description’ derived from multiple voices from a diverse range of social and cultural settings. The treatment of a complex subject has thus been methodologically uncomplicated without resorting to oversimplification. The book also synthesises Holliday’s earlier work on ‘small cultures’ (for example, of family, age, occupation, social background) and ‘appropriate methodology’ (that is, the ‘instrumental process of how to do curriculum innovation in diverse settings’ (p 140)), with which some readers may be unfamiliar. The first-hand accounts of the email respondents are illuminating and sometimes confronting to a native-speaker reader, as one sees how ideologically nourished barriers unfairly impact on the personal and professional lives of non-native speakers through limiting them as ‘deficient’ when, in fact, such people have as much to offer the profession as native speakers. To his credit, Holliday does not spare himself from criticism as he recounts experiences in which he, too, has been an instrument of culturist policies. Perhaps as a form of redemption, he draws heavily at times from a range of qualitative doctoral research recently completed (presumably under his supervision) at his home institution in England; each piece of research challenges native-speakerist assumptions of one type or another.

Holliday’s suggested way forward from the dominance of native-speakerism, the cultural continuity approach, is an orientation that sets out what has to be achieved: (1) ‘teachers outside the English-speaking West dealing with the “non-native speaker” label and asserting identity, professional status and employability’ (p 158); (2) ‘English-speaking Western ESOL educators fighting their prejudices, avoiding reducing the foreign Other, learning to appreciate the meanings their students bring to the classroom and dealing with changing, global ownership of English’ (p 158); and (3) ‘language students and teachers dealing with the cultural dilemmas implicit in language learning’ (p 158). Convincing the TESOL profession of the wisdom of this approach is something Holliday’s book will contribute to; changing the profession, on the other hand, will be a long, hard struggle.

The struggle to teach English as an international language is an effective critique of English-speaking Western TESOL, achieved without attempting to simplify the complexities inherent in the teaching of a language that is so widely used for so many purposes in so many different social and (multi-
cultural contexts. As a white, male native-speaker who has considerable experience teaching English overseas, this reviewer found the book to be confronting, enlightening and accurate in its interpretations, and ultimately an important contribution to the literature. Indeed, it forces the reader to accept that all is not well with a native-speaker paradigm in TESOL, and to acknowledge that the power to change it resides in our unwillingness to tolerate the short-sightedness of the status quo. This book deserves a place on reading lists in any serious TESOL teacher-education program.