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The profit motive: time to problematise capitalism in ELT?

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Introduction

While capitalism faces increasing scrutiny as a system of global governance in the 21st century, the application of capitalist principles in ELT continues unabated. This talk aimed to address a gap in the discourse by exploring ways in which the prioritisation of profit is having a damaging impact on the ELT profession.

Defining Capitalism

After playing a short clip to illustrate how capitalism is being critiqued within the context of the climate crisis, I provided some definitions of capitalism, demonstrating how it is predicated on the assumption that people act in their own self-interest, and that the primary motive within this system is to make a profit. Neoliberal capitalism, which has dominated Western socio-economic policy since the early 1980s, goes beyond trade and commerce, allowing all aspects of society – including education – to be controlled by market forces. The ubiquity of privatisation, commodification and marketisation also forces individuals to become commodities, or human capital, whose value is determined by their economic output. Rather than exploring neoliberalism as an ideology, the focus of this talk was to explore the impact of the profit motive on the ELT profession.

ELT as a Profit-Oriented Industry

The involvement of large, global corporations in ELT is well-documented (see for example Bunce et al, 2016), so much so that ELT is often referred to as an industry rather than a profession. Global corporate involvement includes the publishing of materials, provision of assessments, the certification of TESOL qualifications and, of course, the provision of teaching in private language schools, many of which operate as global franchises. Each year, these corporations generate billions by commodifying and monetising the ELT profession through the development of “products”, in the form of courses, coursebooks, assessments and qualifications. In doing so, they are highly influential in determining the methodologies, materials and assessments that are used.

Impact of the Profit Motive

If there was a direct correlation between commercial success and educational quality, there would be less need to engage critically with the commercialisation of ELT. However, many educational and ethical problems exist within our profession, which profit-orientation is largely responsible for. A commodified curriculum requires a highly prescriptive and linear model of learning, with language presented in a pre-determined order, and packaged and sold as courses for students to progress through incrementally. This may seem logical, but is in fact completely out of step with the ‘inherently chaotic and idiosyncratic nature of language learning’ (Thornbury, 2014, n.p.). Moreover, corporations prefer to develop products – courses, coursebooks, assessments and qualifications - that can be packaged and sold globally. This approach is based on the principles of McDonaldisation (Littlejohn, 2012) and is a very efficient business model. However, the one-size-fits-all approach fails to accommodate more localised needs and preferences in terms of learning content, outcomes and methods. Generic content tends to be heavily sanitised, meaning that topics which could be regarded as sensitive in some contexts are avoided. This leads to a lack of focus on issues related to social justice, structural inequality or community action.

Another impact of the profit motive in ELT is the maintenance of the native-speaker/non-native-speaker dichotomy. Discrimination against non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) is already well-documented, with many employers advertising jobs exclusively for native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). However, the NEST/NNEST dichotomy also allows employers in many contexts to justify the poor treatment of NESTs. On one hand, they are exploited as marketing tools, as many learners have been led to believe that NESTs make better teachers. However, alternative discourses also portray NESTs as poorly-qualified, inexperienced and unprofessional, thereby justifying low salaries and precarious conditions.

Ultimately, the prioritisation of the profit motive in ELT means that learning content, methods and outcomes are determined by the market, rather than by what is known to be effective, or what is likely to have maximum educational value. By promoting discourses that favour linear learning, universal prescriptivism and native-speakerism, corporate ELT is able to provide learners with what they *think* they need - rather than what they *actually* need - while at the same time maximising their own profits.

Conclusion

It may be difficult to envisage the ELT profession without the involvement of profit-oriented organisations, and even harder to consider ways to challenge this involvement. The talk finished with some brief suggestions, such as the prioritisation of quality over commercial viability, and the unionisation of teachers. However, perhaps the main focus should be on questioning the uncritical acceptance of capitalism in ELT, and engaging critically with its damaging impact on our profession.

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