On the Study of English as a World Lingua Franca: Some Implications for Training in EFL Contexts

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Abstract

This paper tries to shed light on the general belief that effective English language training can only take place in English-speaking countries. As a result, it is generally felt that those who were locally trained have always been put at disadvantage by academic institutions in matters pertaining to appointment. Thus, in an attempt to redress the balance, this paper has explored and refuted this belief in the light of the present status of English as a world lingua franca. The paper starts with a detailed explanation of two related concepts that are currently used in the literature: English as a world lingua franca (henceforth ELF) and English as an international language (henceforth EIL) as distinct from the traditional concepts of English as a second language (henceforth ESL) and English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL). It then proceeds to discuss issues pertaining to training in EFL contexts.

Key Terms: lingua franca, training, ELF, EFL, EIL

Introduction

There is a general belief amongst EFL teachers and learners that effective study and post-graduate research in English can only take place in English speaking countries. There seems to be two reasons to support this claim. First, many colleges and universities stipulate that applicants for academic vacancies should be trained in English-speaking countries. Thus, those who were trained locally would end up teaching at ESP sections or community colleges; English departments always remained elusive to them. Second, perhaps due to their awareness of the general attitude towards training in English-speaking countries, most teaching assistants and demonstrators at EFL English departments would prefer to have their training in these countries despite the availability of the relevant programmes in many local academic institutions. Needless to say, such training would enable them to evade academic discrimination upon starting their career.

English as a world lingua franca

This section reports on the defining features of ELF as distinct from the dominant ESL/EFL approaches. To begin with, ELF and EIL have emerged to refer to the study and use of English as a means of international communication. It is the growing need for English worldwide that has given impetus to the emergence of such an approach to English language education and

research. It is important, therefore, to report the defining features of the new approach and show the rationale for proposing it as an addition and/or alternative to the existing ESL/EFL models before considering its relevance to the local practice and training issues.

This paper chooses to use the term ELF because it seems more appropriate in diagnosing the status of English worldwide. Compared to EIL, ELF clearly shows that English is used for communication by speakers with different language backgrounds. According to A GLOSSARY OF LINGUA FRANCA, the term "lingua franca is a pidgin, trade language used by numerous language communities around the Mediterranean, to communicate with others whose language they did not speak". By contrast, EIL can be used by nations who did not develop a single national language as it is the case of many African countries, e.g. Nigeria, Kenya, Southern Sudan, etc. These countries chose English basically because of the influence of the British colonialism and   their recognition of the status of English as a means of international communication.

According to Seindlhofer (2005), the use of English as ELF means that "for the majority of its users, English is a foreign language, and the vast majority of verbal exchanges in English do not involve any native speakers of the language at all."   This reality in the use of English language worldwide might have persuaded Crystal (1988), as quoted in Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, to argue that "we may, in due course, all need to be in control of two standard Englishes: the one which gives us our national and local identity, and the other which puts us in touch with the rest of the human race". This is particularly true in the case of spoken English. In different parts of the world, English is spoken with different speech sounds and different accents to the extent that it is hardly intelligible. A case in point is the educational scene in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and perhaps in other gulf countries as well where there are many Asian and African teachers (Arab and non-Arab). In many interactions between teachers, the most frequent communicative function is "asking for repetition" owing to the pronunciation differences. What remains the same across the globe is the written text. While it is true that advocates of the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis contend that culture shapes writing in the same language (cf. Kaplan, 1980; 1983), literatures produced in different corners of the world could easily be read and understood. Thus, compared to the aural-oral skills, the paper skills tend to be more universal and freer of the linguistic and cultural complications that might hinder communication.

However, both EFL and EIL can be used interchangeably to refer to the use of English as a means of communication inside and outside of the major English-speaking countries regardless of the presence of other national languages. Talebineazhad and Aliakbar (2001) report nine assumptions that underlie the use of EIL. A brief summary of each will be given below:

i. EIL is descriptive. This assumption approves of "learners' equal rights" to use this tool of international communication in the variety that suits them.

ii. EIL is reformative, that is, EIL is conceived to replace the traditional ESL/EFL models. Justification for such a replacement arises from the global nature of EIL, which is claimed to be lacking in ESL/EFL models.

iii. EIL is inter-varietal. This assumption extremely revolutionizes the study and use of English worldwide in that it challenges the concept of standard English. That is, "… no speaker is realized as extreme… received pronunciation may no longer be considered the ultimate model, the acquisition of native-like accent is no longer the ultimate objective of the majority of learners…"

iv. EIL is functional. From the perspective of this assumption, learners shall not have to be competent in all the formal and functional aspects of English language. All they need is a certain amount of English to use in a communicative event, i.e. talking to a doctor, a banker, an airport official, etc. This assumption lies at the heart of the definition of the term "international English" by Wikipedia encyclopedia. This especially has to do with "English words and phrases generally understood throughout the English-speaking world as opposed to localisms". Thus, it is these words and phrases that English users need to use in different communicative events worldwide. Wikipedia goes so far as to restrict "international English" to "academic and scientific communities, where formal English usage is prevalent, and creative use of the language is at a minimum". Indeed, among all the forms of English language use, it is the academic and scientific discourse that remains the most intelligible variety to those involved in academic and scientific activities.

v. EIL is non-artificial. Of course, it is a natural language since it is conceived to stem from English language.

vi. EIL is inter-cultural and cross-cultural. As a means of international communication, EIL is expected to accommodate all the cultural backgrounds of its users. Smith

(1983), as quoted in Talebineazhad and Aliakbar (2001), conceives of EIL as "a value free or cosmopolitan English that is quite independent of any cultural background but able to represent, describe, and illustrate all cultures with equal vigour".

vii.   EIL is multi-cultural. This assumption centres upon the interaction between cultures, which, in turn, arises from the communicative events where people with different cultural backgrounds communicate in English.

viii.   EIL is universal. This assumption is axiomatic in nature, and is taken for granted.

Arguments about Local Training

The claim made in (1) above seems to rest on the assumption that being amid native speakers, learners can always avail themselves of natural situations to practice their English. Indeed, it is practice that transforms learners' passive language input into active language output. But should practice be necessarily done in countries where English is spoken natively? Yet, assuming that most learners need English for utilitarian purposes (cf. Al-Busairi, 1991), which English-speaking country could provide the best practice? What about the other countries where English has an official status?

Traditionally, English language is associated with two countries: Britain and USA. This view is reinforced by two facts. First, sociolinguistic resources (cf. Trudgill, 1973) differentiate between two major English varieties corresponding to these two countries. Second, most advanced learner's dictionaries label all types of lexical information included therein as either British or American.

Thus, most teachers would recommend Britain and/or the USA for better learning opportunities. However, this tendency can be argued to be less convincing in the light of the present day English status across the globe. Other things being equal, Britain and the United States of America no longer hold the copyright on the use of English as for a number of reasons. First, Kachru and Nelson (1996: 74-75) mark the Australian, Canadian and New Zealand English dialects as "commonly accepted" English varieties alongside the British and American ones. They also list about forty African, European, and Asian countries where English has an official status.

In an attempt to classify the type of English users worldwide, Kachru and Nelson propose three "concentric circles" on the basis of the English function in each country; these circles are the "Inner Circle", "the Outer Circle" and the "Expanding Circle". As to the first circle, it includes the five countries mentioned above; namely, Great Britain, the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The Outer circle is conceived to consist of countries where English has

roles in "education, governance, literary creativity and popular culture". The countries associated with this type of use are India, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, etc. Finally, the countries belonging to the Expanding Circle use English "for more specific purposes" than those of the Outer Circle. That is, they use English for "technical and scientific purposes". This category includes Iran, China, Japan, Korea, etc. (p. 77-78).

Second, even when accepting the view that training and practice can only be done in Britain and the United States of America, there still remains a question about the amount of time needed to achieve satisfactory performance. Implicit in this view is the assumption that learners should stay in an English-speaking indefinitely for effective practice to take place. Indeed, since language is an open-ended phenomenon, learners would always stay for more language updates.

Third, the present world is often referred to as a "global village" owing to the communication revolution. Events that occur in different corners of the globe can be readily known to people almost at the time of their occurrence through a variety of media: satellite channels, the Internet, radio stations and cell phones, to mention but some. Access to teaching and research materials has also been tremendously facilitated in all forms: hard and soft materials (written and audio-visual).

Needless to say, English is the major medium of communication for most events and resources. On the basis of statistics, McCrum et al (1987: 1) state that toward the end of the twentieth century, English "is more widely scattered, more widely spoken and written than any language has ever been". The fact that this is so, they report, stems from two statistical realities: about one billion people across the globe speak English, with half of them speaking it natively. Also, compared to the German and French lexical repertoire (i.e. 185,000 and 100,000 words respectively at the time the book was published), English had about 500,000 words. Thus, the various communicative needs of the great number of English users legitimately match the richness of the English vocabulary. McCrum, Cran and MacNeil are justified in concluding that English "has become the language of the planet, the first truly global language" (ibid).

Alongside the language needs associated with Kachru and Nelson's (1996) concentric Outside and Expanding Circles, some countries, e.g. India, South Africa, etc. need English owing to their acute multilingualism. Of course, promotion of a local language to be the country's national language would aggravate their political and social problems and could even endanger their national unity. Therefore, taking refuge into English would be an acceptable compromise.

In the light of what has so far been said about the international status of English language, this paper argues that successful language education does not necessarily take place in the major English-speaking countries only, namely Great Britain and the United States of America. This argument seems to be reinforced by the fact that non-English speaking countries can have their own training programmes that could be as successful as those of the major countries in the concentric Inside Circle.

It is true that it always remains preferable for most EFL learners to acquire English in countries where it is spoken natively. Other things being equal, in such learning situations learners could but communicate in English. Thus, even when they could not rise to the expectations of their interlocutors, listening to others speaking would further familiarize learners with the speech sounds, native accents and ultimately enable them to recognize dialectal differences. Moreover, many such training programmes involve accommodating learners with hosting families, adding further opportunities for learners to practice their English.

Despite all these advantages of this type of learning, it can also be argued to be defective in many ways. First, quite a limited number of learners can access it; due to the high cost involved, only those who are financially able can be enrolled in the relevant programmes. Second, most training programmes (particularly the non-degree programmes) last for a short time, which can hardly qualify learners to communicate competently in the four skills. On the other hand, degree programmes have their own problems. For instance, since such programmes centre upon linguistics and literature, learners would spend most of their time communicating with books. Needless to say, "bookish language", so to speak, is hardly communicative in situations requiring face-to-face or phone interaction. It is interesting to mention in this connection that reports indicated that a number of African scholars doing their postgraduate training in Britain and USA were criticized for speaking 'bookishly' when they communicated with native speakers (cf. Abdalla, 2007). All in all, learners would end up acquiring academic English which is the least useful variety outside of academic institutions. It goes without saying that such book-based training could equally be acquired in the learner's country.

Where postgraduate training is concerned, most of us prefer to receive it in an English-speaking country (preferably Britain and US). Part of the reason that we chose to do so seem to have something to do with developing our linguistic and communicative competence. In other words, those on a study course would be more exposed to English, which is expected to improve their communication skills. Once more, such an objective could be refuted on two grounds. First,

it would be too late to improve one's communicative competence at this stage.; for if they had not done so during their four-year undergraduate training, they could not have been expected to fix it in a nine-month stay, say, for an MA degree in an English-speaking country. Second, assuming that some postgraduate students do indeed need such exposure, they are unlikely to succeed in dealing with the course content (basically linguistics or literature) that they have been sent for.

Justification for both institutional and individual interest in postgraduate training in the major English-speaking countries could have been more logical if it had been intended for quality purposes. Annual classification of world universities has to date placed American and British universities on the top of the hierarchy of educational quality. The question to be addressed in this connection is whether to eternalize such training interest. It seems that practice does not support such training tendency, that is many third world academic institutions did nativise English postgraduate training despite most trainees' dissatisfaction with it. If given the choice, most postgraduate students would choose British and American Universities to obtain their degrees. Thus some effort need to be made to persuade them of the relevance and visibility of local training.

Fortunately, modern technology has greatly facilitated the access to the educational materials in all forms: aural, oral and written. These can be availed online or as software stored in disks. Now learners do not have to travel to the Britain or USA to acquire native accent. The relevant material can easily be imported to train learners in all aspects of English pronunciation.

Some EFL teachers and researchers might wish to contend that local training could be devoid of an appropriate cultural level or would tend to legitimize foreign accents. Regarding the first preservation, the cultural aspects of English, as it is the case for other languages, is an inherent component of what has come to known as social English. Now, cell phones short messages, chat rooms on the internet, chat programmes on T.V. etc. are reliable resources for such language components.

As to the "deviant English pronunciation", advocates of the Interlanguage Hypothesis (cf. Corder 1981; Selinker, 1984; Nemser, 1984) argue that formal language education (whether in the Inside, Outside or Expanding Circle) hardly results in the acquisition of a native accent. In other words, the speech of EFL learners would always suffer from a foreign accent however insignificant it is. Thus, whether people learn English in their countries or in Britain or USA, they would end up incorporating fossilized foreign accents in their EFL speech. Thus, it is doubtful

whether the training time spent amid native speakers could produce native accent. Such terms as "idiosyncratic dialects", "Interlanguage" and "approximative systems" (as used by the scholars quoted above respectively) function as descriptive tools for language forms produced by (any) language learners. If this is the case, then learners do not need to travel all the way to Great Britain and the USA to acquire an (approximative) native accent. There are two facts that support this reasoning. First, the scholars just quoted contend that learners' speech would always be characterized by a foreign accent no matter what the level of their proficiency in the target language. Second, modern technology has greatly benefited oral-aural skills. (Free and paid) listening and speaking materials are available online and on disks; these are basically intended for educational purposes. Satellite channels can also function as reliable resources for native accent. It is interesting to note that satellite channels show a variety of speech forms ranging from most formal to least formal overtones.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper is not nor can it be an attempt to detract from the value of English learning and postgraduate training in the English-speaking countries. However, it warns against the institutional tendencies that favour those trained in these countries, which is conceived to be a form of academic discrimination, putting those who are trained locally at disadvantage. In the light of the ideas and facts reported in (2) and (3) above, this paper can arrive at a number of conclusions. First, the time spent in an English speaking country (e.g. for a summer course, one academic year for an MA, etc.) is hardly enough to improve one's linguistic and communicative competence, and could not, therefore, be a valid basis for such academic favourtism. Secondly, English is currently spoken in a number of dialects and accents that sometimes tend to be fairly unintelligible. It is doubtful, therefore, whether the training received in an English-speaking country is more appropriate than local training in preparing learners to communicate in English across the globe. Third, where postgraduate training students are concerned, most of their training involves the use of academic English. The best resource for such language is academic texts; these no doubt, place the relevant trainees on the same footing with those receiving local training. Fourth, it is now internationally admitted that two Englishes are in the making: the one used by the traditional native speakers and the one conceived to function as a world lingua franca. It is uncertain whether the students are trained in both varieties in the English-speaking countries.

I would like to conclude by requesting all the relevant academic institutions to objectively consider the issues which have arisen by the approach to English as a lingua franca in their training and employment policies.

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