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Neoliberalism and the hidden curriculum in ELT materials: Towards a critical synthesis

Calum To

Faculty of Letters, Nara Women's University, Nara, Japan

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Abstract

Neoliberalism has expanded from an economic ideology to become embedded across social life, shaping views about everything from healthcare to education. This article begins by outlining key tenets of neoliberalism and how they appear in educational materials through the hidden curriculum, before examining studies exploring a range of global and locally-produced ELT course books. Whilst methodological limitations make it difficult to draw strong conclusions, the article argues that where a neoliberal hidden curriculum is present, it can restrict opportunities for critical thinking and language development. Learner responses to such content are then presented, with findings suggesting complex and at times contradictory reactions. The article concludes by discussing implications for teaching practice, proposing that critical pedagogy offers teachers a way to transform such neoliberal content into opportunities for linguistic and critical development.

Keywords neoliberalism, hidden curriculum, critical pedagogy, language teaching materials, textbook analysis, materials evaluation

1. Introduction

As the dominant ideology of our times, neoliberalism has had a profound impact on contemporary life. Although originally an economic philosophy associated with free-market capitalism, neoliberal ideologies have increasingly embedded themselves across social domains (Holborow, 2007). In education, it exerts a powerful influence on the implicit messages contained within teaching materials, shaping views about culture, beliefs and how society should function (Saltman, 2020).

This article first outlines some core tenets of neoliberalism and its impact on education through the hidden curriculum, before examining research exploring its presence in English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks. Whilst a lack of methodological rigour amongst studies makes it difficult to substantiate claims that neoliberalism consistently underlies materials, this article argues that, where present, a neoliberal hidden curriculum can impact learning by restricting opportunities for critical thinking and language development. After examining learner responses, the final section suggests teachers may mitigate these effects through critical pedagogy and by encouraging reflective discussions to support learning.

2. Neoliberalism, Education and the Hidden Curriculum

Since the 1970s and the inability of Keynesianism to address high inflation and stagnant growth led to calls for deregulation and privatisation, neoliberalism has become *the* dominant political and economic paradigm (Saltman, 2020). Despite emerging in particular historical contexts, its spread to become the dominant global doctrine has resulted in it becoming fundamental to many of the seemingly common-sense ways we interpret the world (Harvey, 2005; Jalalian Daghigh et al., 2022).

Whilst the term neoliberalism has been criticised for its potential fuzziness (e.g., Jessop, 2012), there are nevertheless certain underlying tenets. A key feature is the belief that through deregulation, the mechanisms of

competition and accountability should be allowed to govern the free market. This principle then goes hand in hand with policies aimed at reducing government spending and privatising public services (Kubota, 2020). Within this market, the individual is positioned as the foremost economic actor, with competition encouraged to maximise individual utility (Foster, 2016; Saltman, 2020). Then, as in Margaret Thatcher's infamous pronouncement, society no longer exists as anything more than 'individual men and women'. Neoliberalism has since spread beyond economics, to become a powerful mode of rationality governing behaviour (Dardot and Laval, 2013). Brown (2015) goes so far as to argue that human well-being itself comes to be understood as best supported by free markets and the unfettered liberation of individual entrepreneurialism.

When extended to education, neoliberal ideology then reshapes its pedagogical purpose, with students no longer viewed as participants in a society for whom critical inquiry is central, but rather as economic subjects to be equipped with the skills and behaviours to service the economy (Brenden et al., 2024; Gray et al., 2018). Rather than a humanistic endeavour aiming to develop critical autonomy amongst learners, education becomes a financial venture pursued as an investment, framed as a competition in which success equates to greater economic rewards (Hastings, 2019). Language learning is similarly recast as a commodified skill (Kubota, 2011). Decontextualized from its cultural and social dimensions (Bori & Canale, 2022), it is reduced to become "segmentable, testable, and rankable" (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212). This process of McDonaldization then repositions teachers as deliverers of pre-packaged content with predictable outcomes to anonymous learners (Littlejohn, 2022; Ritzer, 2020).

Before continuing, it is important to note that while this characterisation of neoliberal education draws on substantial research, and reflects the author's own position, it is worth highlighting that it rests on a value judgement itself, and one that implicitly assumes critical inquiry to be the primary purpose of education. As Biesta (2009) argues, what constitutes 'good' education is always a composite question, and such assumptions are therefore better made explicit and transparent than left unexamined.

Returning to the issue of how ideology shapes educational content and practice, a key concept in analysis is that of the hidden curriculum (Apple, 2019). First used by Jackson (1968) to describe those lessons learned through the *experience* of education rather than content, it has since been taken up across a range of educational contexts. Whilst some definitions emphasise the implicit political agenda of *capitalist* education (e.g., Saltman, 2020), this critical stance overlooks that some imparted values, for example personal responsibility, can be positive (Çubukçu, 2012). It is therefore better to understand the hidden curriculum as those unspoken ideas embedded systematically within education that have significant consequences, but that are taken for granted and *subtly* shape the learner experience for better or worse (Gray, 2023).

As Brown (2022) writes, the hidden curriculum may be found in a number of educational contexts, from the physical environment (Tor, 2015) to assessments (Joughlin, 2010). Studies into neoliberalism and the hidden curriculum have also examined the issue across contexts, from classroom practice (e.g., Sayer, 2019) to technology (e.g., Brenden et al., 2024), with findings regularly pointing to significant negative impacts on the contexts examined. However, it is in the materials literature that concerns regarding the presence of a neoliberal hidden curriculum are most often explored.

3. Global ELT Materials and Increasing Neoliberal Representations

Tyson and Woodward (1989) argue that up to 90% of what occurs in U.S classrooms is textbook-driven. Whilst such figures are unavailable for the English language classroom, at a time when English language coursebook series have established themselves as a paradigm for teaching, textbooks exert a similarly dominant influence in ELT (Akbari, 2008; Jordan & Gray, 2019). Constructed cultural artefacts, textbooks inscribe language learning with particular values that are never neutral (Gray, 2010; Littlejohn, 2012).

Studies examining global textbooks suggest a steady increase since the 1980s in depictions of highly agentive individuals whose success is framed *solely* as the result of individual choice, whilst glossing over structural inequalities. In a mixed-methods analysis of two textbooks from each decade from the 1970s to the 2010s, Gray and Block (2014) used qualitative content analysis to contrast, for example, the inclusion of a listening activity involving discussion of job (in)security and low wages in *Headway Intermediate* (Soars & Soars, 1986), with the significantly more positive portrayal of entrepreneurial work in *New Headway Intermediate* (Soars & Soars, 1996). This change in framing came at the expense of a portrayal of a wider range of social relationships and experiences. For example, whilst representations of working class characters and experiences made up 41.5% of the total content in *English in Situations* (O'Neill, 1970), this had fallen to 14.4%

in *New Headway Intermediate* (Soars & Soars, 2009).

Other studies have found a similar contrast between later representations and earlier, more realistic portrayals of working challenges and collaborative problem-solving. In a study using qualitative content analysis of ELT coursebooks published between 1975-1982 and 1998-2014, Copley (2018) found that those from the earlier period included significantly more portrayals of working class occupations and emphasised the power of collective solutions. However, in later textbooks issues faced by those in work were often attributed to individual ineffectiveness, with social group interests and work challenges replaced by an emphasis on the development of neoliberal life skills and individuality. English language acquisition was then portrayed primarily from the perspective of maximising employability, with little space given for more critical discussion. For example, in one section from *Open Mind* (Taylore-Knowles & Taylore-Knowles, 2014), students are introduced to a character who uses their communicative skills to build a positive image of an airline that has a poor safety record, though the ethical implications are left unexplored. It should be noted that limited reporting on which sections of the coursebook were chosen, and procedures for doing so, makes it difficult to assess the extent to which the examples and analysis given are representative of the whole textbook.

4. Uncovering Neoliberalism in Local ELT Materials

This narrowing of representation within global ELT materials is matched by a similar increase in neoliberal ideas in locally-published textbooks. In a comparison of Malaysian textbooks published in the 1990s and those since the early 2000s, Jalalian Daghigh et al. (2023) used inductive thematic analysis to identify an increasing presence of consumerism themes, reflecting a growth in the representation of neoliberal values and ideologies. For example, despite an earlier focus on consumer rights education in *English Form 2 KBSM* (1989), content related to products in *English Form 1* (2016) was framed around the purchase of technological items engendering a sense of satisfaction. In addition, although careers portrayed in *KBSM English Form 3* (1990) and *KBSM English Form 5* (1991) were shown in relation to 'nation-serving' jobs such as doctors or firefighters, in *English Form 2* (2003) the portrayal of work emphasised entrepreneurial business. Success was then equated with being rich, and education portrayed primarily as an *investment*. It should be noted that it is unclear how textbook data was segmented, with limited bibliographic information further complicating interpretation.

Neoliberal themes such as this emphasis on entrepreneurship have also been found in locally-produced coursebooks in China. In a case study analysis of *New College Horizons 2* (Zheng, 2017), He and Buripakdi (2022) used a deductively developed codebook and quantitative content analysis to identify the most common neoliberal values incorporated into the textbook. These were entrepreneurship (17%), individualism (11%), self-responsibility (10%), and flexibility (10%). A three-dimensional critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework was then used to examine how these themes were reflected in the texts and visual images in the book. For example, the authors argued that an image of two children sitting back-to-back whilst using computers projected the importance of individuality, whilst a group discussion on money-making ideas highlighted the value of entrepreneurship. Although analytical procedures are clearly reported, with 16 visuals and 69 written texts used as part of the study, there is little contextualisation given as to the relative proportion of these to the whole book. Additionally, whilst it is important that entrepreneurship is identified as having made up 17% of the total of *neoliberal* themes in the book, without comparison to themes *not* associated with neoliberal discourse, it is difficult to assess the relative significance of findings.

Further research suggests other neoliberal themes such as language learning commodification have also been found in Chinese-produced textbooks. In an analysis of the 7th - 9th grade versions of *Go For It!* (Nunan, 2003) published by the People's Education Press, Xiong and Yuan (2018) also used CDA to analyse the generic features, discourse patterns, lexico-grammar and non-linguistic semiotic features of four excerpts taken from the textbooks. Their findings suggested neoliberal discourses were present through the portrayal of English learning as a highly individualised, asocial undertaking, a monolingual emphasis on language and the commodification of language learning. One of the excerpts chosen contained two testimonials discussing what learners had gained from attending a language school, particularly in relation to their "enhanced job prospects" (p. 109). The authors' analysis concluded this portrayal demonstrated learners acquiring linguistic capital to sell themselves more effectively in the market, a central feature of the neoliberal agenda to repurpose *human* beings as *economic* beings. Although the relative clarity in sampling procedures is commendable, with the authors reporting their use of purposive sampling as "engendering new theoretical perspectives and insights" (p. 106), it is unclear how and/or why these particular four texts were chosen; again, without explanation of

how representative of the textbook the chosen texts are, it is difficult to contextualise findings.

Whilst findings from the above studies are valuable, there are important limitations: the textbooks reviewed represent only a small sample of those used globally, with unclear sampling of textbooks in many of the above studies severely limiting further generalisability (Selvi, 2019). The validity of conclusions drawn from such studies hinges on avoiding selective use of data (Cohen et al., 2018), yet reporting is often unclear on whether full textbooks or selected sections were analysed, and if so, how or why they were chosen. These limitations reinforce concerns that textbook studies may suffer from confirmation bias and non-representative inclusion of content (e.g., Hadley, 2014). Greater transparency in methodological choices is therefore essential to improve trustworthiness and applicability of findings.

Babaii and Sheikhi (2018), on the other hand, offer a more balanced account in their examination of four upper-intermediate textbooks, *American English File, Topnotch [Summit], English Result,* and *New Headway*. Although it is unclear which editions were sampled, reporting covered both neoliberal and non-neoliberal themes. Quantitative analysis employed van Dijk's (1981) 'episode' as the unit for analysis and Fairclough's (2001) analytical framework of constraints on contents, relations and subjects. Over half the content was found to be related to neoliberalism, either directly (e.g., money matters) or indirectly (e.g., advertising). Although friendship was the most common relationship depicted, interviewer-interviewee (20.1%) and colleagues (5.7%) were highlighted as neoliberal relations. Subject positions such as occupational roles in institutional settings (33.1%) also reflected market-based contexts in communicative depictions. Qualitative content analysis identified additional neoliberal themes of market dominance, individualism, and consumerism. The authors argued these textbooks promoted uncritical acceptance of neoliberal views on society and power relations, repositioning learners as "passive, self-interested consumers" (p. 257). The absence of reliability checks again raises concerns about representativeness (Harwood, 2014), yet despite methodological limitations, the study offers more transparency than many in the field through the inclusion of non-neoliberal themes. Findings from the studies introduced so far suggest a degree of neoliberalism underpinning the examined textbooks, though analysis does not extend to pedagogical consequences in the classroom.

5. The Impact of a Neoliberal Hidden Curriculum on Learning

Given ideological positioning underlies many learning materials (Apple, 2019), the presence alone of one particular view of the world is not necessarily cause for concern, particularly when such aspirational content may be motivational for learners (Gray, 2013). Yet when representations of experiences recognisable as learners' own are excluded as a result of such positioning, then learning is negatively impacted (Gray & Block, 2014). Taylor (1994) goes further to argue such invisibilising practices are a form of oppression. More pedagogically, this erasure has been argued to adversely affect learner motivation, willingness to communicate and self-esteem (Boriboon, 2004). With failure in a neoliberal world solely due to the individual rather than any systemic inequalities, learners may begin to internalise a sense of responsibility for any social marginalisation they experience (Saltman, 2020).

Beyond affective impact, the uncritical presentation of subjective representations of the world obscures the fact that such views are always contestable (Sleeter & Grant, 2017). These practices undermine the kind of criticality that should be integral to education (Brenden et al., 2024). In an analysis of the globally-produced pre-intermediate *Face2Face* (Redston & Cunningham, 2012) and upper-intermediate *New Headway* (Soars & Soars, 2014), Bori (2020) used quantitative content analysis to conclude that only one unit in each did not contain themes related to four main features of neoliberal governmentality: competition, consumerism, personal/corporate social responsibility, and self-entrepreneurship. Further qualitative content analysis found an almost complete absence of activities based on critical awareness, reflection or dialogue, with content rather driven by an ideology focusing on self-entrepreneurship and consumerism. It should be noted no coding framework was included in reporting for this qualitative analysis. Nevertheless, in one notable example in *Face2Face* (Redston & Cunningham, 2012) the language for making apologies was introduced through a listening activity in which a character apologises for cancelling social plans to work overtime. Learners are given no opportunity to question or discuss the values this portrayal suggests. In *New Headway* (Soars & Soars, 2014), learners are introduced to vocabulary for negotiating prices such as "bargains", "haggle" and "pay off". With a word such as "haggle" relatively infrequent at the 9000 word level (Nation, 2017), and conservative vocabulary size estimates for B2 learners at whom the book is aimed placing the number closer to the 4000 word level (Milton & Alexiou, 2020), the pedagogical value of such specialised vocabulary at this proficiency is questionable (Nation, 2022). This appears to support Gray's (2023) assertion that *ideologically*-motivated textbook content is not *pedagogically*-motivated content, and may further result in the withholding of more

objectively valuable language or *other* vocabulary that might support students' ability to think about the world. As Littlejohn (2022) argues, these omissions are not incidental, but stem from a neoliberal view of learners as human capital to be trained for the market, not to critically engage. By failing to encourage this kind of engagement, textbooks may not only limit opportunities to develop critical thinking skills (Waring, 2009), but also those for language acquisition (Ellis, 2009).

These concerns are echoed in Canh's (2022) finding that a neoliberal focus on standardisation and testing in a series published by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training in collaboration with Pearson Education restricted learner opportunities for developing higher-order thinking skills and communicative competence. Although it is unclear which editions of the textbooks were used, quantitative analysis of the 10th, 11th and 12th Grade versions of *Tiếng Anh* found around half of the included tasks in the grade 10 (163/409) and grade 11 textbooks (195/439), and more than half in the textbook for grade 12 (194/362), consisted of closed-ended activities, mirroring those in national school-graduation exams. The author concluded this negative washback stemmed from a neoliberal emphasis on quantifiable gains, resulting in test-like exercises that emphasised accuracy rather than meaning. However, this conclusion should again be viewed cautiously as the absence of reporting on *other* activity types raises concerns that results may have been "cherry-pick[ed]" to support the researcher's argument (Harwood, 2022, p. 140). If the remainder of activities were meaning-focused, the proportion of closed-ended activities might seem less problematic. Additionally, limited bibliographic information given on the textbooks further limits transparency and replicability. This does not, however, negate the broader concern that excessive focus on accuracy negatively impacts learning, with research evidence suggesting students learn better through meaning-focused communicative activities (Jordan & Gray, 2019). Discrete, formal language learning activities may further leave students unprepared for unplanned communication (Tomlinson, 2020).

6. Learner Responses to Neoliberal Content

The above findings highlight the negative effects a hidden neoliberal curriculum may have on learning by limiting opportunities for critical thinking and meaning-focused communication. However, this does not provide insights into learner responses, a distinction captured in Littlejohn's (2011) contrast between materials as they are and materials-in-action. Although there have been calls for research into the latter, there is still a relative dearth in the field (Harwood, 2014). Despite this, those studies that have begun to explore learner responses suggest complex, multifaceted reactions to neoliberal content.

Part of a larger study taking place over four months, Bori (2021) examined student responses to the neoliberal values of consumerism, self-improvement and self-responsibilisation present in the elementary and pre-intermediate *Face2Face* textbooks (Redston & Cunningham, 2012) used at a private language school in Belgrade. Seven out of 11 participants in the two courses took part in semi-structured interviews organised around participant background, expectations for learning English, and perceptions of the textbook. This data was supplemented by the researcher's observation field notes. Interview data was coded inductively and then analysed using critical ethnography. Textbook content largely appeared at odds with the lives of the students: for example, in one activity requiring discussion based on the prompt, 'how do you usually pay for meals in a restaurant?', students were observed discussing how neither of them had money to pay for meals in restaurants. In interviews, others expressed discomfort with the regular depiction of wealthy people, noting they were "the minority" (p. 191). Nevertheless, many students also found such content aspirational and motivating, with one participant explaining that although travel was not something she could afford, it was something to which she aspired. Although the author concluded by calling for critical pedagogy to problematise this unquestioning acceptance of neoliberalism, it is clear that in this case, learner responses to the content were complex and at times contradictory. It should be noted that little information is given on how the interview data was coded, what steps were taken to ensure reliability, and no coding frame was included with reporting.

Shah et al. (2024) reported similarly complex responses in their analysis of the A1 version of *American Headway* (L. Soars & Soars, 2016) used in the US-aided English Access Microscholarship program in Pakistan. Foucault's notion of governmentality was used as a lens through which to analyse the neoliberal themes of marketisation, consumerism, and individualism that "dominate[d]" (p. 719) the textbooks. It is unclear if coding categories were derived inductively or deductively, and it does not appear the textbook was sampled systematically. As such, whilst the authors present numerous examples of neoliberal discourses, it is unclear as to what extent these may represent a small, possibly unrepresentative, subset of the materials. However, as in Bori's (2021) study, some of the 20 learners who took part in semi-structured interviews found the textbook content motivational, with one participant stating "these textbooks show us that we can do anything" (p. 715).

Equally, others expressed a conflict with their beliefs, noting they would prefer to visit Islamic countries rather than the trip to London depicted in one reading text. The authors concluded the textbooks had 'neoliberalised' students into particular views about social status and individual, rather than government/state responsibility, though without further triangulation it is difficult to determine how much this was shaped solely by textbooks rather than other influences.

Conclusions from both studies should again be viewed with caution due to a lack of clarity in data analysis procedures: in neither study was detail given of coding procedures of interview data beyond vague references to qualitative content analysis in Shah's (2024) study or an "inductive approach" (Bori, 2021, p. 188). Looking ahead, there is a clear need for more studies in different contexts examining learner responses to neoliberal content in coursebooks, yet it is also important that such research ensures greater methodological transparency. Studies using interviews should include, or at least reference, a coding framework to enhance trustworthiness and reliability of findings (Nowell et al., 2017; Selvi, 2019). Despite limitations, these studies challenge assumptions that learners passively absorb textbook ideologies, suggesting instead opportunities to promote critical engagement with such themes.

7. Implications for Teaching and Materials Development

Although neoliberal content may be viewed positively by learners, the potential for negative responses, coupled with the limits such content might place on opportunities for critical thinking and meaningful communication, mean these are issues that materials developers should attempt to address. Indeed, critical research into other aspects of the hidden curriculum appears to have had a positive impact. For example, Goyal and Rose (2020) found a comparative reduction in gender bias in the third edition of *Market Leader* (Cotton et al., 2010). However, critical work on neoliberalism has had far less impact (Bori, 2020), with improvements often merely reflecting a 'progressive neoliberalism' that avoids engagement with deeper, structural inequalities (Fraser, 2017). Moreover, with positive learner responses to aspirational neoliberal content likely to reinforce the belief that such portrayals remain the most profitable option, meaningful change through materials development seems unlikely (Brown, 2024). Alternative textbooks have been proposed, but whilst they may address certain issues, they may raise others. For example, Babaii (2022) found two textbook series published by the Iranian Ministry of Education celebrated collective morals rather than individualism, but also included gender segregation and "hyper-nationalism" (p. 371).

With textbook reform unlikely in the short-term, a more immediate solution is for the critical deconstruction of already-in-use textbooks (Ordem, 2023). This requires the development of greater awareness of the hidden curriculum. Evaluative frameworks for materials such as that proposed by Ortaçtepe Hart (2023) can support this process, whether through integration into teacher training or for immediate use by teachers. Where problematic areas are identified, teachers can mediate through critical pedagogy by promoting cooperative work and critical evaluation (Pennycook, 2019). A particularly useful resource for this is Hadley and Boon's (2022) *Critical Thinking* which contains 93 practical activities that can be adapted for use alongside textbook tasks. For example, *Rank It!* (p. 63), which asks learners to evaluate and rank the strength of different arguments, could be incorporated with the listening task analysed in Bori (2020): students could brainstorm other reasons for cancelling social plans, rank these collaboratively along with the original and discuss whether prioritising work reflects acceptable or problematic values. This type of discussion also offers a rich environment for linguistic development, with many of the teachers in Jeyaraj and Harland (2014) investigation into critical pedagogy arguing socially relevant issues enhanced learning compared to blander textbook themes. Genuine dialogue between teachers and students can offer further opportunities to foster a more participatory classroom community and move the classroom beyond the atomised model of learning that neoliberal discourses promote (Littlejohn, 2022).

Expanding input beyond the textbook, Gray (2021) argues the inclusion of literary texts in ELT can foster criticality, with extended reading potentially stimulating debate and bringing "social values to language learning" (Barnawi, 2022, p. 391). Despite initial resistance, tasks drawing on critical pedagogy that require learner selection of texts have also been shown to ultimately lead to a strong sense of student achievement (Barnawi, 2019). Teachers might then adopt critical literacy frameworks such as that also proposed by Ortaçtepe Hart (2023) to guide student engagement with textbook readings. Alternatively, Xiong and Yuan (2018) recommend Freebody and Luke's (1990) model of textual engagement to break down texts, connect them to learner experiences and engage in critical discussion. For example, this might be applied to the travel text about a trip to London examined by Shah et al. (2024), giving learners the opportunity to critique destinations and propose their own. Innovation at the textbook level may remain unlikely, but the

recommendations offered here, though clearly not exhaustive, suggest teachers can offer alternatives for learners to develop linguistically and critically. In doing so, teachers might repurpose the neoliberal hidden curriculum as a valuable pedagogical tool.

8. Conclusion

This article has attempted to show that despite methodological limitations, research suggests underlying neoliberal hidden curriculums in ELT coursebooks can impact learning by implicitly encouraging uncritical acceptance of particular views of the world. Aspirational content may be positively viewed by learners, but erasure of recognisable experiences can equally have a negative impact, with the added risk that activities stemming from ideological positioning are unsupported by, or even contrary to, research evidence on pedagogically effective language learning.

With ELT publishers unlikely to change in the near future, it falls to teachers to encourage critical engagement with the hidden values that students are exposed to. Pennycook (2021) argues that applied linguistics has too often positioned itself as apolitical, yet as Freire (1985) writes, "washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (p. 122). Equipping students with the tools and opportunities to engage critically offers more than just opportunities for language use, but also empowerment to decide for themselves where they stand.

Calum To is a lecturer at the Faculty of Letters, Nara Women's University, Japan, where he teaches English Communication and Intercultural Communication. He graduated from St Hilda's College, University of Oxford with a BA (Hons) in History, and subsequently completed an MSc in Applied Linguistics for Language Teaching at St Anne's College, University of Oxford. His research interests include Global Englishes, listening instruction pedagogy, sociolinguistics, and critical materials assessment. Email: calum.to@cc.nara-wu.ac.jp

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Conflict of Interest

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