Taking on EIL in School Curriculum

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1. Introduction

Calculating the exact number of the English speakers around the world is particularly difficult due to the absence of concrete statistical information and the ambiguity in defining who are “English users”. Crystal (2003), for example, estimates that there are approximately 1.1 billion and 1.8 billion users of English around the world, of which only 320 million to 380 million are native speakers of the language.

However, the number of users alone of a language does not give us a sense of how globally spread it is, the different roles it undertakes also need to be contemplated. Crystal (2003) mentions that “a language achieves a genuinely global status” (3) when its unique role is also recognized beyond those countries where it is largely used as the inhabitants’ mother tongue. Kachru’s Concentric circle model (1985), for instance, describes the functions of English in different parts of the world. By dividing countries into three circles — Inner circle, Outer circle and Expanding circle\(^1\) — we are able to have a general understanding of the types of spread, patterns of acquisition and the function English assumes in each country.

In addition to its roles in separate countries, English has also achieved a significant status in international contexts where it is used as the language

\(^{1}\) The Inner circle refers to countries in which English is used as the dominant language of the society (e.g. United States, United Kingdom and Australia), the Outer circle includes countries that are former colonies of the Inner circle countries (e.g. India, Singapore and Nigeria) and the Expanding circle refers to countries where English is taught as a foreign language (e.g. Portugal, Brazil and China).
of communication among individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural and national backgrounds. The development of faster and cheaper means of communication and the growth of the Internet and online communication has contributed to creating more and diverse opportunities for using English in multicultural and multilingual settings.

As a result, when analyzing the current sociolinguistic landscape of English, we are able to recognize that its unique diversity complicates the way ELT can be approached. Traditionally, it is constructed as a static and monolithic entity; however, due to its position as a diverse language at both a linguistic and cultural level, localized forms of English have emerged so as to adapt to new sociolinguistic and sociocultural environments. Because of this, according to McKay (2002), “the teaching and learning of an international language must be based on an entirely different set of assumptions than the teaching and learning of any other second or foreign language” (1).

Matsuda (2012) further argues that the broad range of linguistic forms, functions and profiles of English users today in ELT has brought forth several questions that need to be addressed, some of which include:

Which English variety should be considered as the instructional model for the class?

Who should be presented as the “model” English speaker?

Whose culture should be represented as an English-speaking culture?

Therefore, in order to prepare effective users of English for our growing international community, many issues need to be reconsidered regarding classroom practices, and learners’ and teachers’ attitudes (e.g. Sharifan 2009).

In this article, I will begin by focusing specifically on the dilemma of which instructional variety should be chosen for the classroom and the subsequent implications it brings on creating the appropriate language learning materials.

2. Selecting an instructional variety: the debate

In English language courses instructors are usually required to decide on a particular variety of English that will guide the various parts of a curriculum, namely in oral and written production. However, these decisions are usually
hastily made without much reflection, taking into consideration former concepts already previously implemented or the status quo. Typically, the two most chosen varieties include Standard British or American English, as they are regarded the “established” varieties with recognized importance and legitimacy in most transnational settings.

Although there is nothing inappropriate in selecting one of these two varieties, ideally, the decision made by teachers should bear in mind society’s current use of English as the main language employed in international contexts, both at a European level (in Portugal’s case) and at a wider global level. Limiting students’ contact to a restricted set of varieties does not reflect the reality of most communicative exchanges in which interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact. Actually, the variety/ies that is/are used in each circumstance depend/s on those taking part in the communicative interaction, therefore, these situations are characterized as being highly unpredictable, because each person brings the variety they are familiar with.

Unless there is a single stable community in which an international variety of English may arise, most communicative situations are fluctuating and unstable, so there is no one variety that can be used successfully in every communicative situation. In order to overcome the several linguistic barriers that may arise, it is important that participants learn to make use of several accommodation skills and communicative strategies, such as: drawing on extralinguistic cues, gauging interlocutors’ linguistic repertoires, supportive listening, signaling non-comprehension in a face-saving way, asking for repetition, paraphrasing, and clarification of requests that allow participants to check, monitor and clarify understanding (Jenkins 2000).

In agreement with what Jenkins (2000) proposes, Canagarajah (2007) also believes speakers’ need to negotiate the forms they will adopt, so as to mutually appropriate their language according to the context:

The form of this English [that is used as an international language] is negotiated by each set of speakers for their purposes. The speakers are able to monitor each other’s language proficiency to determine mutually the appropriate grammar, phonology, lexical range and pragmatic conventions that would ensure intelligibility. Therefore, it is difficult to describe
this language a priori. It cannot be characterized outside the specific interaction and speakers in a communicative situation.

(925-926)

Bearing in mind the diversity of English users and contact situations today, there is no one correct variety that has to be used or an incorrect variety that cannot be used. What teachers may choose to do is adopt several approaches that contribute to raising students’ awareness of the existing English varieties. For example, in addition to developing learners’ communicative strategies, which is necessary in all languages, it is important they also understand that whatever the dominant variety chosen by the teacher, it is only one of many others they may encounter once outside the classroom. Therefore, by exposing students to different varieties, they will be able to understand the linguistic diversity that exists within the English language and become familiar with other cultures.

Another approach may involve providing students with the opportunity to interact with other English users from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This may include having a diverse international teaching staff or guest visitors (both national or from abroad) when it is possible to do so, or it may also include interaction in various Internet communities and social network services (e.g. blogs, Facebook, Moodle, YouTube) where learners actively participate in along with students from other countries.

A third approach that may likewise be taken, and which is probably the most accessible for teachers, includes the teaching materials made available (e.g. textbooks, CDs, videos and ELT websites). However, very little exists on material development for teaching English as an international language, despite most people agreeing it has become a widely distributed language and linguistically diverse. Therefore, learning how to select or adapt existing materials, and how design original materials is essential for developing one’s own class syllabus.

3. Teaching materials for EIL

ELT processes and teaching materials in specific have obviously changed over the years. In the 1940s and 1950s materials focused mainly on grammatical aspects, while in the 1960s they shifted to a more social
perspective of language. From a sociolinguistic point of view, in the 1970s Hymes (1972) put forth several issues to be contemplated when observing language use — possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performance — which brought important implications for ELT. According to his understanding, not only should standards of correctness be observed in language use, but so should issues of language appropriateness. Because of this, textbooks began to be organized by social situation and/or language function, giving particular emphasis on the surface to language use and language appropriateness, while grammatical issues were disguised in the dialogs written to exemplify and practice particular grammatical structures (McKay 2012). This same practice still continues to be implemented in today’s ELT course books.

Culture has been yet another issue of concern in ELT course materials. The literature, customs and holidays from English-speaking countries (mainly from the United Kingdom and United States, with some references made to Australia) are usually the main topics discussed in English classrooms and the reason for this longtime emphasis on the British or American culture is greatly attributable to both countries dominating ELT book publishing.

Despite these issues, through the years teaching materials have played an essential role in ELT and the current plethora of existing resources reflects the extent to which institutions and teachers look at published work to shape their teaching methods and goals. Rubdy (2003), for instance, mentions only some of the advantages of using published materials:

— Course books provide a sense of security and self-confidence in teachers;
— They give structure and certainty which results in a sense of safety in in-classroom interaction;
— Course materials present themselves as a “direction map” for both teachers and learners;
— Course books may also function as agents of change by encouraging teachers to modify traditional teaching methods.

Taking on a textbook oriented approach today, however, does not seem to meet the expectations of most communicative interactions. Because the number of English speakers has been increasing, especially owing to
macroacquisition\(^2\) (Brutt-Griffler 2002), several implications have risen in the development of materials that may take on an international perspective of the language. So, how can teachers adapt their materials and the curriculum in order to take on a more EIL perspective?

In relation to grammatical norms and lexical use, because English is now more varied than before, distinct features have appeared, many of which have been described in contemporary literature. However, less has been written on the effects of these variations on language teaching. So as to prepare learners for intercultural communicative interactions, it is important they understand the diversity of standards in English nowadays and one way this may be done is by resorting to a reality students are familiar with. Portuguese, for instance, like English, is also an international language with several varieties (e.g. European Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese); so teachers may take advantage of something students are acquainted with so as to explain how language is structured. This exercise is particularly useful, however, it is often neglected since textbook oriented classes generally focus on only one standard variety.

In terms of culture, most textbooks produced in English-speaking countries also center their content on cultures from other Inner circle countries. And regarding context, interaction is on the most part between native speakers, with very few examples of communication between L2 speakers. This is true for materials produced in English-speaking countries, but it is also visible in many textbooks produced in countries typically deemed as part of the Expanding circle. So as to counteract this, teachers may complement the topics in textbooks with their own written texts and dialogs that portray L2-L2 interactions (McKay 2012). By doing so, students are given a better understanding of what intercultural communication is really like. McKay (2012) also mentions that teachers and students can take on a “classroom-based social research” approach (Peirce 1995). In this approach, students take part in a collaborative project in which they gather examples of L2 interaction in their local community, be it person-to-person contact or English used on the web, and teachers may

\(^2\) Macroacquisition refers to the acquirement of English as an additional language by individuals in their own country. What we are witnessing is bilingualism at a global scale, in which English is used for international and/or intranational communication.
also contribute with audiotape examples. The main aim of this exercise is essentially for students to come into contact with other L2 speakers from an array of social and cultural backgrounds.

From the examples given, we are therefore able to understand how an EIL approach gives particular importance to linking classroom language learning with language use outside school. In other words, the learning process only begins in the classroom, and it mostly continues once outside it.

In order to fulfill this objective, the use of authentic material plays a key part in the process of language learning. “Authentic” in this case does not refer to materials produced for non-pedagogic purposes in another community of users (e.g. restaurant menus), but to “texts that particular groups engage with and create discourse around for the purpose of furthering their language learning” (McKay, “Teaching Materials” 80). Before making a decision on the teaching materials, teachers should take into consideration whether the materials are suitable for the learners and if they motivate them, if they contribute to increasing language proficiency, and if they are also appropriate for the classroom and social context in question (McKay 2012).

It is only by reflecting on these issues that we can take a step ahead in adopting an EIL perspective in classrooms and in order to do that, much still needs to be done, especially regarding the importance of language awareness in teachers.

4. Concluding remarks

To conclude, teachers play an essential part in raising language awareness among students and if the main goal is to develop effective intercultural communicative agents, much more needs to be done besides a textbook approach in classrooms. Additional materials and activities may and should be developed according to the aims of the class. Therefore, when devising the curriculum of a class, McKay (2012) believes teachers should consider the following questions:

— What do I want my students to learn from this activity and why?
— Are most learners in my class ready to learn this aspect of the language?
— What topics are of interest to my learners?
— How can I create the conditions for learners to engage with a text
and/or other learners to promote their language proficiency? (80)

By considering these issues when planning a course, teachers are encouraging
a language learning process that will hopefully contribute to develop
competent users of English who are aware of the diversity of the language
and who will respect the local features of the language and culture when
interacting in multicultural communicative interactions.

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ABSTRACT

The linguistic, cultural and functional diversity related with the English language in today’s world has led to the reconsideration of fundamental assumptions in English Language Teaching (ELT), and rethinking traditional pedagogical practices.

Teachers and policy makers are faced with challenging issues concerning which instructional variety should be chosen to guide the various aspects of a curriculum.

Up to now, this decision was generally made without much thought, based on former concepts or the status quo (particular emphasis being given to Standard British or Standard American English). But, when considering today’s society use of English as an international language (EIL), several factors should be further contemplated — these include: students’ needs and goals, teachers’ expertise and available resources.

This article gives particular emphasis to teaching materials used in classrooms. The importance of developing materials for effective language learning will be discussed, as well as some of the main principles for creating materials that can help prepare students to interact successfully in English international contexts.

KEYWORDS

English as an International Language; English Language Teaching; Variety; Teaching Materials.

RESUMO

A actual diversidade linguística, cultural e funcional do inglês tem contribuído para a crescente necessidade de reconsiderar algumas noções do ensino do inglês e, ao mesmo tempo, de repensar práticas pedagógicas.

Uma das questões importantes que os professores enfrentam é saber qual a variedade que deve escolhida para o programa educativo estabelecido. Até há pouco tempo esta decisão era tomada tendo em conta práticas já previamente estabelecidas ou o status quo, dando particular ênfase ao inglês britânico ou o inglês americano padrão.
Uma outra questão que merece particular atenção são os materiais utilizados. A importância de desenvolver materiais que contribuam para uma aprendizagem efectiva da língua é aqui discutida, para além de alguns aspectos a serem considerados para criar materiais que ajudam a preparar alunos a interagir em contextos onde o inglês é usado como língua internacional. No entanto, e considerando o uso que a sociedade faz hoje do inglês como língua internacional, são vários os factores que devem ainda ser contemplados, como por exemplo; as necessidades e objectivos dos alunos, a competência dos professores e os recursos disponíveis.

Este artigo pretende, por isso, dar especial atenção aos materiais de ensino usados em sala de aula. A importância de desenvolver materiais que promovem o ensino efectivo da língua é aqui tratado, tal como os princípios fundamentais para criar materiais que ajudam a preparar os alunos para interagirem com sucesso em contextos onde o inglês é utilizado como língua internacional.

**Palavras-chave**
Inglês como língua internacional; Ensino da língua inglesa; Variedade; Materiais de ensino.