Teaching “the Standard”: Reevaluating the Teaching of English From ELF and Columbia School Theory

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Due to globalization and mass media, English has become the official language for communication across the world. Given this phenomenon, English as a second language (ESL), teachers and researchers are wondering about the best approach to teach English. Regarding this, linguistics has partnered with ESL pedagogy to provide the knowledge that helps instructors design better lessons. Traditional linguistics based on Structuralism and Generative Grammar provided the basis of teaching English practices by looking at the language systematically organized into levels (phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic). Coupled with views on the prevalence of received pronunciation (RP) and American English as the ideal pronunciation models, second language (L2) learners should attain, most teachers have relied on material that fosters this perception. However, in the 1980s, sociolinguistics and other theories that look at how languages used and how can be best described in their contexts appeared. Among these, and within the latter, the concept of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has called teachers and researchers' attention. In this paper, we will look at the concept of ELF, in opposition to that of English as a foreign language (EFL), supported by traditional perspectives on language; and the theory of the Columbia School of Linguistics as theoretical sources that can support a more inclusive and multicultural conception of teaching English to speakers of other languages.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, teaching English, linguistics

Introduction

The English language teaching (ELT) profession has seen a dramatic growth since the beginning of the 21st century. This century has witnessed critical changes in various aspects: a thriving information and communication technologies (ICTs) industry, population changes in the form of mass migration from the countryside or nations in conflict to industrial and populous cities/countries and the emergence of new economies, which require new specialized workforce for their companies (Graddol, 2006). Such changes have of course made an impact on the demands of teaching an alternative language, especially in English. The latter has traditionally been taught as a foreign language (EFL), which entails a certain view as regards native speakers. According to EFL, native speakers of English act as the guardians and owners of the language and its cultural practices. Those who wish to learn English have to conform to such rules and imitate them, irrespective of their own mother tongue and beliefs. Alternatively, and during the last decade of the aforementioned century, a new perspective rose. It challenges the EFL paradigm as it essentially places the use of English in a global context, i.e., in terms of “communication in English between speakers with different languages” (Seidlhofer,

2005, p. 339). In this paper, the author will deal with the two paradigms of ELT and the view they both posit with regards to the instruction of one or other variety of English (British or American English). The author will also explain why an English as a lingua franca (ELF) view seems best in nowadays teaching contexts and how this is supported by the theory in question.

New Paradigms and New Perspectives in Teaching English

As the author has mentioned earlier, EFL has been thought of as the ruling approach to teaching English. According to this view, English has to be taught considering two varieties: British English or American English and all course materials have to be designed bearing this statement in mind. British, American, and Commonwealth citizens are accounted as heirs to the language and hence, “custodians over what is acceptable usage” (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339).

Essentially, EFL stands for English as a foreign language and has been a “longstanding tradition” as an approach in the English language teaching (ELT) field (Graddol, 2006, p. 82). It emerged in approximately the middle of the 19th century, just when the British Empire was at its highest peak. Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey (2011) placed EFL as “part of the modern (foreign) language paradigm,” since they consider that most interaction involves “non-native speakers” with “native speakers of the language, and non-native speakers ‘goal’ is to approximate the native variety as closely as possible” (p. 284). Therefore, the objective of learning the language system is to imitate native speakers’ language behavior and culture. EFL learners’ errors are deemed as failures in achieving native-like competence and are mostly categorized in second language acquisition literature as interferences and fossilization (Jenkins et al., 2011). What is more, there is this view of the non-native learner as an outsider, who is less likely to assimilate to the target culture and, as a consequence, to not be able to achieve a native speaker’s proficiency mastery of the language (Graddol, 2006).

This conception of ELT has direct consequences not only in the aspects previously mentioned, but also in terms of language and educational policies in countries where English is taught as an additional language: that of exclusively hiring native teachers of English. This is definitely a negative ideological consequence of the EFL model as it reiterates discriminatory practices and enhances a bias towards native teachers (Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002).

On the other hand, ELF is an acronym that stands for ELF, a term “referring to communication in English among speakers with different first languages” (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339). It emerged as part of “the more general phenomenon of ‘English as an international language (EIL)’ or ‘World Englishes’” and it has its theoretical basis in the field of sociolinguistics, particularly in the theories of the concentric circles of English and of language contact and evolution (Seidlhofer, 2005; Jenkins et al., 2011; Kachru & Nelson, 2006; Mufwene, 2004).

The first mentioned theory basically makes reference to “three broad categories of regional varieties of English.” They have been termed “the inner-circle, the outer-circle, and the expanding-circle” varieties of English (Kachru & Nelson, 2006, pp. 1-16):

1. The first one includes the countries where English is used as an official language and where its speakers use it since birth, i.e., as a first or dominant language (L1). For example, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the countries that make up the Commonwealth of Nations.

2. The second variety comprises nation-states with a large body of English language use as a result of colonization, acculturation and nativization processes. Such countries have a large body of literature in English

and the language holds an official status. For instance, India, Nigeria, Singapore, Philippines, etc.

3. The third varieties are those “developing in countries where English is used primarily for international purposes,” even though when English “is fast becoming an instrument of identity construction and artistic innovation” (Kachru & Nelson, 2006). E.g., China, Japan, and South Korea.

The second theory addresses the issue of linguistic change as an “inadvertent” matter, “a consequence of ‘imperfect replication’ in the interactions of individual speakers as they adapt their communicative strategies to one another or to new needs” in extended language communities (Mufwene, 2004, Chapter 1). It is important to remind ourselves that language change is a constant phenomenon, given the fact that language speakers are repeatedly making “mutual accommodations to each other”, which “trigger constant competition and selection processes that bring about changes of all kinds” (Mufwene, 2004, Chapter 1). The issue of evolution is also relevant here because it refers to “the long-term changes undergone by a language (variety) over a period of time” (Mufwene, 2004, p. 12).

Because of this theoretical basis that underpins ELF, native of speakers of English are then no longer regarded as the guardians and reliable sources of knowledge of the language system. What is more, the idea of the non-native speaker is also deconstructed. According to ELF theorists, they are considered “highly skilled communicators who make use of their multilingual resources in ways not available to native speakers” (Jenkins et al., 2011, p. 284). They are also considered critical thinkers as regards language use because they prioritize the usage of certain communicative strategies over other.

Research within the ELF field cuts across different levels of the language: phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse/pragmatics. However, and due to the central issue that concerns this article, the author will briefly present the research conducted only at the phonological level.

Jenkins and his research team (2011) are mainly concerned with the phenomena of phonological accommodation and miscommunication. The former has to do with the sort of strategies, second language (L2) speakers put into play in order to “make their pronunciation more intelligible to their non-native interlocutors” (p. 287). The latter is related to the former because when learners make certain phonological accommodations, like the use of “weak forms, elisions and assimilations” do not “contribute to intelligibility in the ELF interactions” (Jenkins et al., 2011, p. 287).

As we have seen, ELF not only did come out as a new model for linguistic research, but also as an alternative pedagogy for the teaching of English as an additional language, especially where it is used “in international communication” (Sung, 2013, p. 175). Because in ELF-based pedagogy, the emphasis lies on the variability of the system of the language and of the strategies L2 learners use in order to communicate with other users of English, it is important to clarify that most ELT materials are available only with the inclusion of the so-called “standard” variety of the language. Therefore, the creation of new contents and materials from an ELF perspective seems an absolute necessity, even though some ELT practitioners and researchers still insist with a preference for EFL materials, arguing that second language learners feel safer “with a codified pedagogical model as a point of reference” (Sung, 2013, p. 178).

Despite all of this, the author believes that advocating ELF-based and multicultural instruction should prevail over any arguments which apparently favor a false sense of convenience in the use of EFL materials for both teachers and learners. This is so based not only on the aforementioned theories that sustain the ELF framework but also considering what the Columbia School analysis and theory state on this matter (Huffman, 2001).

Both ELF and the Columbia School analysis consider language as a primary device of human communication. In addition, the last theory the author mentioned adds to the equation two additional characteristics: “memory and intelligence;” such cognitive constructs are inherent to human communication because the former stores in the mind “a considerable but still finite number of signs” and the latter because, even though the amount of signs may be limited, the “number of messages” that can be communicated and inferred is unlimited (Garcia, 1975, pp. 40-41). Regarding the last statement, it is crucial to emphasize that speakers infer meanings offered by other L2 interlocutors, by combining “the knowledge of the context of the utterance” and the use of communication devices or strategies (Garcia, 1975, pp. 40-41).

Because for both ELF and the Columbia School what describes English as a system is its versatility, it should seem pointless to believe that a “standard variety” of pronunciation is possible in the teaching context. The sooner we come face to face with this fact as teachers, the better results we will have as regards lesson planning, especially focusing on those in which language use that has some form of connection with reality (Garcia, 1975).

Another similarity that links ELF and Columbia School theory is the absence of a priori statements as regards language analysis and description. This is so considering the fact that analysis guides and precedes the theory, “no matter how unfamiliar the resulting theory may appear” (Diver, 1995, p. 43).

In addition, and when describing and teaching ELF, we must bear in mind that when learners learn and analyze an L2 “create what may be fairly be individualized techniques of communication,” which has, as a consequence, “a lack of anything even approaching absolute uniformity from individual to individual,” which, in turn, leads to the conclusion that Generative and Structuralism notions like “rules leading to the formation of grammatical sentences” and “standard systems” of a language seem somewhat far-fetched and inadequate (Diver, 1995). Therefore, whenever English language users (either native or non-native) communicate, they do not make meaningful messages by summing up individual meanings but by offering hints on the basis of which inferences or guesses as regards the meanings of such phonological utterances are done. Such inferences “may be right or wrong” and, in fact, “the attempt at communication proceeds from here;” but what really matters at this point and what guarantees successful communication between English speakers from different backgrounds is not the pronunciation variety chosen (be it American English, British English, or any other one) but the speakers’ capacity “to assess how much knowledge” hearers already have “concerning the intended message, and what hints should be selected for successful transmission of the new material” (Diver, 1995, p. 74).

Furthermore, communication among individual users of the same linguistic system (ELF) is possible “not by the linguistic code” itself but by the very same users who make use of inferences in order to jump to conclusions regarding the intended message (Huffman, 2001; Garcia, 1975). Again, the role of variety choice is of little relevance in this theory. What ELF learners need to learn is to avoid what Erica Garcia (1975) calls “inferential indigestions”: neither too much of too little information suffice for this; what provokes a phenomenon of this kind is that speakers are “surfeited with a mess of information that must be processed” and they are “prevented from leaping to the conclusion as ‘they are used to doing’” (p. 43). This is particularly true of the onslaught of information that is presented all at once because of the large “semantic matter compressed into too narrow temporal confines” and which, thus, produces “a hindrance to communication” (Garcia, 1975, p. 43).

Conclusions

In conclusion, ELF has become quite a controversial model in the English teaching profession, especially because it challenges prescribed notions of linguistic theory, analysis, and pedagogy. Because we are living in a globalized world, it seems useless to insist that English is still exclusively used by native speakers of the language and that communication in such linguistic system rarely occurs between users of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Because of this reason, ELF emerged and research projects within this approach, like “the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) project, led by Barbara Seidlhofer,” both investigate further into the nature of ELF speakers and “also provide support for the recognition of ELF users in the way English is taught” (Graddol, 2006).

Because the core of ELF is the focus on the intelligibility of messages and the strategies that their users put into play in order to communicate such messages effectively, “native-like accuracy” is left at a side. In a similar fashion, the Columbia School of Language Theory and Analysis comes up with theoretical support that accentuates communication through “signal-meaning” pairs turns out relevant (Huffman, 2001). Conversely, and because both theories place great stress in human communication and the messages conveyed by language users, the choice between the teaching of one or other variety does not occupy such a relevant place.

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