

Language and Teaching Materials in ELT: An EIL Approach

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Abstract | The current cultural, functional and linguistic multiplicity associated with the English language has led to the pressing need not only to reassess essential notions in English Language Teaching (ELT), but also to reconsider traditional pedagogical practices.

Until now, for instance, the decision regarding which instructional variety should be used in a curriculum was generally made without much thought; the choice was mainly centered on already previously established concepts or on the status quo (with particular prominence being given to Standard British or American English). But, when considering the present use of English as an international language, several aspects should be further considered as well, namely: students' needs and goals, teachers' capability and accessible resources.

The aim of this article is therefore to introduce readers to central issues like language diversity in ELT (not only in terms of native speaker varieties, but also regarding the need to develop communication skills for different communicative situations), and the importance of adapting and creating teaching materials for classroom use. Regarding the latter issue, particular reference is made to creating materials for effective language learning, as well as to how an international perspective can be incorporated into ELT materials so as to prepare students to communicate successfully in a variety of contexts.

Key words | English as an international language, English language teaching, varieties of English, teaching materials

1. Introduction

Due to the lack of solid statistical information and the existing vagueness in defining the notion of “English users”, estimating the exact number of the English speakers at a global level is an especially arduous task. Several numbers have been proposed by various researchers, but the most well-known researcher is perhaps Crystal (2003), who estimates that there are approximately 1.1 to 1.8 billion users of English around the world, of which only 320 to 380 million are native speakers of the language. Ten years later, these numbers have already increased by far, especially when considering the continuous ascending trend in the number of English learners in the last decades.

Numbers alone, however, do not give us an understanding of the extensive and pervasive use of English. The variety of different roles and domains in which it is used also need to be contemplated, particularly regarding business, higher education, the entertainment industry, the Internet and transportation. In addition, Crystal also argues that “a language achieves a genuinely global status” (3) when its unique role is also acknowledged in nations where it is mainly not spoken as the general population’s mother tongue.

A particularly relevant model that grasps the types of spread, patterns of acquisition and functions English takes on in each country is Kachru’s Concentric circle model (Kachru, “Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism”). This model allows for a general understanding of the different functions English assumes around the world by means of three concentric circles – the Inner, Outer and Expanding circle. The first one refers to countries where English is the first language of the majority of the inhabitants, the second one is applied to countries where English assumes the role of a second language (L2) and the latter, to countries where it is mainly used as a foreign language.

In addition to its role in separate countries, English has also attained an important position worldwide where it is viewed as the most common and shared language of contact between people from varied cultural, linguistic, and national settings. Moreover, the progresses in faster and cheaper means of transportation and communication, and the increasing use of the

Internet, have likewise played an important role in establishing a variety of opportunities for using English in an array of multicultural and multilingual settings.

Considering these issues, the present sociolinguistic situation is characterized as being uniquely diverse, therefore, complicating how ELT can and should be approached. From a traditional point of view, the English that is taught is customarily viewed as being “a more static and monolithic entity” (Matsuda 3); however, due to its global use, localized varieties of the language have appeared in order to adjust to new sociolinguistic and sociocultural environments (Kachru, “Models for non-native Englishes”). It may therefore be argued that the ideal of a single standard and fixed variety does not exist in reality, subsisting only in the prescriptive rules of grammar books. In real use, language changes in time and is inherently unstable. Bearing in mind this fact, Graddol reiterates that “[English is no longer] English as we have known it, and have taught it in the past as a foreign language” but “a new phenomenon” (11) known as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or even as English as an International Language (EIL).¹

As a result, there is an increasing need to reconsider ELT when compared to other foreign languages, especially due to its international nature. As McKay argues, “the teaching and learning of an international language must be based on a . . . different set of assumptions than the teaching and learning of any other second or foreign language” (McKay, “Teaching English as an International Language” 11). Due to the variety of linguistic forms, functions and profiles of English users in ELT, Matsuda has likewise put forth several pressing issues, which need to be addressed, namely: 1) who should be the “model” English speaker in ELT; 2) which English variety should be adopted as the instructional model; and 3) which culture should embody an English-speaking culture.

Considering these issues, several are the factors that need to be reassessed, especially those related to classroom practices, and learners’ and teachers’ attitudes (e.g. Sharifan 2009), which play a vital role in preparing effective English language users.

In view of all these aspects, the main focus of this paper is to introduce pre-service and even in-service teachers to relevant issues which need much reflection, namely the dilemma of

which instructional variety should be selected for the classroom, its consequent effects in creating suitable language learning/teaching materials and lastly, how an international perspective of English can be incorporated into ELT materials.

2. Selecting an Instructional Variety: Towards an International Perspective

When organizing an English language course, deciding on a specific instructional variety of English is essential, as it will guide the various parts of a curriculum in both oral and written production. However, current trends in ELT syllabus design appear to make little provision for the existing linguistic diversity. According to Cogo and Dewey, there still continues to be the widely held assumption that language-teaching norms can be centrally determined and universally applied (172). In fact, in practice, the tendency is for decisions to be hastily made by teachers who usually take into consideration prior concepts already implemented or the established *status quo*. Standard British or American English are therefore the two most chosen varieties,² as they are recognized as the “established” varieties with the most importance and legitimacy in the majority of international situations.

Although both varieties are legitimate options, ideally, language practitioners should also consider the present day use of English as the main idiom employed in transnational settings – at national, European and global levels. By restricting students’ contact to a limited range of varieties, they never actually have the opportunity to acknowledge the reality of most communicative exchanges, which by and large take place among interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Assuming that contact situations are characterized as being highly unpredictable, the variety/ies that is/are used in each circumstance depend/s on those taking part in the communicative interaction, especially when considering that each person uses the variety they are most familiar with.

Consequently, it may also be argued that there is no distinct variety that can be used successfully in every communicative context, as most communicative situations are fluctuating and unstable. Only if there were to exist a single stable community, would an international

variety of English arise; however, in practice this is highly improbable. For that reason, instead of centering one's attention only on a specific variety, attention should also be placed on how to overcome the different linguistic barriers that may emerge when communicating with others. In order to do so, one important issue to learn is how participants can converge towards their interlocutors as communication progresses. According to Jenkins (2000) this can be done by acquiring and developing several accommodation skills and communicative strategies which are essential, namely: drawing on extralinguistic cues, gauging interlocutors' linguistic repertoires, supportive listening, signaling non-comprehension in a face-saving way, asking for repetition, paraphrasing, and clarifying requests so that participants can check, monitor and clarify their understanding. These strategies not only contribute to raising students' awareness to existing accommodation skills, but also prove how different English varieties can be used in achieving effective intercultural communication.

For that reason, regardless of the dominant variety chosen by the teacher, it is necessary learners' realize that it is only one of many others they may encounter once outside the classroom. By exposing them to different varieties, students will be able to understand the existing linguistic diversity within the English language and become familiar with other cultures as well. Providing students with the opportunity to interact with English users who have had different linguistic and cultural experiences is therefore essential for the learning experience. Having a diverse international teaching staff or guest visitors (both national or from abroad) is one option, but another one may also involve exchange programs with students from abroad. Even if those exchanges are simply restricted to Internet communities and social network services (e.g. blogs, Facebook, Moodle, YouTube), the aim is for them to effectively and actively contribute to a network, and to communicate with other peers.

A practical example of this is the role that the European Commission has had in supporting exchanges at a European level with several programs, of which the Comenius Program is included. The main aim of the Comenius Program (European Commission), which focuses on all levels of school education, is to help young people and educational staff to better

understand the range of European cultures, languages and values. In addition, funding is likewise available in terms of actions related to school education, such as:

- **School partnerships**, which enable school co-operation and class exchanges in different European countries. These partnerships not only contribute to foreign language learning, but also promote intercultural awareness. Moreover, they also play an important role in creating positive attitudes towards learning among students, and in developing new and collaborative teaching approaches among teachers;
- **Regio partnerships**, which consist in bilateral partnerships between school authorities of different regions. The main aim is essentially to enrich the educational offer to students in the participating regions;
- **eTwinning** – an Internet platform for teachers and schools, which takes advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet and digital media. In addition, it also contributes to promote school cooperation, collaborative learning and project based pedagogy at a European level.

With these types of programs, both teachers and learners interact with people from different countries. Accordingly, these experiences not only contribute to raising one's awareness towards how English is spoken differently around Europe, but also to developing one's accommodation skills (especially regarding the comprehension of different accents, among other issues).

Another approach that may likewise be taken into account when choosing a variety, and which is probably the most accessible one for teachers, includes the teaching materials made available (e.g. CDs, textbooks, videos and ELT websites). However, despite the general acknowledgement that it has become a widely distributed and linguistically diverse language, there is very little information on material development for teaching English from an international perspective. For that reason, learning how to adapt or select already existing materials, and how

to design original ELT resources is vital when developing a class syllabus.

As Seidlhofer puts it, “what is crucial therefore is not *what* teaching materials are used but *how* they are used” (201).

3. Rethinking Teaching Materials for an International Perspective

Over the years, ELT processes and teaching materials have gone through several changes regarding both grammar and culture. While in the 1940s and 1950s materials focused primarily on grammatical issues, in the 1960s there was a shift towards a more social perspective of language. Later in the 1970s, from a sociolinguistic point of view, Hymes (1972) presented several issues worth considering when observing language use, namely possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performance, which brought important implications for ELT. According to him, standards of correctness should be observed in language use, as well as in issues of language appropriateness. As a result, textbooks began to be arranged according to social situation and/or language function, in which particular emphasis was given on the surface to language use and language appropriateness, while grammatical issues were camouflaged in the dialogs written to exemplify and practice specific grammatical structures (McKay, “Teaching Materials”). Up to this day, this continues to be the most common practice in the majority of the published ELT textbooks.

As for culture, reference in this area usually lies on the literature, customs and holidays of English-speaking countries, especially from the United Kingdom and the United States, with occasional references made to Australia or Canada. This longtime emphasis on the British and/or American culture is greatly owed to both countries’ dominant role in the ELT book-publishing scene.

Regardless of these issues, teaching materials have always played a key role in ELT, and the current profusion of resources reveals the extent to which both institutions and teachers take into account published work to mold their teaching methods and goals. Rubdy, for instance, refers to some of the benefits of using published materials (cf. 39-40):

- Textbooks offer a feeling of security and self-confidence in teachers;
- They provide certainty and structure which promotes a sense of safety in in-classroom contact;
- They are presented as a “direction map” for both teachers and learners to follow;
- And they may also serve as agents of change by persuading teachers to adjust their traditional teaching approaches.

Nonetheless, taking on an exclusively textbook oriented approach nowadays does not quite meet the expectations of the majority of the communicative interactions. In addition, due to the increasing number of English speakers, especially in terms of macroacquisition³ (Brutt-Griffler 14), various implications may also emerge in the development of materials with an international perspective of the language. In view of these issues, the question that persists is: in what way can teachers adapt their materials and curriculum so as to undertake a more EIL perspective?

To begin with, and as previously mentioned, English is now more varied than ever before, and it is especially through contemporary literature that distinct English features are clearly visible in the grammatical norms and lexical use (many of which have been studied – e.g. V.S. Naipaul or J.M. Coetzee, to name just a few). However, when observing these variations in language teaching and in teaching materials, much less has been written about the issue. If one of the main aims in ELT is to prepare learners for intercultural communicative communication, it is essential they recognize the existing diversity of English standards. One suggestion, which may help support this point view, is to make reference to something that is familiar to the students in question. For instance, Portuguese (like English) is also an international language with a number of varieties (e.g. European Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese, among others); so, teachers may take advantage of this reality students are familiarized with, and explain how English is similarly structured. This type of exercise may be put into practice by taking a variety of different texts from authors who write or

speak in English, so as to establish an understanding of how the language is structured differently around the world. Despite being a useful and valuable approach, many of the times it is often neglected, as textbook oriented classes are mainly centered on the single standard variety developed in the book.

As for culture, the majority of textbooks from English-speaking countries are predominantly centered on the two main cultures, the British and American culture; although, occasional references may be found to other Inner circle countries as well (e.g. the Australian or Canadian cultures). Nevertheless, culture is not merely restricted to iconic symbols; it is also essentially centered on how individuals communicate with each other in a specific setting; therefore, the importance of pragmatics, where context contributes to meaning.

Context is likewise crucial in teaching materials, as interaction is predominantly centered between native speakers, and so with scarce examples from L2 speaker interactions. This is not only true for materials developed in English-speaking countries, but it is also visible in textbooks from countries traditionally believed as part of the Expanding circle. In order to counteract this fact, McKay believes language practitioners may complement the dialogs and texts in the textbooks with their own written texts and dialogs portraying L2-L2 interactions (“Teaching Materials” 77). By doing so, not only are they demonstrating the existence of a broader diversity of English users, but they are also contributing to students’ understanding of intercultural communication.

A “classroom-based social research” approach, as suggested by Peirce (26), may also be seen as an alternative tactic for both teachers and students regarding materials. In this case, the aim is centered on the students’ ability to engage in a collaborative project, gathering examples of L2 interaction within their own local community, be it person-to-person contact or English used on the web; while teachers contribute as well with audio examples of their own. With this type of an approach, learners get to contact with other L2 speakers from an array of social and cultural backgrounds, which would be impossible if simply restricted to the classroom and textbook.

By taking on approaches similar to these, emphasis is placed on linking classroom language learning with actual language use outside of the school environment. In other words, the learning process only begins in the classroom and continues afterwards outside of school when contacting with different language users.

In view of this, the use of authentic material is essential in the language learning process. However, in classroom contexts, the use of the term “authentic” does not apply to materials developed for non-pedagogic reasons in other communities of users (e.g. a restaurant menu from the UK); it refers to texts that assume a specific communicative purpose for a group and with which that particular group can “engage with and create discourse around for the purpose of furthering their language learning” (McKay, “Teaching Materials” 80). Bearing this in mind, when deciding on which materials should be used for a course, language practitioners should reflect on: 1) whether the materials chosen are appropriate for the learners of that particular context and if they motivate them, 2) if they contribute to developing language proficiency, and 3) if they are applicable for the specific classroom and social context (80).

Much may be done in this area, as Matsuda and Duran (2012) suggest when implementing an international perspective of English into ELT classrooms. According to them, a variety of practical lessons and activities can be applied at different language levels. These lessons and activities range from introduction to World Englishes, to different varieties and language attitudes, local creativity, culture and writing. With simple everyday materials (e.g. worksheets, Internet access, dictionaries, a white board, a computer and a projector), new activities can be developed and implemented, which prove change is possible when distancing oneself from the textbook.

In view of what has been explored throughout this essay, these are simply some reflections on issues, which still need much deliberation. There is much to be done so as to take a step forward in implementing a more international perspective of English in language teaching environments, especially in what concerns the importance of developing language and cultural awareness.

4. Concluding Remarks

As has been discussed, language practitioners have a crucial role in raising language awareness among learners. If developing effective intercultural communicative agents is one of the central goals in ELT, much still needs to be done so as to distance teaching practices from single varieties and textbook approaches. Supplementary activities and materials can and should be integrated, always bearing in mind the aims of each lesson. McKay therefore argues that when devising a curriculum, teachers should take into account the following issues (“Teaching Materials” 80):

- Are the majority of the students in class prepared to learn this specific feature of the language?
- What do I want my students to learn from the activity and why?
- What topics are of interest to the learners in question?
- How is it possible to create the conditions for learners to engage with a text and/or with other learners so as to encourage language proficiency?

By taking into consideration these issues, teachers foster a learning process that contributes to the development of competent users of English, who not only are aware of the diversity of the language, but who will also recognize the local features of the language and culture when communicating in multicultural communicative settings.

Notes

¹ The terms English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL) will be used interchangeably in this essay, meaning “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer 7).

² Taking into account the official English language curriculum in Portugal as an example, the great majority of references given are from the United Kingdom or from the United States, although the former is in advantage when compared to the latter. Therefore, if a teacher is to follow the list of references given, the decision is clearly biased towards one of these two varieties.

³ The term macroacquisition refers to individuals who acquire English as an additional language in their own country.

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