English as an international language? Taiwanese university teachers' dilemma and struggle...

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What do university English teachers think about the role of English as an international language today in Taiwan?

Introduction

This study aims to explore university English teachers' perceptions of the role of English today in Taiwan from two aspects – the ownership of English and acquiring target language culture in the English language classroom. The concept of English as an international language (EIL) or English as a lingua franca (ELF) has been discussed extensively in the ELT field for many years. Theoretically the concept promotes the idea that English is no longer a possession of any particular English-speaking countries and that there are many different varieties of Englishes. Since teachers are an important – if not *the* most important – influence in the language classroom, their perceptions are likely to affect the students profoundly. In spite of the theoretical discussion of EIL, in reality, what do university English teachers in Taiwan think about the role of English today? In the study, five experienced teachers were invited for a focus group interview to discuss these issues. The results suggest that university English teachers in Taiwan are facing a dilemma and struggle to follow the notion of EIL (or ELF) in the classroom.

The spread and ownership of English

According to Crystal (1995), the English language has reached its international status today primarily because of the expansion of the British colonial past and the economic power of the US in the 20th century. Furthermore, Crystal (1997) adds several reasons such as historical, political, economic, practical, intellectual and entertainment reasons and explores why people are learning English today from various aspects. Crystal (1997:61) estimates that there are approximately 670 million people who have a native or native-like command of English. He even continues by saying that

> If we go to the opposite extreme, and use a criterion of 'reasonable competence' rather than 'native-like fluency,' we shall end up with a grand total of 1800 million. A 'middle-of-the-road' estimate would be 1200–1500 million, and this is now commonly encountered.

Although Crystal's (ibid.) estimate might be out of date now, it still gives us some implication that the number of English speakers (both native and non-native speakers) is growing considerably. A number of scholars have



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proposed different models to conceptualise the spread of English, for example, Strevens's (1992:33) World Map of English, McArthur's (1987) Circle of World English and Modiano's (1999:10) English as an International Language. However, the most influential and widely used model perhaps is Kachru's (1992:356) three concentric circles (the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle) of World Englishes.

The Inner Circle includes countries where English is used as a first language (a mother tongue) such as the US, the UK and Australia and which are normally said to be 'norm-providing' in the field of SLA and ELT. In the Outer Circle countries such as India, the Philippines and Singapore, English is used as a second language. Many of the Outer Circle countries were colonies of the Inner Circle and have indigenised (or localised) varieties of Englishes today. Those countries are recognised to be 'norm-developing'. The Expanding Circle refers to countries where English is studied as a foreign language and is used for international communication, for example, Taiwan, Japan, or Korea. Those countries are 'norm-dependent' i.e. relying on the Inner Circle's norms (also see, for example, Jenkins, 2003; Kachru & Nelson, 2006).

As we can see from Kachru's model, English is not only used in the Inner Circle countries but also widely used (or learnt) in the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle countries. Graddol (1999) estimates that L2 users of English will grow from 235 million to around 462 million in the next 50 years and claims that L2 speakers will overtake L1 speakers. Similarly, Jenkins (2003) claims that with English being an international language or a lingua franca in today's world, most communication in English may not involve L1 speakers of English, which has raised the issue of the ownership of English. Many scholars have argued that English is no longer the possession of a nation or a group of people. It is an international language which serves as a communication tool in different communities across international and cultural boundaries (see, for example, Kachru, 1992a; 1992b; Brumfit, 1995; Widdowson, 1994; Jenkins, 2003; McKay, 2003). As Prodromou (2007a:49) citing Widdowson (1994:385) states:

> [Native speakers] have no say in the matter… [T]hey are irrelevant. The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it.

So, if English has acquired an international status and no longer belongs to any country or community, do English language learners still need to follow the so-called 'native speakers' norms' when learning English?

Teaching English as an international language

As McKay (2003:3) claims, traditional ELT pedagogy has generally assumed that 'the ultimate goal of English language learners is to achieve native-like competence in the language'. The communicative competence model developed by Canale & Swain (1980) is based on the development of four native speakers' competences – Grammatical Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence, Discourse Competence and Strategic Competence – and has been advocated as an appropriate framework for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Even Gardner (2001:4) claims that in his socio-educational model, L2 achievement refers to developing near-native-like proficiency. However, the notion of communicative competence has been criticised as being *utopian*, *unrealistic*, and *constraining* (Alptekin, 2002: 57–64; also see, for example, Byram, 1997; Hyde, 1998).

Furthermore, many scholars also have begun to argue that there is a mismatch between EIL and traditional ELT (or SLA) pedagogy. When speaking of traditional ELT pedagogy, certain stereotypes have been rooted in the field. Firstly, it is generally believed that the goal of learning English is to acquire native-like competence (Jenkins, 2003; McKay, 2003). Secondly, English different from the US or UK models is wrong and any model different from the native speakers' is an error (Kachru, 1992b; Jenkins, 2003). Thirdly, successful SLA depends on integrative motivation (Kachru and Nelson, 2006). However, these notions have been criticised based on the status of English today. Firstly, Kasper (1997) argues that the so-called native speakers are not a homogeneous group and that attempting to achieve their level of competence is not possible, especially for L2 adults in relation to phonology and syntax (also see, for example, McKay, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2005). Secondly, Kachru & Nelson (2006:87–89)

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argue that 'what functions the target language serves in the learners' community is irrelevant to SLA'. Furthermore, they even claim that a monolingual approach which refers to following the ENL (English as a native language) model is a 'totally unrealistic and misinformed appraisal of their situation and linguistic competence' (also see, for example, Smith, 1992).

Due to dissatisfaction with the so-called native speakers' model (or norms), scholars have started to advocate a 'paradigm shift' and an 'appropriate model' in ELT. McKay (2002; 2003) raises three important points. Firstly, she argues that English learners do not need to have native-speaker-like competence in terms of pronunciation and pragmatics. Secondly, English is used for the individual's specific purposes and communication across cultures. Thirdly, there is no need to obtain target language culture knowledge when teaching and learning English. English has been given local traditions and cultural values, which are far more important to learners (also see, for example, Smith, 1976; Kachru, 1992b; McKay, 2003; Alptekin, 2002; Erling, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2005; Kachru & Nelson, 2006; Canagarajah, 2006, for a similar discussion).

However, the perspective on the 'paradigm shift' or the 'appropriate model' has been revisited and debated recently. Jenkins (2006) argues that many ELT professionals including both native and non-native speakers – teachers, teacher educators and linguists – still believe in the native speakers' ownership of English. She cites Trudgill's (2005) claim that English historically 'stems' from and 'resides' in native speakers, though it may not be owned by them today. Due to this, Jenkins (2006) and Seidlhofer (2005) suggest that there is a mismatch between theory and practice and that research on WEs and ELF needs to be reflected at the practical level. Furthermore, Jenkins (ibid.) points out that apart from raising learners' awareness of the diversity of English and their own sociolinguistic reality ('pluricentrism' rather than 'monocentrism'), it will be important for ELT professionals (both native and non-native speaker teachers, teacher trainers, and educators) to raise their awareness (also see, for example, Seidhofer, 2004; Canagarajah, 2005). However, as Holliday (2005) claims, it will not be easy to teach English as an international language without any struggle.

The Project

This study aims to explore university English teachers' perceptions of the role of English today in Taiwan, which is part of my doctoral research (Lai, 2008) aiming to explore both university teachers' and students' perceptions on the issue (the role of English today). In Taiwan, although English is taught and studied as a foreign language (an EFL context) not as a main language, because of the increasing importance of English, all Taiwanese students are required to study English as a compulsory subject from third grade in elementary school since the Ministry of Education launched the new curriculum (Grade 1–9 Curriculum) in 2001. The rationale for studying English in the new curriculum is based on the notion of globalisation and that English is an international language. At higher education level, apart from English-major students, non-major students also need to take English modules as a compulsory requirement. In recent years, most universities in Taiwan also place their emphasis on developing the students' skills and ability to face the rapidly changing and competitive global village. English plays an important role to connect Taiwanese university students to today's world. In the study, I invited five of my Taiwanese colleagues who were all experienced university English teachers for a focus group interview. They are Sharon (four-year experience), Cherry (six-year experience), Kate (two-year experience), Eva (two-year experience) and Sally (five-year experience). For ethical reasons, I have disguised their real names and used alternative English names as seen above. The focus group interview lasted for about one hour and was audio recorded. Since the participants were all English teachers in Taiwan, I asked them whether they preferred to speak English or Chinese before the interview began. All agreed to use Chinese as the main medium, with the option of using English when it was appropriate. They were asked to discuss the following two questions in the interview:

1 Do you think that English belongs to any particular country in the world today? If so, which country and why? If not, why?
2 Do you think that learning English requires learners to integrate into any English-speaking country/culture? If so, which country/culture and why? If not, why?

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Findings – ownership of English

Interestingly, there were some disagreements and debates when the participants were talking about these issues. Sally and Cherry seem to agree that English is still a certain countries' possession, especially the UK and US. **Sally** strongly points out that:

> …My opinion is that although many people agree that there is no need to distinguish American English or British English and that English should be a lingua franca or an international language, if you have a chance to ask someone who is learning English which accent he/she wants to achieve, he/she probably will not say an Indian accent. I believe that the person will still want to speak like American or British as an ultimate goal… [Sally, Jan. 2007]

Cherry supports Sally's idea and says:

> …If you see it (English) from the origin, the origin of English is from the UK or US. If you trace it further historically, it is actually from the UK…… [Cherry, Jan. 2007]

However, **Sharon** argues that:

> I had the same thought before; however, now I really think that English does not belong to the US, the UK, Australia or Canada. It has become a communication tool. If you think about it from geography, then you will limit yourself in many ways. [Sharon, Jan. 2007]

As we can see from their statements, there was a disagreement about the ownership of English. Sharon supports the concept of EIL, and believes that we should not limit ourselves. However, Sally and Cherry have different opinions. Furthermore, **Sally** explains why English still belongs to certain countries, as she claims:

> When you are teaching, you need a 'base'. You cannot just pronounce any accents. No, you cannot do that. You need a 'base'. It does not matter that they (students) can pronounce like it or not. But you need to give them something to follow. [Sally, Jan. 2007]

Cherry supports Sally's opinion and continues to say that:

> I agree with you. It is important to reflect back to the origin. It does not matter that English is used in any regions widely now. It is from here (the UK). If you need to find the standard, you will have to trace it back here. [Cherry, Jan. 2007]

In Sally's statement, we can discover that she thinks it is necessary to give students a standard to follow when studying English. In today's case, it is either British or American English. And Cherry thinks we should trace the origin of English. Here, **Kate** claims her opinion, and supports Sally's idea in some way. As she says:

> In fact, I tell my students that their accent is not important. The most important function of English is communication. However, I do agree with Sally that it is an important requirement for your employer. [Kate, Jan. 2007]

From the statements above regarding the ownership of English, we can realise that although the idea of EIL has been widely spread in the academic field, it is cannot be denied that some Taiwanese English teachers consider the ownership of English from a practical reason, which is that they want their students to have an advantage.

Findings – acquiring target language cultural knowledge

Since Sally's and Cherry's opinions about the ownership of English favour the UK and US, it seems they also agree that it is better for students to acquire some cultural knowledge of these two countries. As **Sally** claims:

> I think the social status of the English language is higher than other languages. (INTERVIEWER: So you think it is better to speak with a British or an American accent?) Yes… (INTERVIEWER: So you think British or American culture is important?) To be honest, if I think about it from my students' point of view, they will still want to understand these two countries' culture…… [Sally, Jan. 2007]

Again, **Cherry** agrees with Sally and says:

> When we introduce the language (English), it is very natural to mention these two countries (the UK and US) because the source is sufficient. If we do not consider the advantage of the English language, still these two countries are dominant in the world today. So, when we are teaching the language, it is very natural to introduce their cultures… [Cherry, Jan. 2007]

Sally continues to claim that:

> I think it is impossible to teach English as an international language because you need an accent and a culture to follow… In my case, I think if I have to teach my students English, I will teach them an advantageous accent. It is

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> irresponsible to teach any accents that you like. This is my opinion. [Sally, Jan. 2007]

However, Sharon and Kate are against the idea of acquiring target language culture knowledge. **Sharon** argues that:

> But I disagree. I think you should target them (students) to see different cultures. They (students) have the ranking in their mind because the input is not correct. [Sharon, Jan. 2007]

Kate agrees with Sharon and says:

> To be honest, I am not very keen on promoting British or American culture. If you talk about accents, it is true that in reality they (students) need a standard, especially in Taiwan. However, I do not think that they need to understand British or American culture. [Kate, Jan. 2007]

As we can discover from the disagreement in this section, Taiwanese English teachers' perceptions of acquiring target language culture knowledge vary. Some of them still insist that students need to understand British or American culture in the case of learning English. Some of them believe the concept of English as an international language in their mind and think it is unnecessary to understand the target language culture, but still struggle with the idea whether students need a standard for learning English. I think **Sally** points out an important issue at the end of the interview. She says:

> I think sometimes it is different between academics and the thing that students want. You can help them to be a global person, but you need to give them the most advantageous and beneficial skills. [Sally, Jan. 2007]

Apart from the findings regarding my research questions, an interesting discussion came out from the interview process. When I was teaching at university, I realised that my students were very fond of American English (material, culture, accent, etc.), and seemed to reject other Englishes. Almost all interview participants agree with me that in Taiwan the English education is very American dominant. **Cherry** says that:

> When I was teaching, my students thought that British English sounded very nice and elegant. Sometimes, when they saw a British movie, they liked the accent very much. However, when I used the material which was with a British accent, my students complained and asked me to change it back to American English which they were familiar with. [Cherry, Jan. 2007]

Eva says:

> In Taiwan, American English is still dominant. Especially when students have exams, the English used for testing speaking and listening is all American English. [Eva, Jan. 2007]

Discussion

The focus group interview data suggest that Taiwanese teachers' perceptions of the role of English today are contradictory. A couple of teachers have the stereotype that English still belongs to certain countries (especially the UK or US) and suggest that we should trace it back historically. Nevertheless, others support the idea of English as an international language and that we should not limit our thinking. However, in terms of teaching in the English language classroom, the teachers' opinions reflect their perceptions of the ownership of English. A couple of teachers comment that English teachers in Taiwan should try their best to teach English as an international language and raise students' awareness. However, others argue that we need to follow the most prestigious and advantageous model (American English is mostly preferred) in the English classroom in order to equip students for their future after they graduate, though they are aware of the notion of English as an international language.

As we can see from the discussion above, Taiwanese university English teachers are facing a dilemma of whether they should follow the English native speakers' model (ENL) or a variety of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in the classroom. From my own teaching experience, I also feel that I was struggling to teach English as an international language in the language classroom. Although I did my best to raise my students' awareness of the role of English today and strongly suggested that it was not necessary for them to have the native speakers' competence, in reality, I still needed to follow the ENL model (American English in my case) due to my students' demand for finding a good job or passing academic exams (e.g. TOEFL, IELTS, or GEPT – General English Proficiency Test – which is an official English language proficiency test authorised by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan). As Chien (2007:5) claims, in Taiwan:

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> Non-native English teachers, too, tend to invest heavily in reaching near-native English competence. Although the majority may agree that conveying meaning is more important than perfect conformity with a native-speaker standard, they are still generally inclined to keep the native norm as a teaching model.

The issue of teaching English as an international language has been debated and discussed in the fields of applied linguistics and ELT recently. It has been argued that more emphasis should be placed on teaching and raising students' awareness of the variety of ELF (English as a lingua franca) in the English language classroom. Also, it is believed that this variety will eventually become Standard English one day. However, some scholars (see, for example, Prodromou, 2007a; 2007b; McMaster, 2008) claim that the variety of ELF is not yet a well-developed concept and/or model for ELT professionals to follow in practice. As McMaster (2008:7) citing Seidlhofer (2002) claims, '[a]s long as there is not some sort of ELF model to make reference to, the only, hence default, descriptive model when talking about "English" is ENL [English as a native language]'. My study seems to show that the majority of the teachers involved in this research still think in this way.

Conclusion and suggestions

The study suggests that Taiwanese university teachers' thoughts on the role of English today are contradictory. A couple of the teachers in the study insist that English still belongs to certain countries (the UK and US) today, although they are aware of the notion of EIL. In terms of teaching in the English language classroom, most teachers in the study are facing a dilemma and argue that it is their responsibility to follow the 'best' and 'advantageous' model, i.e. ENL models, in order to equip their students with prestigious competence for their future. Here I would like to make the following suggestions which hopefully will inspire some ELT professionals.

Since each context is different, I believe that the local ELT professionals (teachers and educators, etc.) are likely to have a better understanding of the situation than others do. The local ELT professionals then have a responsibility to listen to the students. It is important to follow the most 'appropriate' model based on the students' needs and wants. Taking Taiwan for an example, if university students require attainment of English native-speaker competence for their future prosperity, perhaps the ELT professionals could follow the varieties of ENL (e.g. American English) as a starting point. However, meanwhile, it is also important to raise the students' awareness of varieties of Englishes including English as a lingua franca (ELF). As Prodromou (2007b:10) argues:

> In the real world, they (*learners*) will not only have to deal with other L2-users; they will need to be effective in linguistic contexts where the command of the core of Standard English (minus culturally opaque idioms) is an advantage. We will prepare them to cope with the maximum range of contexts and interlocutors, be they L1- or L2-users of the language. We move from a view of English as 'model', to language as a process of acquiring maximum 'linguistic capital'.

Apart from learners, teachers' awareness raising is crucial as well since teachers play an important role in the English language classroom. Jenkins (2006) argues that one of the reasons that the notion of teaching English as a lingua franca has not yet influenced language teaching in practice is because teacher training programmes place less emphasis on the issue. Chien (2007:5) also suggests that '[t]here must be a concerted effort to broaden teacher education to include methodologies that raise awareness of both local and global perspectives within the Taiwan context'. This awareness raising needs to be addressed in both pre-service and in-service teacher education. As Seidlhofer (2004:228) argues:

> Rather than just being trained in a restricted set of pre-formulated techniques for specific teaching contexts, teachers will need a more comprehensive education which enables them to judge the implications of the ELF phenomenon for their own teaching contexts and to adapt their teaching to the particular requirements of their learners. ■

Notes

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