Introduction: Is Language Learning in Anglophone Countries in Crisis?

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Introduction

The term monolingualism is widely pejoratively denoted in scholarly circles, associated with linguistic myopia (Ellis 2008a) or reductionism (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1996), thus describing a blinkered view of the de facto linguistic diversities we find in nearly all corners of the world. Paradoxically, the more monolingualism is normalised, the less we might hear about it: one does not tend to remark on that which is taken
as the norm (Ellis 2008b). The normalisation of monolingualism (assuming that all share one language, and that one language only), and subsequent monolingual mindsets, is a relatively recent phenomenon, associated with modernity, as well as with the creation of nation-states in the Western world (Ellis 2008b; Crystal 1987), where they dominate to this day. The phenomenal success of English as a global lingua franca has undoubtedly contributed to spreading monolingual mindsets (Ellis 2008b; Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1996), and has changed the global landscape of language learning, with English being by far the most popular language to learn. Many learners of English aim to cement whatever economic, social, and cultural advantages knowledge of this language might bestow on them (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015).

Much less has been said about how the success of English has impacted on the (already existing) monolingual mindsets of those who speak it as their first or one of their first languages. The erasure of linguistic diversities (Gogolin 2010), and subsequent disadvantaging of speakers of less prestigious varieties and languages, is common to many countries and educational settings. However, Anglophone countries—defined here as those countries where the majority of the population is English monolingual (Jenkins 2015)—are especially prone to English monolingualism, for all those working and living in Anglophone contexts (Liu 2016). The global value of English, made up of the sum total of the value of its speakers (Bourdieu 1977), affords ‘linguistic myopia’ to English monolinguals more than to any other first language speakers. It may, thus, be of little surprise that language learning in Anglophone countries lags behind that in other countries. Academics have now started to turn their attention to the specific problems for language learners with English as their first language, and learners of languages other than English (LOTE) more generally (see the special issue of the Modern Language Journal, 101[3], 2017, for a series of articles on this topic). To date, however, this problem has not been investigated in a systematic manner. This edited volume proposes to provide an overview of problems concerning and solutions for the widespread monolingualism found in Anglophone contexts.

Is language learning in Anglophone countries in crisis? Today, the term ‘crisis’ can be found frequently in many Anglophone countries, such as the UK (Lanvers and Coleman 2017; Lanvers 2017) and the US (AAUP
In the UK, for instance, lack of language skills costs the UK economy about 3.5% of its GDP (Foreman-Peck and Wang 2014), and language learning decline in the US over the last two decades has resulted in acute language skill shortages in military and intelligence, leaving many ‘language-designed’ positions vacant (Babbel 2018). Public media, journalistic publications, and even politicians frequently adopt the ‘crisis’ label to describe the state of language learning in their country (British Council 2019; The Atlantic 2015; University of New England 2020). A recent UK Higher Education report (HEPI 2019) concurs that the term ‘crisis’ is appropriate, and the term ‘recovery’ in the recent National Recovery Programme for Languages (APPG 2019) denotes some form of necessary response. Discussing the parlous state of second language learning in New Zealand’s schools, East (2012) also draws on the word ‘crisis’. Reflecting on the evidence available back in 2012, East argues that this word was appropriate because the situation had been “precipitated by a pervasive worldview that English is the only essentially important language, and that knowledge of English is all people need if they are to succeed in communicating with others across the globe” (p. 130). The word continues to be apposite in the Australasian region. Despite occasional criticism of the term (see Brown et al. 2019, for Australia), East makes reference to the situation in neighbouring Australia, as documented, for example, by the Group of Eight Universities (2007) and, more recently, by Piller (2016). In the context of the US, crisis is not generally used to reference language learning specifically, perhaps because of an overall lack of the perceived importance of language learning in this context by many of the stakeholders. However, crisis is frequently used in academic-based opinion pieces describing the current situation of humanities in general (i.e. Siskin and Warner 2019).

What, then, has created this language learning crisis, and what has spurred the editors of this volume to tackle it in a global and comprehensive manner? A first motivator stemmed from the self-evident observation that, if the same problems occur in different geographical locations, the crisis is best tackled in a systematic and pan-global, rather than national or localised, manner. We could apply the same principle to other global crises, such as the COVID-19 outbreak or global warming. Hitherto, academics in the above-mentioned countries have succinctly,
and often urgently, described the language learning crisis ‘at home’, aptly describing the lack of appetite for language learning among students, or the general population, and lack of coherent policy initiatives to tackle these.

To date, the specific learning and teaching issues relating to learners of LOTE generally, and in particular to learners with English as first language (L1) (Lanvers 2016; Thompson 2017; Thompson and Vásquez 2015), have received much less attention than learners of English as second or additional language (L2).

The sheer volume of publications on the topic of motivation in learners of English—as opposed to learners of any other language—exemplifies this well (Al-Hoorie 2018). Redressing this imbalance, the contributions in this edition share their focus on the very particular challenges, and possible ways forward, for language learners with English as (part of) their first language(s), brought about in particular by the context of Global English. Unlike learners of English, acquiring the globally most desirable language, uncontested as the only hypercentral global language (de Swaan 2001), English L1 language learners face challenges at all levels, which mirror the advantages of learners of English as L2. Figure 1 (see also Lanvers 2016) compares the socio-cultural advantages of learners of English with an Anglophone learner learning another language (LOTE), at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. For the learner of English, the hypercentrality of English contributes to the structural facilitation of the learning process, at the level of the individual (high return of investment, high motivation), the meso-level (opportunities to practice), and macro-level (strong education policy and support for learning). Conversely, the English L1 learner of LOTE faces predicaments at each level: at the micro-level, many learners in Anglophone contexts are surrounded by a culture of an English monolingual mindset (‘English is enough’), and thus often struggle to develop intrinsic motivation to counter this mindset. At the meso-level, learners are routinely confronted with the problem of ‘slipping back into English’ whenever they want to practise their LOTE, with foreign interlocutors often more able, and willing, to converse in English, rather than conversing less fluently in whatever LOTE the Anglophone learner is studying. At the macro-level, we observe the low priority language education tends to receive in
Anglophone countries, alongside poor investment into language planning and delivering.

As a result of the pressures on the English L1 speaker when learning a LOTE, this group is most in danger of remaining monolingual, which, if not challenged, for instance, in educational experiences, can persist throughout English speakers’ lifetimes.

This volume tackles language learning for English L1 learners from a sociolinguistic and sociopolitical perspective (rather than, e.g. a cognitive perspective, focusing on psycholinguistic L1–L2 interactions—see, e.g. DeKeyser 2007, for such approaches). In a world where English, in its ever-increasing diversity, serves for international communications across all domains of life, and all educational sectors, English L1 speakers may—all too easily—develop linguistic myopia, culminating in the misconception that ‘English is enough’, especially if their education system, societal practices and values around them either tacitly permit or explicitly reinforce this misconception. In this respect, it is particularly incongruous to
observe that many Anglophone countries susceptible to the ‘English is enough’ fallacy are in fact very multilingual (for the UK, e.g. Office for National Statistics 2011; for the US, US Census Bureau, for NZ, 2018 census data). We recall that the erasure of the linguistic diversity in any given society, in education systems and beyond, is by no means a phenomenon of Anglophone countries alone (Gogolin 2010), but that the global success of English has made Anglophone countries especially vulnerable to these attitudes—beliefs which can be traced at the level of the individual, folk language beliefs, and at the level of language education policies. Different chapters in this volume tackle such negative attitudes to language learning, at these different levels. The resulting lack of language skills detrimentally affects the economy, as well as social and political developments, in all Anglophone countries represented in this volume. Thus, in more than one sense, the term ‘crisis’ is justified.

A sociolinguistic understanding of the language crises in various Anglophone countries also means that, despite some similarities, and beyond the shared Global English context, all countries, nations, and education levels described in this volume have their unique problems related to the specific contexts. In the UK, for instance, the—sometimes gradual, sometimes steep, but always continual—decline of language learning in secondary and tertiary education over the last 30 years has arisen as a complex result of increasing liberalisation and decentralisation of education policies, marketisation of Higher Education, and, in some Anglophone countries such as the UK, a mentality of insularity. Here, we observe that the agendas of marketisation of Higher Education, and of liberalisation of education in general, are likely contributing factors to the language crisis in other Anglophone countries. The issue of a mentality of insularity, however—eminently exemplified by the Brexit agenda—seems especially pertinent to the UK. In the context of the US, actions of the outgoing president, Donald Trump, frequently exhibits xenophobic attitudes, from the “build the wall” theme in the 2016 presidential campaign to statements about keeping the “bad hombres” from Mexico out of the United States, to the more recent statement of the “Chinese virus” (Somvichian-Clausen 2020) and tweeted threats to close US borders “to protect the jobs of our GREAT (sic) American Citizens” (Rogers et al. 2020). In Australia and New Zealand, and despite strong validation of
indigenous languages, a ‘monolingual mindset’ persists. Mindful of the variety of contexts represented in the Anglophone world, care must be taken not to assume that the many good examples proposing ‘ways forward’ out of the crisis this volume presents will be of equal validity across Anglophone countries, regions, nations, or educational sectors. Rationalisations for studying any languages at all are increasingly pushed towards neoliberal agendas in education: economic needs, return on investment, focus on standards and testing, and devolution of responsibility for delivering these to individual institutions (Cruickshank et al. 2020: 14). This edited volume demonstrates how language learning in Anglophone countries in particular arises disadvantaged by this neoliberal agenda.

The current timeliness to describe the decline of language learning from the perspective of Anglophone countries, and in the context of the ever-increasing popularity of English as the global lingua franca, has arisen from a combination of several deleterious factors. They will be presented as the ‘four misconceptions’, or myopias, common in English L1 learner contexts:

1. Essentialising L1 English language learners as incapable, inherently weak language learners or similar (Lanvers and Coleman 2017; Lanvers et al. 2018; c.f. Thompson and Vásquez 2015) especially in lay public discourses.
2. Individualising the problems for English L1 learners, laying the challenge to increase language learning at the door of the individual learner, or individual schools (Lanvers 2017).
3. Ignoring the specific Global English context of English L1 learners (Lanvers 2017; c.f. Thompson 2017).
4. Ignoring and undervaluing existing community and individual language competencies (Thompson 2016), and thus not capitalising on the societal, economic, personal and educational benefits these languages might offer (MEITS n.d., US Census Bureau). In a global context where the English language is increasingly associated with social and economic capital, to the detriment of other languages, Anglophone countries are particularly vulnerable to this linguistic myopia.
These misconceptions may manifest themselves in tandem in various combinations at different levels. In England, for instance, policy initiatives aiming to address the crisis are characterised by the individualisation misconception (attributing responsibility for tackling the crisis to individual schools), attempts to understand the crisis are plagued by the essentialisation misconception (learners blamed as poor linguists), while curriculum and pedagogy innovations tend to ignore the context of Global English (not tackling the challenges of English L1 language learners, Lanvers 2017). As a result of a combination of these, English L1 learners are not presented with opportunities to change ‘English is enough’ beliefs, or understand the value of language learning, and policies and practices remain ineffective in their attempts to tackle the crisis. In their ineffectiveness, policies often condone—inadvertently—the hegemony of English. By the same token, the many positive examples tackling the crisis that this volume presents all oppose, in one way or another, the above-listed misconceptions: some “ways forward” chapters focus on tackling essentialist beliefs, some offer coherent (e.g. national rather than school only) policy solutions, some exemplify how the problem of demotivation in the hegemony of English can be overcome, and others still rely on community and/or world languages to tackle linguistic myopia.

Convinced of the need to both describe and address the language learning problems in Anglophone countries in a holistic and universal manner, the editors of this volume have sought contributions which, in one form or the other, address these misconceptions, but also offer solutions and examples of positive, forward-thinking practice. The first two sections (Parts I and II) are of the ‘taking stock’ kind, describing and analysing language learning trends, language skills deficits, language ideologies, and policies in a variety of manners, and at all educational levels. The authors of these chapters refrain from essentialising or blaming individual learners, or individual educational institutions. Instead, the reader of Parts I and II might be struck by underlying structural similarities in language learning trends, and difficulties in implementing well-intended policies, across all three large geographical areas represented in this volume: Northern Europe, the Americas, and Australasia.
Part I offers conceptual descriptors of ingrained monolingualism, honing in on the thorny issue of language tuition delivery at school level, across seven countries, three continents, and all school sectors. Sterzug and Shin describe the perhaps surprising monolingual mindset of many of those in the Canadian context. With a focus on the policies of Saskatchewan, they outline the “historical normative educational practice in Canada” and give examples of how to support a more plurilingual pedagogy. In the US context, Hancock and Davin describe a relatively new initiative, the Seal of Biliteracy, which is an award indicated on high school transcripts for those who have achieved biliteracy in two or more languages. This award validates the L1 of linguistically diverse students and motivates Anglophones to achieve proficiency in a LOTE.

Bruen and East describe the treacherous trajectories of language education policies in Ireland and New Zealand, respectively. In Ireland (Bruen), we observe that political directives and policy announcements seem to promise a real change towards increasing language outcomes via schooling, but—as is so often the case—the devil in the detail appears in the form of a mismatch between ambitious goals and support for schools to implement them. Similarly, East describes the paradoxical situation in New Zealand, of, on the one hand, a continual decline in de facto language uptake at secondary school level, and, on the other, a language learning agenda that, at face value at least, advocates for language learning, but falls at the hurdle of implementation. Taking a different demarche, Lanvers and Martin ask what parents and secondary school students themselves think about pursuing language study beyond the compulsory phase in England, with somewhat surprising results. Parents and students show a breadth and depth of the value of language learning, somewhat flying in the face of the common prejudice that ‘the English don’t care about language learning’. However, this may not translate into increasing uptake, as many systemic hurdles are put in the way of students pursuing language study at higher levels; moreover, attitudes fall sharply along socio-economic divides, whereby parents from advantaged backgrounds pass on beliefs about the value of languages, thereby reproducing socio-economic divides in the uptake of language learning in the UK. Collen reports on the one British nation where foreign languages are not commonly taught in the Primary sector, Northern Ireland. The
generally complicated and volatile ‘Irish problem’ creeps into language policy here, as the teaching of the two community languages associated with segregation, English and Irish, somewhat overshadows any progress to be made in the delivery of other LOTE, despite some political will to do so. Mason and Hajek describe the mismatch in Australia between (on occasion, ambitious) policy aims and existing status quos where only a small percentage of students chooses to continue with language study beyond any compulsory period—a trend which, they say, has continued for decades unchanged.

Part II describes the state of Higher Education (HE) learning in Anglophone countries. Liddicoat, reporting on the UK, provides an in-depth analysis of language tuition provision as advertised on universities’ websites, demonstrating high variability of language provision, and a lack of ‘joined up’ institutional policy, linking for example, internationalisation agendas to language development, or meeting the UK’s national needs for language skills. In the US context, Thompson describes the trends of LOTE study at the university level, using course enrolments in seven states as examples, and also highlights some of the many benefits of learning a LOTE, as well as student motivations and opportunities to learn LOTEs in the US context. In the New Zealand context, Minagawa and Nesbitt move beyond the challenges of promoting the learning of Japanese to L1 speakers of English to the possibilities for those of an Asian L1 background to achieve success in ways that they may not find in other subjects. All three contributions thus highlight opportunities and prospects for development in this sector as well.

Parts III, IV and V offer examples of good practice, and hope. Here, all contributions are underpinned by language learning concepts and pedagogies that counter at least one (and often more) of the above described four misconceptions and myopias.

Part III offers encouraging examples, some from lifelong learners who remain engaged and motivated, often in otherwise nefarious contexts. Mitchell and Tracy-Ventura present two case studies to exemplify how effective personal resilience, and purposefully chosen strategies, combating English hegemony in university students’ daily life, can be. Bower presents evidence of successful Content and Language Integrated (CLIL) pedagogy to overcome problems of student motivation and uninspiring
language learner experiences. Buckingham provides a unique and interesting focus on heritage and community language maintenance in the New Zealand context, examining the potential for this maintenance in the face of an English-dominant society. Barbosa gives an example of a type of progressive pedagogy that overcomes an otherwise pervasive monolingual bias, and successfully integrates existing community language skills into their language practice. In her chapter, Barbosa describes a service-learning (SL) programme *Learn from the Experts*, a partnership between a Hispanic-serving university in South Texas and a public high school in the same community. The Anglophones learning Spanish and the Spanish speakers learning English were able to learn from each other; together they demystified ideologies of Spanish as inferior to English via carefully chosen themes for the project.

No discussion of innovative and pioneering language learning policies and practices would be complete without highlighting the contribution of online learning. Contributions in Part IV show effectively how the target language, community and culture can all be brought into the classroom via both synchronous and asynchronous online activities. Innes and Huang illustrate how virtual interactions with young Scottish and French language learners increase intrinsic language learning motivation, particularly in terms of enjoyment and autonomy. This study is unique with regards to the age group, primary school students, which is an understudied age group in Applied Linguistics research. Also using virtual interactions, in this case between university students in New Zealand and Germany, Feick and Knorr used a linguistic landscape project to raise the students’ awareness of multilingual communities in both contexts. Tolosa, East and Barbour present a small-scale study into an initiative to enhance Asian language learning at the primary level in New Zealand, through online distance learning opportunities, bringing out both the possibilities and the challenges of the initiative. Walker-Morrison, Brussino and Gilmour focus on the tertiary level in New Zealand, and describe recently developed blended-learning courses for French, Italian and Spanish at two different universities, demonstrating how online learning can be combined effectively with traditional formats.

Contributions in Part V all exemplify what, to date, remains the most promising avenue out of the Anglophone language crisis: multilingual
practices in the FL classroom that validate existing community and heritage languages, improve social cohesion, increase motivation for minority languages, and increase metalinguistic awareness. Reporting on Ireland, Little and Kirwan present a multilingual project funded by the Council of Europe in three Irish primary schools. Here, the whole school multilingual approach exemplifies how much can be achieved if monolingual myopia is not only fought in language lessons but also supported by the whole school. Diaz, Cordella and Ramos admit to the struggles for language learning to achieve adequate recognition and stability in schools, despite Australia’s increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. They go on to present a study that demonstrates that the ‘monolingual mindset’ can be challenged at the school level, and successful language programmes can emerge, but teachers need to be prepared to adopt them carefully with confidence and efficacy. In a university writing class in the US context, Britton describes how she disrupted the global dominance of English, as she helped her students facilitate critical L1 and L2 awareness. Also using the practitioner lens, Zhang-Wu describes three activities that may be used to foster linguistically responsive instruction. Gordon et al. highlight the importance of incorporating discussions of language and race in a university methods course for pre-service teachers. The authors illustrate the discomfort that many people have with discussions of racism in such courses, using the lens of white fragility as a framework. Reflecting critically on the interconnectivity of race and language, targeting discussions on this topic will cultivate development of the course instructors and the pre-service teachers alike.

Thus, our Ways Forward (Parts III, IV and V) contributions present positive pedagogical examples, from all continents represented in this volume, of how to overcome the language learning crisis. They have in common a shared personal and/or professional dedication to, and enthusiasm for, language learning and plurilingualism. The personal resilience, and professional commitment, of the individuals carrying such initiatives forward offer commendable and inspiring role models for many a future language pedagogue or Anglophone language learner. The concern, however, remains that an over-reliance on individual commitment cannot
provide sufficiently robust answers to the—by now, systemic—crises of language learning in Anglophone countries: we shall return to this in our concluding remarks.

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