

Globalization and the Linguistic Imperialism of the English Language

Jokha Khalifa Al Hosni

Language Center, Sultan Qaboos University
Oman

Abstract

This paper aims to address the new challenges faced by English language teachers in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, which have emerged as a result of the commodification of English and the rapid growth of the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry. The paper first scrutinized the correlation between the recent global changes and the predominant power of the English language. It also examined the "commodification of English Language" as a new global phenomenon that triggers many challenges for language teachers. The main focus of this paper is to reveal the EFL teachers' level of awareness of the current impact of globalization on the ELT realm. For the purpose of collecting data, a questionnaire was distributed among thirty non-native English teachers who teach the language to freshmen in different Omani higher education institutes. The questionnaire was intended to investigate the participants' attitudes and the challenges they encounter as non-native speakers and teachers of the English language. The major findings of this paper concluded that this group of teachers was aware of the status-quo of the English language and they believed that the power of English has entailed some challenges in the ELT field. The two principal challenges are: The changing linguistic and communicative needs of language learners and the cultural barrier global course books create when adopting them in EFL classrooms.

Key words: Commodification, ELT industry, English, globalization, linguistic imperialism

Cite as: Al Hosni, J. K. (2015). Globalization and the Linguistic Imperialism of the English Language. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no1.23>

Introduction

In his book entitled *The Alchemy of English*, Kachru stated that "Knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science and travel. In short, English provides linguistic power" (Kachru, 1990, p. 1).

English has become the global language of the world. It is the language of economy, research, media, politics and social communication. It is the lingua franca of all spheres and the predominant medium of instruction worldwide. Globalization has undoubtedly played a significant role in creating the status-quo of English language around the globe. Economic, political and cultural globalizations, in their international and highly influential movements, have greatly contributed to the wide unprecedented spread of English. Therefore, learning English has become a top priority to all individuals who seek jobs, academic degrees or/and social privileges. As a result, English has been viewed as a new "commodity" which has its own market and consumers. This commodification is obviously observed in the current intensification of the ELT industry all over the world.

What is Globalization?

In order to understand the way how English has gained its dominance as a global language, defining globalization is of great importance. Kumaravadivelu (2006) described globalization as a "slippery term which carries different meanings to different people at different times." It is evident that the complicated nature of globalization as an era makes finding an agreed-upon definition quite an uneasy task. The interpretation and perception of this phenomenon vary from one observer/scholar to another depending on their area of interest and the particular angle of globalization they look at. However, most of the scholastic definitions of globalization have addressed the state of interdependency and interconnectedness between the various human spheres: social, economic, political, etc. Globalization is repeatedly defined as "new patterns of worldwide interconnectedness- the stretching of social relations and economic activities across national spaces and regions in various complex networks of interaction." (Popkewitz & Rizvi, 2009). Tobin (1998) defined globalization as "a fashionable word to describe trends perceived to be dramatically and relentlessly increasing connections and communications among people regardless of nationality and geography" (Para. 1). The list of definitions goes on and what is obviously admitted by all scholars concerned with this phenomenon is that globalization is mainly about the inextricable connections between all life domains. This phenomenon started, as it is believed by many historians, in the fifteenth century when the steady transpacific connection started to appear (Popkewitz & Rizvi, 2009). However, the Globalization era in the form of capitalism "started in the second half of the nineteenth century, along with the emergence of more consistent and coordinated practices of colonialism." (Popkewitz & Rizvi, 2009).

The next few sections investigate the reasons behind the unprecedented spread of English and how globalization helps to perpetuate this status. Exploring the *linguistic imperialism* of English help to reveal the influence globalization has on this language.

The power of English in the era of globalization

Around 375 million people speak English as their first language and 750 million people speak it as their second language (How many people speak English, n.d.). This huge number of speakers which outnumbers the speakers of all other languages indicates very clearly that English is the global language which predominates in the era of globalization. David Crystal one of the giant and prolific writers in this field, asserted that "There is the closest of links between language dominance and economic, technological, and cultural power. Without a strong-power base, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication." (Crystal, 2003, p. 7). Ciprianova & Vanco (2010) argued that the emergence of English as a global language is a result of the "unequal distribution of economic, political and cultural influence and a deliberate effort of native English speaking countries, mainly the United Kingdom and the United States of America to promote English around the world." Therefore, analyzing the major global forces (political, cultural, economic) and their connection with

English as primarily a tool of communication can reveal how these forces lead to the linguistic imperialism of this language which is the core theme of this paper.

Crystal (2003), attributed the global status-quo of English to "the expansion of British colonial power which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century" (p.59) and he asserted that the second factor is the one which continues to support the dominance of English in the world as Britain has lost its colonial power over its colonies around the world. Yet, the colonization period has greatly contributed to the formation of this powerful reputation English has gained worldwide. In the post-colonial era, Kell (2004) argued that proficiency in English is still linked with prestigious jobs and the possibility to study abroad or migrate to a desired destination in the Asian countries which were British colonies until 1970s. The model of the three circles of English coined by the US linguist, Braj Kachru clearly illustrated the influence of colonization on the spread of the English Language. (Crystal, 2003). According to this model, the distribution of English speakers is determined by the level of geographical influence of the English political power over a particular region. The first circle is the *inner circle* which refers to the native speaking countries of the language. The second circle is the *outer circle* which encompasses the countries which were British colonies during the history of colonization. In these countries " the language has become part of a country' chief institutions and plays an important ' second language' role in a multilingual setting" (Crystal, 2003). The third circle is the *expanding circle* which involves the countries that recognize the international role of English and had never been under parts of the British Empire. Figure 1 shows the three concentric circles and the estimated number of speakers in each one.

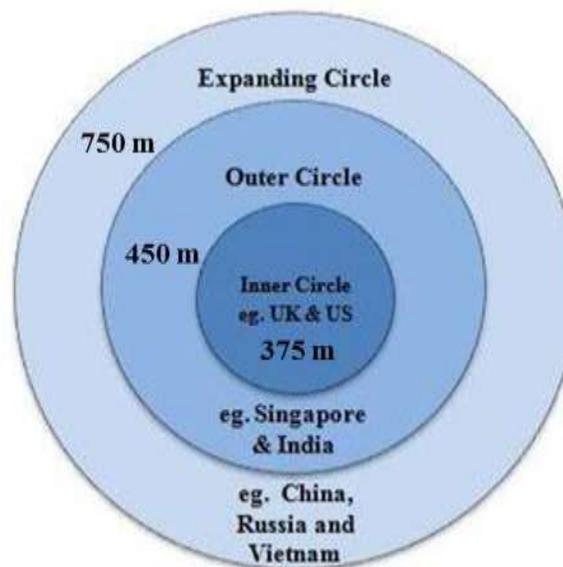


Figure 1. Kachru's circles of English

Along with the political power that contributed to the spread of English around the world, the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century in Britain and in the United States later in this century intensely strengthened the position of the English language in the world as most of the innovations that have been a turning point in the human civilization, were invented in these two English speaking countries (Crystal, 2003). As a result, the English language has become the medium of communication through which all humanity can get access to this new knowledge. This factor is still the chief reason behind the dominance of English as a global language, because globalization in its different aspects (e.g. Internet, new technologies and the competitive global market) helps to further this status.

Globalization and the linguistic imperialism

It goes beyond doubt that English is the lingua franca which enables people from different nations which have different languages to communicate with each other effectively. However, in this competitive global world, English has been viewed "as much more than simply a tool for communication." (Prey, 2001, p.21). Ciprianova & Vanco (2010) stated that many linguists such as Phillipson (1992), and Pennycook (1994,1998) argued that " the universal presence of English is a result of pursuing political and economic interests and of the effort of the British and the Americans to maintain control over the English language, often with the support of national organizations and ELT industry.". This can be interpreted as a new form of colonialism in which cultural and economic imperialism takes place through exploiting the unprecedented linguistic power of the English language. Robert Phillipson has coined the term *linguistic imperialism* to describe the wide spread of English as "a post-colonial endeavor" of the inner circle countries to maintain dominance over the other countries, especially the ones which were in the outer circle (McKay, 2003). By facilitating access to the language and language learning in the other nations, the native language speaking countries have created a solid foundation for a permanent successful industry (ELT industry) and simultaneously promote their culture and ideologies across the world. Khan (2009) pointed out that " although the majority of English language speakers in the world are in the 'expanding circle', hegemony of the 'center' (inner circle) persists when it comes to English language educational management" (p.191). This can be observed through the ELT centers mainly the British Council in the UK, AMIDEST, a center for the American Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL) exam in the Middle East and the International Displaced Person (IDP) agency in Australia. One of the clearest aspects that can obviously manifest the linguistic cultural imperialism is the international English proficiency tests: International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and TOFEL. These high-stakes international tests stand as a barrier to the majority of the English second language learners, a finding reached by Sarah Khan who has conducted a case study in Saudi Arabia. The participants of this study were twenty-four female students from the upper two levels in a college preparatory English program and five of their teachers. In the college, TOFEL is used as an entrance exam which means that the participants consider this test as a critical stage in their academic studies. The researcher has indicated in the findings' section that many participants have shown their dissatisfaction with this international test. That is because they believe that the test includes no "neutral content which is of general interest" to its takers and it does "privilege a specific culture" (Khan, 2009, p.202). They have argued that the listening and reading comprehension questions reflect a totally different context from their own and; consequently this hinders them from fully understanding the test questions. They have also pointed out that using American English in this test doesn't necessarily reflect the every-day language they are accustomed to.

There are some vocabulary and language expressions that do appear in the test and the majority of students are unfamiliar with. The same holds true with IELTS that represents the British English and its culture. The question is: Why do second language learners need to get exposed to the inner circles countries' cultures in order to pass these high-stakes tests, and; therefore, to survive in their societies through getting a degree certificate or a respectable job? Is being aware of the language native speakers' cultures a legitimate measure of language proficiency?

Yet, the reputation these tests have gained in Saudi Arabia and the other countries that use these international proficiency exams on a wide range makes it quite difficult for these nations to replace the tests with local exams due to " numerous socio-political and institutional benefits that ensue from [them]" and " the economic benefits that the creators of 'these tests' enjoy in collaborations with publishers of test preparation material which continue to maintain this status quo." (Khan, 2009, p. 203).

The linguistic imperialism can be also depicted "in the various ELT materials published and marketed by powerhouses like Longman, Oxford, Cambridge, Penguin, Macmillan, etc., and which are found almost all over the world." (Al-Issa, 2005) and, mainly, the global course books produced by the ELT international centers. Gray (2002) asserted that "Although course books are designed explicitly for the teaching of English language, they are also highly wrought cultural constructs and carriers of cultural messages." (p.152). Sheldon (1998) considered neglecting the cultural appropriacy as one of the major flaws of these textbooks. She added that the publishers "fail to recognize the likely restrictions operative in most teaching situations." (p. 239). According to the linguistic imperialism, this neglect could be deliberate as the publishers try to impose the native speaking countries' cultures on the other nations which intensely use these course books.

The commodification of English and the ELT Industry

The other and more powerful side of the linguistic imperialism is the economic motives of the countries in the inner circle; mainly the USA and the UK to create a strong industry which can guarantee a powerful position for these countries in the global competitive market. The great increasing need for English as an international language of knowledge, technology, economy, etc. has been nourishing the ELT industry around the globe. Heller (2010) stated that:

Late capitalism consists of the expansion of markets and their progressive saturation, resulting in an increased importance for language in (a) managing the flow of resources over extended spatial relations and compressed space-time relations, (b) provides symbolic added value to industrially produced resources, (c) facilitating the construction of and access to, and niche markets, and (d) developing linguistically mediated knowledge and service industries (p.103)

It is clear from what Heller asserted that late capitalism as a new form of the global economy has redefined the role of English and made the need for learning this language a top priority. Consequently, English has become a commodity that has its own market and consumers all over the world. This phenomenon is known by many sociolinguists as *the commodification of language* which is defined by Heller (2003) as :

a shift from a valuing of language for its basic communicative function and more emotive associations- national identity, cultural identity, the authentic spirit of people and so on- to valuing it for what it means in the globalized, deregulated,

hyper-competitive, post-industrial "new work order" in which we now live" (p. 295)

The commodification of English is a very noticeable global phenomenon which can be fairly recognized through the intensification of the ELT industry. The British Council, one of the giant ELT organizations worldwide, stated in the British Council Annual Report 2005-06 that the agency taught 1.1 million class hours of English to around 325,000 language learners in 53 countries and earned £ 81 million in that year (Cipriano & Vanco, 2010). It is worth mentioning here that this huge amount of money does not include the profits earned from administering the international high-stakes IELTS test. Another example of this intensification is the *Ambient Insight Regional Report, 2011-2016* which stated that "English language learning applications ranks consistently in the top-ten paid mobile learning applications in all the countries in Asia. Consumer spending on mobile-based ELT products represents significant new revenues for suppliers". Moreover, the annual report 2010/2011 published by Oxford University Press, one of the top ten ELT publishers, shows that the press in 2011 published about 1,200 new printed and online ELT products to second language learners worldwide. This huge number of products is only produced by one British publisher in one year. What about the other famous ELT publishers such as Longman, Macmillan/MEP, Cambridge University Press, Heinemann, Pearson, Collins and so on? These publishers which distribute their printed and online English language learning resources worldwide are a tangible indication that this industry is witnessing an era of prosperity. As an English language teacher and learner, the researcher can feel this intensification through the overwhelming teaching/learning resources that can be obtained from online websites, bookshops, international book fairs, advertisements received through mails and emails. There are also lots of agencies that offer books, teaching resources, traditional and online English learning courses and preparation courses for IELTS or TOFEL, besides the fabulous offers made by private and international schools for parents to send their kids to get their education in English.

To sum up what has been discussed earlier, it is evident that globalization has played a major role in creating (through colonization) and furthering the global role of English as a language which has both use-value and exchange-value. The term, *linguistic imperialism*, can obviously illustrate the cultural and economic motives of inner circle countries for maintaining the status-quo of English. As a language teacher who teaches English to college freshmen in Oman (a country located in the expanding circle according to Kachru's model), exploring the level of awareness of my colleagues about the impact of globalization on Language teaching and the challenges they encounter is very significant. Being aware of these various dimensions which undoubtedly affect the ELT realm would definitely help the English language teachers to better understand their role.

Methodology

For the purpose of collecting data, a questionnaire has been distributed among a convenience sample which is around thirty English teachers who teach the intensive English language program to freshmen in different Omani higher education institutes. The questionnaire attempted to reveal the participants' level of awareness of the current impacts of globalization on ELT realm, and to investigate their attitudes and the challenges they encounter as non-native speakers and teachers of the English language. The questionnaire (Appendix 1) consisted of two parts. The first part contained five items which required the participants' opinion about the language; these opinions are based on their experience as second language learners. The second part of the

questionnaires included miscellaneous open-ended questions which have been derived from what has been discussed in the literature review.

Findings

I have divided the questions and the participants' responses into three categories:

- 1- The importance of English in the world of globalization.
- 2- Globalization and ELT.
- 3- Teachers' awareness of their role in the era of globalization.

The participants' responses to the questions that fall under the first category have revealed that teachers are fully aware of the strong position English holds globally. 86% of the total participants have agreed that learning English is a top priority in order to survive in the new global community. 55% is the total proportion of those who believe that they are interested in learning the language because it offers them more job opportunities. With regard to the second category, a huge percentage of the participants (82%) have seconded the statement that English has been commodified in the global competitive market and 59% have agreed with the statement that says that ELT and ETS centers have imperialistic agenda (Economic and cultural) through spreading the language worldwide. Some participants indicated that the need for getting a high score in IELTS or TOFEL as a top requirement for getting a job or applying for higher education degree proves the agenda testing agencies have to gain more money and turn the language into a commodity. They elaborated on this idea by adding that these proficiency tests are valid for two years only. They believed this period is very short because sitting for a new test is finically demanding.

As for the third category, the majority of the participants have showed different concerns about the challenges they face as language teachers and how the linguistic imperialism in its two forms has forced them to adopt new teaching methods in their classrooms. 52% of these teachers have indicated that they usually use global course books with their students. These course books, as indicated earlier are produced by the language speaking countries. Most of the participants' responses fall in the "fair" category when evaluating these textbooks according to the given criteria. Although 50% of the participants have found these course books, to some extent, culturally appropriate, 40% of them have evaluated them as culturally inappropriate textbooks. One of the participants asserted that "These course books in general do not consider the cultural differences between the different contexts in the world. Therefore, ELT teachers have to face the challenge of adapting them to suit their students and the cultural background of the context in which they teach." Another teacher added "I believe that most of them [the course books] are still written from a western point of view." For example, some course books, which are widely used in the Arab world countries for EFL learners, are British-centric. Although these books are intended for international learners across the world, the content usually highlights British celebrities (pop stars, authors, poets, actors, etc.), British cities, and facts about the British society in general. In addition, some readings texts and photos associated with them cover culturally- inappropriate themes such as: romantic stories and songs. In other cases, teachers need to spend lots of time explaining background knowledge related to topics that are unfamiliar to students. Teachers find themselves forced to use these global commercial textbooks for various reasons. The most common reasons are: the pedagogical demands met in these textbooks and the lack of professional local textbooks.

Although we cannot ensure that emphasizing the western culture in these textbooks is a hidden agenda for the publisher, the linguistic imperialism theory discussed earlier does support this view.

With regard to the teaching approach EFL teacher needs to adapt, about 95% of the participants acknowledged that the linguistic needs of the language learners have changed, due to the global economic and cultural changes. Consequently, teachers need to adopt new strategies in teaching the language to their students. Most of them stated that learners need a "language for communicative purposes" not the Standard English of literature and books. Another teacher indicated that exposing learners to a variety of accents other than the British and American accents is what learners need in order to "prepare them for the real world where communication occurs most of the time between non-native language speakers."

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the questionnaire, the participants have addressed the major challenges they face because of the linguistic imperialism of English. These challenges can be summarized below:

1-The changing linguistic and communicative needs of the language learners. For instance, what is the proper English that learners need as there are nowadays endless varieties of English created by second language learners and media? Also, the teachers need to be aware of the changing communicative needs of their students because the purpose behind learning the English language differs from one learner to another.

2- The cultural barrier which has been forced by the global course books used by the majority of the English teachers in the intensive programs is another challenge. These course books usually include themes which are either inappropriate to discuss or totally unfamiliar to many learners who have different cultures. I think there is nothing wrong with getting exposed to unfamiliar cultures and gain, through their language, some knowledge about the different aspects of their lifestyles. However, the topics should be carefully selected which consider the age of learners and their cultural backgrounds, as well as being pedagogically effective for learning the language.

Investigating the related literature which is devoted to the major challenges faced by English teachers and the possible pedagogical suggestions to deal with these challenges can be the subject of another paper.

About the Author:

Jokha Al Hosni is a language instructor in the Language center at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. She holds an MA in Curriculum Studies from Purdue University, USA. Her research interests include: Curriculum design, teaching reading to EFL young adults and blended learning.

References

- A, Sam (Ed). (2012). The Asia Market for Digital English Language Learning Products and Services: 2011-2016 Forecast and Analysis. *Ambient Insight Regional Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.ambientinsight.com/Resources/Documents/AmbientInsight-2011-2016-Asia-Digital-English-Language-Learning-Market-Abstract.pdf>
- Al- Isaa, A. (2005). The Role of English Culture in the Omani Language Education System: An Ideological Perspective. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 18 (3), 258-270.
- Annual report of the delegates of the university press. (2011). Oxford University Press. Retrieved from http://fds.oup.com/www.oup.com/pdf/OUP_Annual_Report_2010-11.pdf
- Ciprianova, E & Vanco, M. (2010). English in the age of globalization: Changing ELT models, restructuring relationships. Retrieved from <http://www.uab.ro/cercetare/ciel/jolie/JoLIE%20lucrari%20pentru%202010/pdfs/8.cipriana-nova-vanco.pdf>
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a Global Language*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, J. (2002). The Global Coursebook in English Language Teaching. In B, David. & C, Deborah (Eds). *Globalization and Language Teaching*. (pp.151- 168). USA: Routledge.
- Heller , M. (2003) Globalization, the new economy, and the commodification of language and identity . *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(4), 473 – 492.
- Heller, M. (2010). The Commodification of Language. *The Annual Review of Anthropology*. (pp.101-110). Annual Reviews.
- How many people speak English? (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-faq-the-english-language.htm>
- Kahn, k. S. (2009). Imperialism of International Test: An EIL Perspective. In S, Farzad. (Ed.). *English as an International Language: Perspectives and Pedagogical Issues*. (pp.190-205). UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Kachru, B. (1990). *The Alchemy of English: The spread, functions and models and non-native Englishes*. US: Illini Books.
- Kell, P. (2004). Appropriating English: The Global Business of Teaching English in South East Asia. The 15th Annual Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.uab.ro/cercetare/ciel/jolie/JoLIE%20lucrari%20pentru%202010/pdfs/8.cipriana-nova-vanco.pdf>
- Kumaravadivelu, K. (2006). Dangerous liaisons: globalization, empire and TESOL. In J, Edge (Ed). *The (Re-) framing process as a collaborative locus for change*. (pp.1-26). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan
- Popkewitz, T. S., & Rizvi, F. (2009). Globalization and the study of education: An introduction. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 108 (2), 7-28.
- Prey, R. (2001). How Do You Say Imperialism? The English Language Teaching Industry and the Culture of Imperialism in South Korea. Retrieved from summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/8706/etd1708.pdf
- Sheldon, L. (1998). Evaluating ELT Textbooks and Materials. *ELT Journal*, 42 (4), 237-246.
- Tobin, J. (1998). Globalization of the world economy. Retrieved from <http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/216/45906.html>

Appendix- Questionnaire

I am a language instructor at Sultan Qaboos University and I am currently conducting a research paper about the linguistic Imperialism of the English Language. For the purpose of completing this questionnaire, globalization is defined as "new patterns of worldwide interconnectedness- the stretching of social relations and economic activities across national spaces and regions in various complex networks of interaction." (Popkewitz & Rizvi, 2009). This anonymous questionnaire attempts to reveal the non-native English Teachers' level of awareness of the current impacts of globalization on ELT realm, investigate their attitudes towards these impacts and the challenges they encounter as non-native learners and teachers of the language. The information you will kindly provide will be kept confidential. The time and effort devoted to completing this questionnaire is highly appreciated.

Thank you in advance!

Part One:

1- As a non-native English language learner, I believe that:

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Learning English has become a top priority in order to survive in the new global community.					
2	I learn English mainly because it offers me more job opportunities					
3	English has nowadays been viewed as a "commodity" which has its own market and consumers.					
4	International English proficiency exams such as TOFEL and IELTS stand as a big barrier before non-native English learners who seek jobs or degree certificates... etc.					
5	ELT institutes and ETS centers have imperialistic agenda (Economic and cultural) through spreading the language worldwide.					

Part Two:

1. As a non-native English Language teacher, I believe that:

The global economic and cultural changes have forced me to adopt new strategies in teaching English to my students.

Yes

No

1.2 Please explain your answer based on your teaching experience.

.....

2. The linguistic needs of English language learners have changed because of globalization.

Yes

No

Please explain your answer based on your teaching experience.

.....

3. Please indicate how often you use a global English course book with your students. Circle the appropriate answer.

N.B. A global course book is a textbook which is not written for learners from a particular culture or country, but which is intended for use by any class of learners in the specified level anywhere in the world.

- a. Usually
- b. Sometimes
- c. Never

Please evaluate these textbooks using the criteria below.

	Criterion	Poor	Fair	Excellent
1	Culturally appropriate			
2	Relevant to learners interests			
3	Authentic (Expressing real- world situations , realistic, intended for ELT setting)			
4	Educationally Valid (Is it in tune with broader educational concerns?)			
5	Cost-effective			

4. If you have any further comments, I would be very appreciative and they would definitely be of great value.

.....

