

Technology and Change in English Language Teaching (ELT)

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1. The growth of ELT

English Language Teaching (ELT) has been with us for many years and its significance continues to grow, fuelled, partially at least, by the Internet. Graddol's study (2000) suggests that in the year 2000 there were about a billion English learners - but a decade later, the numbers will have doubled. The forecast points to a surge in English learning, which could peak in 2010. The same study indicates that over 80% of information stored on the Internet is in English. For the first time in history there are more non-native than native users of the language and diversity of context in terms of learners' age, nationality, learning background etcetera has become a defining characteristic of ELT today. What are the implications of this? (Jarvis, forthcoming).

Technological innovations have gone hand-in-hand with the growth of English and are changing the way in which we communicate, work, trade, entertain and learn and it is non-native users of English, frequently from Asian countries, who are arguably, at the heart of this. It is fair to assert that the growth of the Internet has facilitated the growth of the English language and that this has occurred at a time when computers are no longer the exclusive domain of the dedicated few, but rather widely available to many. Warchauer (2002) has discussed this change in terms of conflicts between local identities and the globalisation of the English language; whilst Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004), in this journal, have suggested that the Internet may be a contributory factor in shifting away from a

communicative towards a context-based approach to language teaching pedagogy. The notion of widespread availability requires some qualification as there are clearly important issues of a 'digital divide' and 'electronic literacy'. This issue is frequently presented as being between nations and it is clearly the case that the most powerful economies dominate Internet activity; but such a perspective explains unequal power relations purely from the influence of external factors and the picture is surely more complex than this. The same type of economic power relations also exist within nations, and divisions of social classes within are equally important here. In short, it is the middle and upper classes in virtually every country who have much greater access to computers and, significantly for this paper, it is the Asian countries which are experiencing massive growth as their economies develop and change.

Change of this magnitude clearly raises a number of issues for ELT and, it is argued, necessitates a revision of traditional definitions of what constitutes the English language as well as a move away from the established EFL\ESL classifications and towards a less culturally loaded view of English as a global or international language (EIL/EIL). This in turn has implications for language pedagogy and approaches to syllabus design.

2. Computers in ELT

To fully understand the impact that computers are currently having on ELT it is firstly necessary to step back and consider their how their role has developed.

2.1 Pre-Internet

In pre-Internet days computers in ELT could be viewed from one of two perspectives. Firstly, computer assisted language learning (CALL) developed and concerned itself with the pedagogical applications of the technology. Students used the computer to develop and practise their English. CALL is, of course, still with us today but in pre-Internet times rather limited text-based provisions were something of a novelty for both students and enthusiastic practitioners; this novelty factor has, of course, long since gone for many who use computers as part of their day-to-day life. A second perspective was in the use of computers for assisting and understanding of what constitutes the English language and how it works. Corpus linguistics and the arrival of lexis as an item to be included within the syllabus began in the 1980s with

Sinclair (1987) and others, and work of this type continues today.

This statistical analysis of language, initially analysis of written language, but more recently spoken language, has allowed us to examine the frequency of words and this has informed the profession from several perspectives. It has given us insights into the most useful vocabulary to teach and facilitated the emergence of the lexical syllabus. It has also allowed us to look at form-based words and this has given us insights into the grammar that we teach. One positive outcome from all this has been the arrival of a range of publications for teachers and students - such material can now be based on how the language is actually used rather than what the traditional grammar book prescribes. The work of Biber et al. (1999) is particularly useful; they found, for example that the modal verb 'may' is hardly ever used in spoken language for permission! For students, resource publications such as McCarthy and O'Dell (1994) provide good practice of such real language.

We can see that computers have had a role in pedagogical practice and in analysing language - both these aspects have further developed with the arrival of the Internet but the point here is that in pre-Internet days the role of the computer did not fundamentally influence the language itself and it is only with the arrival of the Internet (and related technologies such as text-messaging on mobile phones) that computers began to significantly change language.

2.2 The Internet and a changing language

The Internet (of which CMC forms a major aspect) is changing the language partly because it gives rise to new vocabulary, but more importantly because the medium and its users drive the language in certain directions (Crystal, 2001). The following verbs are just one illustration of the influences on vocabulary, they all either meant different things, or did not exist, only a few years ago; to ... email, text, boot, chat, surf, bookmark, e-shop, google, etcetera. More fundamentally, the Internet is changing language, a 'Netspeak' and a 'Netiquette' is emerging, the former refers to a language variant, the latter to the conventions which surround its use. This changing language is rapidly evolving and does not have a long history to inform syllabus designers and ELT practitioners. Emails do not have, and arguably do not need, to follow punctuation conventions. Typos and spelling mistakes are also, depending

on context, more acceptable with this medium.

To what extent should we allow this to influence the language content of emails in our teaching? Furthermore, synchronous emails, those in real time chat forums (e.g. MSN), are a kind of unique text version of spoken English and the language generated from this, along with text messaging on mobile phones, is at times completely different to anything else that we have hitherto known. I had the fortune, or perhaps misfortune, of picking up my daughter's mobile the other day and I read some of the messages which seem to occupy so much of her time. That the content of these messages were of little substance came as no surprise, but the ways in which English was being used was revealing. As my daughter explained these incomprehensible texts and smileys to me (e.g. "c u l8r m8" for "see you later mate" and o-:) for the user being an angel), I felt as though I needed to go back to a foreign language classroom again. Except of course on this occasion it wasn't a foreign language, it was a variety of English, a 'Netspeak', from which I had previously been excluded. On a different occasion I was chatting to a Thai colleague on MSN and "555" was typed to mean "ha ha ha" (laughter) - the word five translates as "ha" in Thai!

The Internet, as these simple examples show, is clearly impacting upon the ways in which we use language and what constitutes language. And this rapid and largely uncharted evolution of language is surely set to continue unabated - like it or loathe it we all, especially as language teachers, have to come to terms with it. Should we include Netspeak and Netiquette in our classroom practice? Can we avoid not including it? (Jarvis, forthcoming).

Within a traditional approach to syllabus design we arguably need to plot these new items of language and include them in our programmes, but as we will see later, I shall argue here this in a sense futile and it will be more useful to specify a series of tasks for our learners and allow them to generate whatever appropriate language is required in order to successfully complete such tasks. But before we come to these implications for pedagogical practice, let us firstly explore the potential impact of change on our well-established notions of EFL and ESL.

3. Implications

3.1 From EFL/ESL to EIL/GL

A few years ago the long-established UK-based newspaper of the profession the EFL Gazette changed its name to the EL Gazette. In due course I would fully expect this journal to follow suit and drop the F in EFL! Why is this and in what ways might the Internet be contributing to such changes? To answer this question it would be helpful to firstly clarify what is meant by EFL and ESL. Jarvis (forthcoming) notes that, "These terms are used to describe learners and users whose native language is not English. It is a foreign language if used by non-native speakers in a non-native English-speaking country which has not adopted it as the "official" language of that country." By official I refer here to the language of government and commerce. Asian countries here would include Japan, Korea, Thailand, China and many more. Jarvis continues, "It is also a foreign language when used by a non-native speaker who is a temporary visitor to a native English-speaking country." Asian students studying in the UK, Australia or the USA would fall into this category. "It is a second language if used by a non-native speaker who migrates to a native English-speaking country." The Chinese community who have settled in the UK, Australia or the USA would be an example of this group. "It is also a second language if used by a non-native speaker where it has been adopted as the official language in their country." In Asia, Indian or Pakistani users of English would fall into such a category.

These definitions have been with the language teaching profession for half a century. However, they carry with them connotations that the language does not actually belong to the users; it is foreign (alien), or it is second (not first) - this despite the fact that today these users are now a majority. A case can be made (Phillipson, 1992) that these connotations are contributory factors in the manifestation of a linguistic imperialism. Certainly there is an implied uneven power relationship which centres on ownership. Furthermore, and of critical importance for the arguments presented here, these definitions tend to be based around the notion of learners and users in physical spaces, a notion which is very much undermined by the virtual world of the Internet. The work of Crystal (2003), McKay (2002), Burns and Coffin (2001) and others, echo a view that today it is more useful to think in terms of English as an international or global language. This new majority being non-native users has, as we have seen, been considerably facilitated by the Internet, and, it is argued, the English language today belongs just as much to

this new majority as it does to the now minority native users. (Jarvis, forthcoming).

It is in this sense that it is not a foreign or second language because it is their language too - it "belongs" to all users. Every minute, hour, day, week, month and year there are millions of users of English across the Asian region and beyond; more often than not the medium for such users is the Internet. When somebody from Korea, China, or Thailand communicates with A.N. Other from Japan, Malaysia or Indonesia they are likely to do so in English and they are likely to do so primarily via the Internet. These people may well meet in person but a great deal of any communication is computer-mediated and they will use a variety of language appropriate to the medium. Given this situation, our challenge, it seems to me, is to promote a pedagogy which reflects what users are actually doing with language, rather than prescribing items to be taught. I would echo Phan Le Ha's (2005) call in this journal for a pedagogy "... in which the teaching and learning of EIL should involve valuing and nurturing the expression of other cultural voices in English... and helping learners to construct identities as owners, users, meaning makers and authorised users..."(p.43). I would suggest a task-based approach is the most appropriate framework from which to address such challenges and it is to this which we now turn.

3.2 Towards a task-based approach

Typically, a traditional ELT syllabus lists learning items in terms of structures, functions, notions and vocabulary which are then set in situations and which usually integrate a variety of skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). This dominant approach has been characterised as product-orientated because it focuses on what is to be learnt or on products (White, 1988). The problem with this approach, as Nunan (1988) has pointed out, is that input cannot be equated with output and that teaching cannot be equated with learning. In short, what the teacher teaches is not what the learner learns. It is a problem which is compounded within our proposed EIL framework.

Nunn (2005) has argued that linguistic, communicative and other kinds of competences have not been adequately addressed in relation to EIL and goes on to argue that "... international communication seems to require the ability to adjust to almost infinitely diverse intercultural communication situations" (pp. 61-62). An

alternative approach can be characterised as process-orientated because it focuses not on items to be taught and learned, but on what the learner does with the language. A task-based approach is very much process-orientated because it focuses on "learning through doing" i.e. on tasks. Tasks mean different things to different people and the work of Ellis (2003) has been particularly helpful in documenting and discussing these issues. For our purposes it is useful to distinguish between pedagogic and authentic tasks. In the case of the former, students are asked to do things which are unlikely to occur outside the classroom, information gap activities or ordering scrambled sentences are examples of these. With authentic tasks students are asked to complete activities which are likely to be carried out in real life once the student has left the classroom. Working with a map to ask a classmate for directions, or listening for a departure time and gate number for a specific flight, would be examples of this. The example discussed below can be viewed as authentic, given certain assumptions about the learners. But let us firstly address a reservation by some to adopting a task-based approach.

A primary objection to task-based approaches is that they are considered unworkable and removed from every-day teaching and learning contexts. It is an argument which I have never really accepted because the approach can be implemented at various levels - it is really about encouraging learners to do useful, interesting and meaningful activities with language and this can be applied in a range of contexts. Indeed, the various levels at which task-based approaches can be delivered (even within a traditional structural syllabus) and a variety of case studies exploring how to do so is discussed in an excellent edited publication by Breen and Littlejohn (2000). This work goes a considerable way to addressing these objections. However, once computers are introduced into the ELT curriculum, and our discussion to date touches upon the case for doing so, then task-based approaches become arguably the only way to effectively take into account the changes in language that we have identified and to shift to an EIL/EGL perspective.

We have already noted the issue of the digital divide and I am addressing the discussion here at those practitioners who, along with their students, have regular access to networked computers in their teaching context. It would be undesirable and arguably quite impossible to list

the variety of language generated by CMC and/or posted on web pages. It is, as we have noted, rapidly changing, subject to trend and fashion and varies in different contexts. This makes product-based approaches virtually impossible; in contrast, as we will see, task-based approaches represent a perfect match! It is very easy to devise simple, achievable tasks which encourage students to use email to communicate with each other, their tutors and the wider world; likewise it is not difficult to find useful meaningful ways in which students access and even post information on the web. The needs of the learners and the contexts in which they work will ultimately determine the most appropriate tasks.

Jarvis (2004, 2003, 2001) for example provides extensive accounts of how such ideas can be realised with English for Academic Purposes students. Similar ideas can be utilised with general English students, they might for example be asked to prepare a travel itinerary for a visitor to their country, province or city. This could involve accessing web sites to note and decide upon the best places to visit, using the web and email to arrange flight bookings to and from the city, negotiating amongst themselves (via email) on the best options etcetera. There must be literally hundreds of task-based activities of this type across the globe which involve students using computers to access information and to communicate with others. The task is specified and students generate appropriate language, with help as required. Success is measured by the extent to which the task is successfully completed and the language is viewed as the tool to achieve the ends; it is not prescribed. The learners are viewed as working with tools which belong to them as much as to anyone else.

4. Conclusions

Several key threads emerge from our discussions. Computers are, on the one hand, impacting on the way in which we define our subject matter (EFL/ESL vs. EIL/EGL) and, on the other hand, are also impacting upon the English language, upon the subject matter itself. This new age would seem to go hand in hand with task-based approaches and represents challenges for everyone involved in ELT. For practitioners, applied linguists and educators there is a changed dynamic in which computers have now become much more than a tool or a tutor for developing language skills. This traditional distinction (Levy, 1997) would no longer seem adequate. Warschauer and Healey (1998) have observed that it is now less a question of the role

of computers in the language classroom and more a question of the role of the language classroom in an information technology society.

Language teaching education is clearly entering a new and largely uncharted phase and we would seem to be at a crossroads. Warchauer and Kern (2000) have identified this as a "sociocognitive phase" where, unlike in previous phases, students interact with each other and the world via the computer. A great deal of work has focused on the value of computers in learning or second language acquisition (see for example Cameron, 1999; Chambers and Davies, 2001; Chapelle, 2000; Debski and Levy, 1999; Egbert and Hanson-Smith, 1999; Zhao, 2003) but rather less, beyond resource publications (Dudeney, 2000; Sperling, 1998; Teeler, 2000; Windeatt et al. 2000), on the implications of the content of teaching itself, i.e. the syllabus. Even less consideration seems to have been given to how we see, define or classify our learners.

We have argued that a task-based syllabus offers a way forward and practitioners will need to reflect upon what is achievable within their own contexts. In addressing these challenges we will clearly need to develop a sense in which English belongs to the students and their fellow countrymen and women just as much as anyone else and to do this we will need to avoid classifying the vast majority of users as "foreign" or "second" language learners. ELT would seem to be at a crossroads and it is heartening to see that much of the momentum for change is coming from, and driven by, practitioners and students from the Asian nations and from journals such as this one. We live in interesting times and colleagues are invited to contact me if they are interested in setting up joint-research projects to investigate and further explore such issues.

The source (the references can be found there, too):

http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/December_05_hj.php