



Vol.7 No.1 (2024)

# Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

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## Neoliberalism and the violation of students' rights: The case of English language education

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### Keywords

Education;  
ELT (English Language Teaching);  
neoliberalism.

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### Abstract

This theoretical study explores the impact of neoliberalism on education, specifically focusing on its influence in the areas of general education and English language teaching. Neoliberalism, a complex concept with varied interpretations, advocates for free markets, privatisation, and individual entrepreneurship as a means to enhance human well-being. In the context of education, neoliberal ideologies have led to the commodification of education, the transfer of educational responsibility from the government to individual households, and the emphasis on standardised testing and accountability measures. The impact of neoliberalism is particularly pronounced in the English language teaching sector, where English is viewed as a valuable economic asset and a tool for individual advancement in the market-driven economy. Despite the growing awareness of neoliberalist influences, there is a need for further academic exploration and critical inquiry to understand its pervasive effects on education systems and learners. Regarding the matter, this study discusses the influence of neoliberal ideologies on textbooks and materials, which often promote themes of employability, consumerism, and entrepreneurship.

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### Article Info

Received 5 September 2023

Received in revised form 26 December 2023

Accepted 6 January 2024

Available online 8 January 2024

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2024.7.1.3>

## Introduction

Neoliberalism advocates for free markets, privatisation, and individual entrepreneurship as means to enhance human well-being. In the context of education, neoliberal ideologies have led to the commodification of education, the transfer of educational responsibility to households, and the emphasis on standardised testing and accountability. This theoretical study utilises different resources to examine the global infiltration of neoliberalism in educational systems. The study also discusses the influence of neoliberal ideologies on English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks and materials, which often promote themes of employability and consumerism.

In terms of theory, the study delves into the multifaceted concept of neoliberalism. It acknowledges the challenge of providing a concise and universally agreed-upon definition due to the polarising responses and subjective perspectives surrounding it. Drawing on the works of Harvey (2005), Giroux (2008), Plehwe (2009), Brown (2015), and Andrew (2023), the study explores neoliberalism as a theoretical framework advocating for individual entrepreneurial freedoms and promoting the financialisation of various aspects of society. The study then examines the manifestation of neoliberalism in education, highlighting the shift in educational philosophy towards individualism and competitive business models. It discusses the transfer of educational responsibility from the government to households, the prevalence of standardised testing, and the privatisation of public goods such as education. Drawing on the works of researchers like Ball (2003), Savage (2017), and Hastings (2019), this study explores the global influence of neoliberal governance on educational institutions, policymakers, and curriculum designers.

Furthermore, this paper examines the impact of neoliberalism, specifically in the context of English language teaching. It explores the historical association of English with colonial powers and the ideological debates surrounding ELT. This study draws on the works of Bernstein et al. (2015), Babaii and Sheikhi (2017), Bacon and Kim (2018), Bori and Canale (2022), and Farsani and Rahimi (2023) to discuss how neoliberal ideologies conceptualise English as a marketable skill and viewing individuals primarily as economic assets in the globalised world. It also addresses the influence of neoliberalism on ELT textbooks and materials, emphasising themes of employability and consumerism. The significance of the matter at hand is undeniable. However, the current body of research on this topic is insufficient, with most studies failing to directly address the issue. As a result, we have undertaken a comprehensive research endeavour to provide a well-structured and informative analysis of this matter. Our aim is to assist English language researchers and teachers in gaining a clear and concise understanding of this topic.

Thus, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is neoliberalism conceptualised by different researchers?

2. How is neoliberalism manifested in mainstream education?
3. What are the traces of neoliberalism in English language education?

## Theoretical considerations: Neoliberalism

The task of defining 'neoliberalism' in 2023 is notably challenging due to the presence of polarising responses, both in favour and against the concept, as well as the varied forms and adaptations it has taken (Andrew, 2023). As Plehwe (2009) puts it, neoliberalism encompasses a range of intricate and multifaceted perspectives, lacking a concise and universally agreed-upon definition within the realm of political philosophy. Since the 1970s, there has been a pervasive inclination towards neoliberalism evident in both political-economic practices and ideological perspectives around the world. The prevalence of deregulation, privatisation, and the state's retreat from various domains of social provision has been a frequent occurrence. Vandrick (2014) asserts that these policies contribute to the perpetuation and amplification of inequities in social class statuses.

According to Harvey (2005, p. 33), neoliberalism can be characterised as the "financialisation of everything". He states that neoliberalism primarily represents a theoretical framework concerning political economic practices, advocating for the promotion of individual entrepreneurial freedoms and abilities as essential means to enhance human well-being. This ideology emphasises the establishment of robust private property rights, unrestricted markets, and unhindered international trade as key components of the institutional framework. The phenomenon of neoliberalisation has resulted in extensive instances of radical rather than transformative change, commonly referred to as "creative destruction" (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). These changes encompass not only the dismantling of existing institutional frameworks and sources of authority (sometimes even undermining conventional forms of governmental control), but also the reconfiguration of labour divisions, social interactions, welfare arrangements, utilisation of mixed technological approaches, cultural norms, cognitive processes, reproductive behaviours, emotional connections to the environment, and deeply ingrained personal inclinations (Harvey, 2005). Giroux (2008, p. 9) characterised neoliberalism as "a broad-based rhetorical and cultural movement designed to obliterate public concerns and liquidate the welfare state".

Brown (2015) also states that neoliberalism is commonly recognised as implementing a wide range of economic policies that align with its core principle of supporting free markets. These policies encompass the deregulation of industries and capital flows, a significant reduction in social welfare provisions and protections for vulnerable individuals, and the privatisation and outsourcing of public goods such as education, parks, postal services, roads, social welfare programs, prisons, and militaries. Additionally, neoliberalism involves replacing progressive tax and tariff systems with regressive ones and abandoning wealth redistribution as an economic or socio-political

policy (Brown, 2015). It also involves the transformation of every human need or desire into profitable endeavours, spanning from activities like college admissions preparation and human organ transplants to baby adoptions, pollution rights, and even trivial matters like avoiding queues or securing more legroom on airplanes. In addition, there has been a recent trend towards financialisation, where finance capital assumes greater dominance over productive capital in the dynamics of the economy and everyday life.

Michel Foucault, as a key figure also has insights on neoliberalism in his famous book, "The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France," which was published between 1978 and 1979. Based on the interpretation of Read (2009) to Foucault, neoliberalism represents a novel form of "governmentality," denoting a particular approach or mindset through which individuals are both governed and self-governed (p. 29). Neoliberalism effectively alters the language and concepts through which people situate themselves within society, shifting away from notions of "rights and laws" and towards considerations of "interests, investments, and competition". Paradoxically, as a mode of governance, neoliberalism appears to govern while seemingly not governing directly; in order to operate, its subjects require considerable autonomy to make choices amid competing strategies (Read, 2009, p. 29).

## Neoliberalism in education

Hastings (2019) asserts that neoliberalism portrays individuals as rational actors driven by self-interest, primarily tasked with maximising their personal well-being. He accounts for what the status of education is with regard to neo-liberalism in five ways as the following:

1. Neoliberal ideology portrays education as a financial venture, wherein education is regarded primarily as an economic investment.
2. The burden of educational provision is transferred from the government to individual households, thereby placing families in charge of the responsibility for education.
3. Neoliberal education reform relies on standardised testing to assess and quantify school worth, enabling informed decisions on investments and enrolment for policymakers, parents, and students.
4. Neoliberalism views education as a technical rather than a political issue, emphasising career and college readiness. Test scores are used to gauge preparedness, with schools prioritising research on methods to enhance performance.
5. Investors in the privatisation of public education aim to profit by providing contracting, testing, tutoring, school management, and non-educational services like marketing to charter schools.

Although the manifestations of neoliberalism have exhibited variation across different regions, the whole global education system has been significantly influenced by neoliberal modes of governance (Savage, 2017). For example, Australia has witnessed substantial restructuring of its government schooling systems and curricula as a result of neoliberalism. This trend persists as reforms increasingly align with market-driven principles. Over the past twenty years, Australian governments have extensively adopted neoliberal policies from the United Kingdom and the United States, disregarding extensive research that illuminates the adverse consequences of these reforms on schools, educators, and students. Stephen Ball (2003), a prominent theorist in the field of education policy, posits that the proliferation of educational reforms shaped by neoliberal ideologies has traversed geographical boundaries, resembling what he terms a "policy epidemic" (p. 215). Prominent educational enterprises, such as Pearson, have significantly capitalised on these shifts by generating educational materials and securing profitable governmental agreements for the provision of fundamental educational services (Hogan, 2016).

The infiltration of neoliberalism into European educational policies faced significant opposition and generated both vocal critics and passionate supporters (Hakala et al., 2015). The ensuing tensions between researchers, teachers, and public officials came to the forefront during the 1980s and 1990s (Husén, 1994, 1996). Despite facing criticism, neoliberal principles were adopted more swiftly in Nordic educational systems compared to those in Continental Europe (Rinne, 2004). Finland, like other countries, began questioning the benefits of a compulsory educational system and sought to tailor schools to individual needs. Schools were recognised as integral components of the national economy, with their output seen as "human capital" (Ahonen, 2002, pp. 177–180; Kalalahti & Varjo, 2012, p. 48). By the mid-1990s, Finnish educational policy had embraced neoliberal values such as efficiency, competitiveness, and a focus on outcomes. Here it should be noted that the phenomenon of neoliberalisation in education is not exclusive to any particular nation but rather represents a widespread global trend that manifests variably at the local level (West, 2019).

Savage (2017) claims that the rise of neoliberalism has brought about a fundamental metamorphosis in the operational dynamics of educational institutions, the approaches employed by parents to navigate through school systems, the strategies pursued by policymakers to govern schools, the decision-making processes undertaken by curriculum designers regarding the knowledge and skills imperative for young individuals, as well as the conduct of school principals and teachers within educational establishments. The influence of neoliberalism on educational governance and schooling remains persistent, with limited indications of diminishing. Contrary to being perceived as a fading orthodoxy, neoliberalism maintains its energy, exerting radical effects on various dimensions of schooling, curriculum development, and the experiences of educators and students worldwide.

Popenici et al. (2023) argue that even universities are facing challenges from neoliberal ideology and a strong emphasis on transforming education into a commercial enterprise, with a primary focus on financial gains and market forces.

## Neoliberalism in English language education

The impact of neoliberalism on the education sector has been profound, resulting in a significant change in educational ideology. This change involves a shift away from valuing social cooperation and towards prioritising individualism and competitive business models (Block et al., 2012). English language teaching has not remained untouched by this global trend. Instead, due to its integral role in the process of globalisation and the historical association of English with colonial powers in many parts of the world, ELT has consistently grappled with ideological debates and a diverse range of influences (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2017).

According to Bernstein et al. (2015), the ideology of neoliberalism has conceptualised the English language as a marketable and technologically driven ability, while also viewing individuals primarily as valuable economic assets. Neoliberal ideologies and implementations within the realm of education sustain a perspective that regards language as an isolated proficiency, devoid of its contextual and societal connotations and ramifications (Bori & Canale, 2022). Textbooks are not neutral. The purpose of textbooks is to exert influence on learners. Textbooks serve as significant tools within the realm of education and socialisation, with the objective of preparing individuals to become responsible members of established societies. This preparation is achieved through the transmission of prevailing macro-level ideologies, essentially moulding individuals in a process commonly referred to as 'social reproduction' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Despite the considerable body of research on textbook ideology, there exists a dearth of scholarly investigation into the phenomenon of neoliberalism within the domain of ELT. Specifically, the manner in which neoliberalism establishes its pervasive influence within the English teaching industry and enlists individuals through educational pathways remains an underexplored area warranting further academic inquiry (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2017).

Under the neoliberal paradigm, English is perceived as a highly valuable yet impartial form of capital that can be accessed by individuals through diligent investment of effort and time (Heller & Duchêne 2012; Heller, 2003, 2010; Park, 2016; Urciuoli, 2008). Consequently, individuals are often held responsible for undertaking the necessary investment in acquiring a socially-expected level of English proficiency to thrive in an intensely competitive neoliberal market. Within this context, the ideology of English as a neutral skill and a pristine medium of potentiality has engendered a remunerative English language industry in South Korea (Park, 2016). The teaching of languages, particularly English as a foreign language, has transformed into a lucrative industry for the English-language sector. (Philipson, 1992; Barnawi, 2017). The acquisition of a second language is commonly framed within discursive frameworks as an ongoing endeavour aimed at continual personal advancement (Shin, 2016). Moreover, it is often

regarded as a strategic investment in one's own capabilities to enhance competitiveness within the realms of education and employment. Horiguchi et al. (2015) contend that neoliberal ideologies prioritise the notion that individuals bear the responsibility of attaining crucial information and skills, such as communication or language proficiency, which are regarded as significant matters within the contemporary knowledge-based economy. Smith (2022) argues that the implementation of a market-oriented approach to English language policy can be seen as an exclusive form of repression. This approach amalgamates forceful measures and consent, utilising strategies that legitimise and sustain the prevailing social, political, economic, and linguistic norms within a given context.

In their research findings, Bacon and Kim (2018) discovered that the participants' discussions on the use of English revealed a minimal connection between language acquisition and authentic interpersonal communication. Instead, their focus shifted towards leveraging their English test scores and perceived proficiency for social, educational, and peer advantages. Moreover, they recognised the practical necessity of English proficiency as a prerequisite for accessing educational and employment opportunities. The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages' publication, the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (1996), and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (2001) established by the Council of Europe have played a substantial role in shaping this perspective. These documents provide standardised criteria for assessing language proficiency. However, according to Canale (2022), relying on metrics, descriptors, and evaluation parameters may create a sense of detachment between learners and the sociopolitical contexts in which language learning takes place. The standardised procedures employed by these documents have implications beyond assessing and evaluating language skills. For example, numerous European countries and even non-European nations utilise the CEFR for Languages to develop language courses and select teaching materials (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Savski, 2020), which often encourages the adoption of a "teaching to the test" approach. Additionally, the CEFR has become a marketable brand, leading to the sale of language products like textbooks and exams.

In a study carried out by Abdollahzadeh and Baniasad (2010), contrasting attitudes towards the English language and its significance in relation to English society, individuals, ethics, and interest in films were highlighted. The research findings indicated that despite a general awareness among educators about imported ideologies, they demonstrated passivity and unwillingness in effectively conveying such awareness to the learners within educational institutions. Babaii and Sheikhi (2017) follow a thorough examination of the textbook episodes and compiled topics. The findings indicated that a substantial majority, surpassing 50%, of the identified subjects exhibit a direct correlation to neoliberal principles, such as employment, financial concerns, interviewing skills, and consumerism. Additionally, an appreciable portion of the topics, categorised as indirect associations, encompasses themes related to celebrities, fashion, and advertising. Xiong and Yuan (2018) utilise a critical discourse analysis approach to investigate the dominant ELT series in China, specifically



the "Go for it!" series, in order to reveal the presence of neoliberal discourse. The results revealed indications of neoliberal principles, such as the promotion of marketisation and individualism, within the locally-produced educational materials.

Bori's (2020) investigation of global English language textbooks aimed to comprehend the representation of neoliberal governmentality within the ELT materials. The study revealed that these textbooks not only replicated neoliberal doctrine but also instilled in learners the values of responsible consumption and entrepreneurship, which are demanded by neoliberal governmentality. The textbooks presented a vision of reality that was permeated by the advantages of entrepreneurship, self-responsibility, corporate social responsibility, and the pleasures of consumption. Jalalian Daghigh and Abdul Rahim (2021) follow the infiltration of neoliberal ideology into domestically produced and globally imported textbooks in Malaysia. They discovered that both collections of textbooks depicted a broad range of neoliberal ideologies. According to the research conducted by Farsani and Rahimi (2022), young learners in Iranian private English language institutes are not exempt from the influence of neoliberalism. The researchers examined a series of textbooks used in these institutes and discovered that they conveyed a hidden curriculum that promoted neoliberal principles such as the importance of 'fame & celebrity,' 'material wealth,' 'consumerism,' and 'competitiveness' to the young Iranian learners.

Park and Lo (2012) state that the concept of neoliberalism has resulted in a shift in perspective regarding language and communication, wherein they are no longer perceived as inherently connected to one's identity. Instead, there is a growing tendency to view them as separable entities that can be manipulated and commodified for economic purposes. The rising perception of English as a crucial ability for future job prospects results in an escalation in the demand for English language services. Consequently, the capacity to afford private English education emerges as a decisive element influencing the life paths of young individuals (Choi & Park, 2013).

Researchers such as Babaii and Sheikhi (2017), Bori and Canale (2022), and Farsani and Rahimi (2023) advocate for the use of critical pedagogy as a means to prevent the dangers posed by neoliberalism. In this regard, Akbari (2008) holds a different opinion from publishers who recommend that coursebook authors should only choose non-controversial topics such as travel, food, and shopping in order to avoid creating content that may lead to disagreements. Freire (1986) believes that critical thinking plays a crucial role in critical pedagogy, which aspires to more than just creating awareness about injustice and questioning societal norms. Its goal is to encourage active engagement in constructing a more equitable society.

Dedicated proponents of critical pedagogy within the realm of education espouse the notion of actively identifying instances of social inequalities and biases, guiding students towards achieving an informed acknowledgement of these inequities, and further empowering them to actively engage in challenging and addressing systems of oppression.

Moreover, these educators exhibit a willingness to adapt their own beliefs and perspectives in order to better align with the needs and viewpoints of their students, as emphasised by Giroux and McLaren (1986) as well as Shor and Freire (1987). According to Ellis (2009) and other researchers, the critical pedagogy approach to English language teaching provides learners with extensive opportunities for learning by creating an environment that is rich in language acquisition. They argue that when learners initiate questions during critical pedagogical tasks, a vital role is played in generating learning opportunities and developing them as active and critical thinkers (Waring, 2009).

Kellner (2000) defines critical pedagogy as analysing education's role in developing individuals and promoting democracy for a just and equal society. It promotes students' critical awareness of structural inequality, political efficacy, and actions to alleviate injustice (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Seider & Graves, 2020). In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the acknowledgement of the applicability and influence of critical pedagogy within the domain of English language instruction. Within this particular context, critical pedagogy serves as a valuable framework that facilitates the cultivation of learners' critical thinking abilities and their active involvement in exploring topics pertaining to power dynamics, identity construction, and cultural aspects within English-speaking societies. Although there are a number of studies that examine the effect of critical pedagogy in the context of English language education, the existing body of research specifically pertaining to the influence of critical pedagogy on neoliberalism within this context remains insufficient, thereby calling for further inquiry by other scholars in order to address this research gap. As posited by Norton and Toohey (2004), this pedagogical approach underscores the significant role of equipping learners with the capacity for critical analysis and thinking, with the ultimate aim of fostering principles of social justice and equality. During an interview dedicated to the topic of critical thinking, Stephan Brookfield expresses the following statement:

An educator's responsibility is to the student, not to the employing agency, and an educator's responsibility is to understand the internal dynamics of learning, and having that be the logic that drives your actions. Rather than the logic of institutional need. And we're often caught in between the two (Brookfield et al., 2019, p. 83).

## Conclusion

To Harvey (2005), neoliberalism can be characterised as the "financialisation of everything" (p. 33). Savage (2017) claims that the rise of neoliberalism has brought about a fundamental metamorphosis in the operational dynamics of educational institutions. ELT has not remained untouched by this global trend. This paper explores the infiltration of neoliberalism into education systems, with a specific focus on its impact on English Language Teaching. The study highlights how neoliberal ideologies have led to the commodification of education, the transfer of educational responsibility to households, and the emphasis on standardised testing and accountability. The findings demonstrate that neoliberalism

has significantly transformed educational philosophy by prioritising individualism, market-driven principles, and the perception of education as an economic investment.

The study reveals that neoliberalism has had a pervasive influence on education systems globally. It provides examples from Iran, Australia, Europe, and South Korea, showcasing how government schooling systems, curricula, and educational policies have been shaped by neoliberal principles. It also discusses the influence of neoliberalism on ELT, where English is often conceptualised as a marketable skill and individuals are viewed primarily as economic assets. The impact of neoliberalism is evident in ELT textbooks and materials, which often promote themes of employability and consumerism.

These findings have implications for future problems and future studies in education. The study emphasises the need for further academic exploration and critical inquiry to understand the pervasive effects of neoliberalism on education systems and learners. It calls for more research on the consequences of neoliberal governance in education, including its impact on socio-economic inequalities, curriculum design, and the experiences of educators and students. Additionally, future studies could investigate alternative educational paradigms that challenge the neoliberal framework and promote equitable and holistic approaches to education. This article ends with a recommendation by other researchers such as Babaii and Sheikhi (2017), Bori and Canale (2022), and Farsani and Rahimi (2023) that call for a critical pedagogy to avoid threats by neoliberalism.

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