

## English today and tomorrow from a critical perspective

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Received 4 September 2010

**Abstract.** Doing any critical analysis with English and English Language Teaching (ELT) requires a critical examination of the language and related matters. First, the English language has a long history of evolution and people all over the world have been speaking English as a first language, second language or an important foreign language. The United Kingdom, its former colonies and the United States of America are the starting points of the popular diffusion of English language. Thus, they are either native speakers of English or competent English users. Secondly, nowadays, English is used as an effective tool in various situations of international communication with various "world Englishes". It also means there are different standards of English, including metropolitan native norms and other local or regional norms. Last but not least, ELT, like other kind of teaching, is not free from political connotations. We should recognize the political nature of ELT for our actions. This paper presents a brief discussion of the present use of English and the growing tendency of this language use. It also looks at the teaching of English language as a political undertaking. On the ground, some ideas may be offered for a more in-depth critical analysis.

**Keywords:** Critical analysis, English language, native speakers of English, political nature of ELT, world Englishes.

\*To think about what a critical analysis should involve, we recall the introduction to the *Quartely Journal for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages and of Standard English as a Second Dialect (TESOL)*, where Alastair Pennycook, acting as an editor for the works of critical approaches in English language teaching, focused on three main themes with these questions: the domain of interest, a transformative pedagogy and a self-reflexive stance on critical theory [1]. First, he indicated that the domain had to do with attempts to connect the microrelations (of

TESOL) - classrooms, teaching approaches, interactions - with broader social and political relations. Secondly, with his "transformative pedagogy", he meant the methods of teaching which might help to change the unequal society. And thirdly, he talked about the criticizing and self-criticizing jobs a critical work should do by questioning the most taking-for-granted assumptions in a society.

For me, to lay a foundation for a critical analysis of the English language and English Language Teaching (ELT), it seems necessary to define critically the language itself, the native speakers of the language and the politics of that language education. Studying these will help us go in the right direction of a work of critical analysis.

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## 1. English language and native speakers of English

The discussion of English language with its increasing power is worthwhile. English is one of about 4,000 languages all over the world. It belongs to the Indo-European group and is the largest Western language. According to A.C. Baugh, T. Cable [2], English is spoken by more than 380 million people in the UK, USA and the former British Empire (whereas Spanish is spoken by about 330 million people, Portuguese by 180 million, Russian by 175 million, German by 110 million, French by 80 million native speakers, Italian by 65 million). Anyway, English is not the most popular native language in the world in comparison with Chinese, spoken in eight varieties, by about 1.3 billion people in China alone).

English is the first language of several highly developed countries and it has become more and more popular outside these countries. R. Mesthrie, R.M. Bhatt [3] wrote about "English language complex", about the increasingly spread of English with varieties of English in the world or 'World Englishes'. They classified English standards and dialects into metropolitan, colonial, regional, social, pidgin, creole, second language, foreign language, immigrant, language-shift, jargon, hybrid Englishes. The metropolitan standards, the standards of the "mother city/city-state" in relation to its colonies, once has been applicable to British English but today indicating at least two standard varieties: British and American English norms. Their formal models are provided by the networks of radio and television mainly in London, Washington, Los Angeles and Atlanta. There are varieties of English as a second language in the colonies (e.g. Kenya, Sri Lanka and Nigeria) where English is important for education and government. English is used as a foreign languages in the countries where there is no direct influence of the British (and US) settlement where English serves international purposes.

About "the native speakers of a language" and "native speakers of English", there are a lot of debates. R. Mesthrie, R.M. Bhatt talked about a traditional native speaker of a language from birth with the automatic use and, therefore, different from a non-native speaker of a language. The non-native speaker does not have the same automatic fluency of the language in comparison with a native-speaker one because that person only learns the second or other language(s) after his or her mother tongue. In other words, a speaker's native language will acquire, store and use the dialect from the crib incidently, implicitly and automatically. However, they further added that the above definition will be true only in monolingual societies because a child, in some societies of multilingualism, might speak several native languages, where:

*...the order of acquisition not being an indicator of ability. Multilingual speakers may switch languages according to situation in a way that monolingual speakers switch styles of the same language"natively" (Scotton 1985).*

The issue of nativeness, especially for English language, is critically sensitive and not simply linguistic. The difference between "nativeness" and "non-nativeness" may be related to different attitudes of the speakers and hearers. Pennycook [1] pointed out:

*The notion of native and nonnative speakers... is interwoven with issues of race and ethnicity, as one's nativeness as a speaker of English is often assumed to correlate with the paleness of one's skin.*

Among the debates, however, Karchru's classification (figure 1) below appears to be popular with scholars. The populations of the five countries in the "Inner Circle" namely UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are taken to be "the true native speakers" of English. The argument is reasonable. First of all, those people bear the hallmark of the native speakers of English. An English or American does not need to speak another "first language" except English (British English or American

English respectively). The same is true for people from Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They only speak this first language as their "mother or grandmother" British tongue. Although these native speakers of English in different countries do not share the same economical, geographical, cultural or political conditions, they have many characteristics in common. Regardless of their today's nationalities, their majority comes from the same original root, Britain. A Singaporean may speak English, Tamil, Chinese or Malay at the same time, and nobody would regard them as native speakers of English. Secondly, English in these places are "pure and real English" before they are mixed with any other kind of languages. Only these countries will provide the world with the best metropolitan standard norms of English. Other English as a second language, foreign language or local, colonial, regional English will fail to meet this requirement. Perhaps, this is part of the reasons why the native speakers of English language become 'hegemonic'. Thirdly, in a new phase, it

is the countries in the Inner circle, especially USA and UK, as the native speakers of English, acting as the elite leaders of the world in term of economics, science and technologies and, hence, politics and military. It is these countries that are pushing the speed of the globalization of English by official organizations and documents, computers, banking, trading products and by their foreign policies.

In short, the countries in the Inner Circle are playing the primary roles in the growth of English as providers of English standards (British or American ones). In the Outer Circle are the former colonies of Britain and USA where English is additionally introduced for education, law, administration, newspapers etc. The Expanding Circle adopts English as essential means of international communication. Actually, only in the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle, there are about 800 million people using English together with other languages to communicate. The fact is demanding an examination of the present use as well as the future growth of this language.

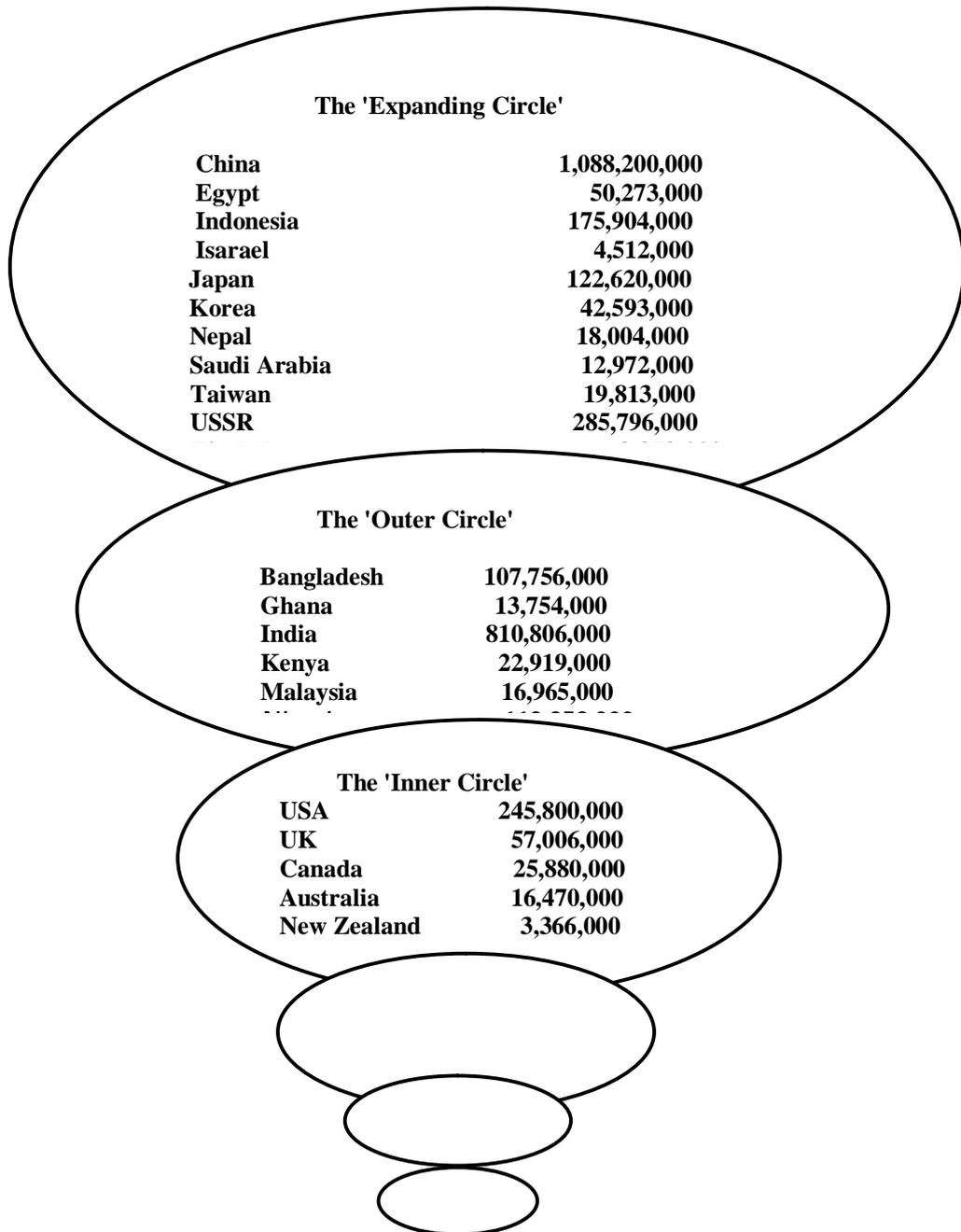


Figure 1. Braj Kachru's Circles model of World Englishes [3].

## 2. English today and in the future

More about same circles of World Englishes, Yamuna Kachru and Larry E. Smith [4] explained the diffusion of English mechanism, a kind of 'chain reaction' with new

varieties, a process in which local multilingual populations, in their turn, are spreading this language. They showed that the use of English in those three circles (two diaporas of English in B. Krachu's words) related to the spread of English worldwide. In the Inner Circle (the first

Diapora), there is a population of a monolingual English-speaking movement, responsible for the introduction this language to new locations (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, and North America) from mother country. In the second Diaspora (with other two Circles), this language was again reintroduced to new places through education, trades and missionary work. Kachru Y. & Smith L.E said the main push for the adoption and diffusion of English came from the local multilingual populations. And the

language, once was established, was adapted to new uses and nativized in the new contexts.

In fact, since after the end of World War II, English language use 'movement' has been accelerating everywhere - not only in Europe but also in Asia, Middle East, South America and Africa. English has become language of international official documents, news, education, trade, technologies, sports, entertainment and others (figure 2) [4].

| Function                    | Inner Circle | Outer Circle | Expanding Circle |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| Access code                 | +            | +            | +                |
| Advertising                 | +            | +/-          | +/-              |
| Corporate trade             | +            | +            | +                |
| Development                 | +            | +/-          | +/-              |
| Government                  | +            | +/-          | -                |
| Linguistic impact           | +            | +            | +                |
| Literary creativity         | +            | +            | +/-              |
| Literary renaissance        | +            | +            | +                |
| News broadcasting           | +            | +            | +/-              |
| Newspapers                  | +            | +            | +/-              |
| Scientific higher education | +            | +            | +/-              |
| Scientific research         | +            | +            | +/-              |
| Social interaction          | +            | +/-          | +/-              |

(+ signals use in the domain; - indicates no use in the domain; +/- points to the use of English along with other languages in the domain.)

Figure 2. Functions of English in the Three Circles.

English is spreading and, anyway, it seems that only English can play that role in the 'linguistic market place'. R. Mesthrie, R.M. Bhatt [3] mentioned Truchot's statement that the spread of English was as a consequence of the internalization of society and globalization of exchanges. The consequences was both social, economic and linguistic. Due to its superiority and advantages in terms of the number of populations, economics, wide colonial use, high technologies and the likes,

English is in the leading position that no other languages can compete today. And R. Mesthrie, R.M. Bhatt even went further to think of a possible dominance of English in future:

*In former times it was the brute force of colonization and conquest that destroyed viable language and cultural groupings in the Americas and Australasia. It is doubtful that economic globalization would have the same catastrophic impact in Europe, Asia and Africa. For this to be the case something like the*

following stages would have to occur in an EFL territory like Denmark or China:

English = English as a Foreign Language → the first foreign language → English as a Second Language → The second first language → the first language serving H functions → sole first language ...

(H here stands for the language or variety deemed appropriate for use in 'High' domains, like education and administration. [3])

For above reasons, R. Mesthrie, R.M. Bhatt stressed that many people consider English to be "a killer language" in its expansion. In fact, people are using this language as an effective tool of national and international communication but, on the other hand, English is also swallowing and replacing other indigenous languages in the world (and , perhaps, their cultures as well).

### 3. The political nature of English language teaching

Language and language education must be, of course, connected to a broader social and political context they are existing in and serving. Pennycook [1] assumed that:

*The view of language or of language learning cannot be an autonomous one that backs away from connecting language to broader political concerns; the understanding of education must see pedagogy as a question of cultural politics; and the focus on politics must be accountable to broader political and ethical visions that put inequality, oppression, and compassion to the fore.*

For empirical research and theory building in second language learning and teaching, since their start in 1940s, language learning was seen as individual psychological phenomenon. Even in 1970s, when the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced and appreciated, the political and social context did not much involve in language learning. The

individuals were not viewed as parts of the broader world they were living in and, therefore, were isolated from their context. A. Coultas [5], wrote about the importance of the context and its relation of to language use. He pointed out the connection between language and social contexts as they were not the separate entities in their relation:

*Language and social contexts is also about how we use language to relate to other people within our communities. Each situation that we find ourselves in every day require us to use language in a subtly different way, depending on where we are, whom we are with, what we hope to achieve within that situation, the equipment we are using and how we want others to react to us.*

A. Coultas, made an interesting distinction between a talk in a meeting where someone wanted to impress his/her boss, trying to project an image of himself/herself as a confident and knowledgeable person by being more formal and assertive than when he/she was trying to book a holiday with a travel agent or when calling for emergency plumber at midnight.

Due to the isolation, during all the time, researchers used to highly value the experimental approaches for the understanding of language class-rooms. They may have underestimated the ethnographic and other qualitative researches. Anyway, not until 1980s did they reconsider their choices when ethnographic approach proved the force the social and political context exerted on language teaching and learning. New discovery of the political aspects in language teaching and learning was also provided by the developments in other disciplines, which made the scholars in the field of anthropology and sociology begin to re-examine the apolitical tradition of their viewpoint. In 1990s, in English Language Teaching (ELT), the idea that ELT was always political was accepted. Bill Johnston in his book *Values in English Language Teaching*, [6] mentioned Michael Foucault's exposes of

the socially situated nature of knowledge and the way in which knowledge is bound up with the play of power in social setting. The ideas of Michael Foucault were influential on many social scientific disciplines, including education. Johnston also talked about the work of Paulo Freire (1972) in education leading to the development of critical pedagogy. About linguistics, he wrote:

*In linguistics, meanwhile - another doggedly apolitical domain - there was a growing realization of the need for linguists to engage politically, if only to save the object of their inquiries: indigenous and other minority languages, which were disappearing at an alarming rate...*

Johnston assumed that there were some reasons for the teaching of English to be apolitical. First, we know that the classes do not usually look like a place of politics. In English classes, learners are just learning a new language. The learning is a process which is quite neutral and beneficial to them. The students are not told about how political their lessons may be. Secondly, most of the teachers never think what they are doing relating to politics and the classes are the right places to express their attitudes. They avoid any sensitive topics they come across during the lessons as the easiest way to just do their jobs. They do not want to claim what viewpoint they are taking or what advice they should give the students about their political attitude. Teachers are rarely encouraged to reflect on the broader sociopolitical context in which they work. They are not urged to relate their teaching of languages to national political, economic and cultural processes. In general, there is a lack of awareness of this political relation in the minds of the teachers themselves. They are not asked to act as active agents of reflection and, finally, forget that their jobs are *"profoundly and unavoidably political"*.

Another reason why the teaching and learning seem to have nothing to do with politics is that the publishers of language

textbooks and course - books are not happy to make their materials sound evidently odd or offensive to some students. In fact, many of the items in the course-books have been purposely selected or intentionally excluded. The ways the ideological ideas introduced are often natural and legitimized in a common sense. Students will find their lessons interesting and enjoyable rather than reluctant or imposing. The topics in the lessons are usually just everyday trifling stories. The power relations and ideologies are, therefore, hidden from view.

Not only the publishers who play their roles in the preparation of the text-books and course-books in a apolitical manner, the social classes who influence the education also keep a safe distance from the classrooms. Businessmen, politicians and religious leaders - people who are benefiting from the teaching of languages are not directly involved in it. This is the key to the problem: those who are really running the political show and earning from the language transmission are absent from the stage where they are the true directors. And the teaching of languages, thus, does not look political though it is really so.

One more problem creating the apolitical view is the understanding of the term "political" itself. Beard A. (200, P5) [7], was very serious to see that the use of the word "political" has (and largely, we assume, anything) to do with social and economic change. He said if we talked of the politics of food production, that would mean there was something wrong with the production of the food or the food production supporting system and change must be made. The politics of sport, he added, included analysis of the changing social and economic structure of professional sport. Johnston [6], also pointed out another dimension of the term "political" which involved power and control of resources. He thought that for most people, this term would apply only to the making of laws by nation and local officials, the election of those officials, the credos and actions of political parties, relation among national governments etc. He showed us:

*Yet in fact, the term political has a much broader field of reference. It refers to anything that has to do with power and the control of resources of every conceivable kind. In this understanding, a great many things about language teaching are political.*

Thus, many issues are of political nature do not look like what the term brings to them. Poverty, unemployment, gender issues or even a distant addressing in party conversation may be political or have deeply rooted in politics.

ELT is political in nature. For Johnston [6], there are many ways in which the statement proves to be true: the language education is playing its part in the processes of colonization and decolonization; there is a huge effect of the spread of English on indigenous languages; the concerns of political dimension of teaching immigrant and refugee learners in ESL contexts is growing, the dominance of English in the media and in computer-based technologies is challenging; and the crucial role of English in globalization is inevitable. In the first place, the mechanism of colonization is a vital part with the teaching of English in African and South East Asia.. From South Africa to Sri Lanka, English has been employed in the processes of decolonization. In these countries, English is more or less maintaining its power in the machineries of economic, political, and cultural hegemony. In the second place, Johnston writes about the death of dozens of indigenous languages in United States as the result of the direct imposition of English. The "hard power" of boarding schools and banned languages have been switched over to "soft power" of neglect and "cultural nerve gas" of television and other media. Johnston agrees with Krauss' estimation that in the next 200 years, 90% of the world's languages could be lost (and maybe together with the cultures) with "devastating effect of the process of language shift on actual individuals and their familial and social relations.". Thirdly, in United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, politics *blatantly* involves the

teaching of English language in the classrooms to immigrant adults and children. The immigrants' first languages become faded out as children are mainly educated in second language or a bi-lingual system. Parents and grandparents find themselves strange to their children culturally and linguistically. The bonds between generations are threatened to be broken. The rapid growing computer-based technologies, internet and the webs mostly in English is another political significance, pushing the social, economic and cultural inequality, with "the increasingly widespread use of computers for tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the consuming obsession many teachers, teacher trainers, and material writers have developed with using computers to teach English" [6]. The spread of English on the internet also serve as an example of globalization which is profoundly political in nature. The process deeply involves ELT as a globalization means providing people with motive to learn English and to travel to teach this language, to be trained or to trade in other countries. Johnston estimated that the Western companies were increasingly exploiting foreign markets with gradual erasure of national boundaries in terms of economics. The financial powers like GATT- the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades- are aggressively supporting that globalization process and:

*This allows American and British text-book companies to market their wares much more extensively and intensively than ever before, in a rapid growing number of countries (witness, for example, the invasion of former Eastern bloc countries by companies such as Longman, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, or Heinemann in the years immediately following 1989)[6].*

The other thing is that when the hi-tech communication is popular, people have almost no other language choice than English to access to other computer users and:

*The overall result of this is that computer users have to use English to access and connect with the rest of the world (often meaning the United States), while television viewers in pretty much any country in the world can watch CNN and MTV in English (whereas in the United States, with a few regionalized exceptions, it is, virtually, impossible to watch television in other languages). [6]*

In summary, it is an undeniable fact that the English spread and English Language Teaching is political. Going back to Beard and Johnston's definition about politics, we find out that the politics lies in the changing tendency of the world from multi-language world to only-English world, which may be causing a collapsible change of cultures (changing from multi-cultural poles towards a mono-cultural pole). The process also has much to do with the power and the control of resources in hands of a few giant economic groups all over the world (mostly based in the influential capitalist countries and many among them are in the English speaking countries). The world is more dependant on a single powerful force and even an only language - English.

In Vietnam, for more than 20 years, English has been introduced to schools and universities as an important foreign language. Government of Vietnam has been encouraging the use of English nationwide. This language policy, together with the deep global economic integration of Vietnam, has helped the country in attracting foreign investments, sending students overseas for higher education and labourers to different international markets. Anyway, there has been some accusation of a "hegemonic English policy". The series of articles of Bui Hien [8-11] denouncing the negative effects of the "only English" requirements of the Ministry of Education are the evidences of other voices that can be heard in our country nowadays. Once the extreme priority is given to English, only this language is interested in, especially for the graduate, PhD students and the staffs in the government

offices, schools and universities. Other traditional foreign languages like Russian, China and French have been marginalized and ignored, causing an unbalanced supply for the varied economic and political demands.

English language has been spreading, together with the influence of the English speaking countries, especially United States of America. English is spoken more largely all over the world in almost every field of human's life. The native speakers are acting as suppliers of standard norms. They are also earning from the process of English language diffusion, economically and politically. The world should be aware of this fact. When people use English for international communication and trading, they should, at the same time, protect themselves from the possible negative invasion of this language and the alien side of the cultures it goes along with.

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## Tiếng Anh hiện tại và tương lai nhìn từ bình diện phê phán

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Tiến hành bất cứ phân tích phê phán nào về tiếng Anh và việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh cũng cần một cuộc khảo sát phê phán về ngôn ngữ đó và các yếu tố liên quan. Trước hết, tiếng Anh có một lịch sử phát triển lâu dài và mọi người khắp nơi trên thế giới đã, đang và sẽ nói tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ thứ nhất, thứ hai hoặc một ngoại ngữ quan trọng. Nước Anh, các thuộc địa của Anh và Hoa Kỳ là những điểm khởi phát của sự khuyếch tán rộng rãi tiếng Anh ngày nay. Vì vậy, người dân của họ hoặc là những người nói tiếng Anh bản địa, hoặc là những người sử dụng tiếng Anh thành thạo. Thứ hai, ngày nay tiếng Anh được sử dụng như một công cụ hiệu quả trong nhiều tình huống giao tiếp quốc tế khác nhau và giờ đây đã có "nhiều loại tiếng Anh" trên thế giới. Có các loại tiếng Anh khác nhau cũng có nghĩa là có các chuẩn tiếng Anh khác nhau, gồm các chuẩn bản địa truyền thống và các chuẩn vùng và địa phương. Thứ ba, việc dạy tiếng Anh, cũng giống như việc dạy học khác, mang tính chính trị. Chúng ta cần nhận ra bản chất chính trị của việc dạy tiếng Anh để hành động. Bài báo này thảo luận về việc sử dụng tiếng Anh hiện nay và xu hướng phát triển của thứ tiếng này. Bài báo cũng xem xét việc dạy tiếng Anh như một công việc có tính chính trị. Trên cơ sở đó, một số ý tưởng có thể hình thành giúp cho việc phân tích phê phán được sâu sắc hơn.

*Từ khoá:* Phân tích phê phán, tiếng Anh, người nói tiếng Anh bản ngữ, bản chất chính trị của việc dạy tiếng Anh, các loại tiếng Anh trên thế giới.