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To Teach Standard English or World Englishes? A Balanced Approach to Instruction

English has now acquired the title of the world's leading "global language" (Crystal 2003, 1) because it is used for business, science, and politics. When we use the term *English*, readers may assume that we are referring to a standard of usage that everyone agrees upon. Readers may think that we must mean British Standard English or American Standard English because the English that exists in such places as Africa, Asia, the West Indies, the Philippines and Singapore is not *real* or *standard* English. Readers may also think that teachers of English as a second language (ESL) must be teaching British or American Standard English because that is what their learners want to learn. In fact, the issue is not as straightforward as we may think; there is neither an agreed-upon definition of *Standard English*, nor is there agreement on what students of ESL need or want to learn. This leads to the following question: Has rapid change in the status of English as a global language left the classroom practices of many English language teachers lagging behind learners' desires or even their needs? To answer this question, this article outlines why and how teachers can inform their practice as they create a *balanced approach* to instruction that suits their particular context and students' needs.

Standard English

The term *Standard English* suggests that we all share a similar understanding of exactly what this means, yet it is not easy to define. One reason for this is that there is no world-recognized governing body that dictates what should and should not be included in such a *standard*. However, McArthur (2003, 442) maintains that Standard English has at "least three identifying characteristics: 1) It is easiest to recognize in print because written conventions are similar worldwide. 2) It is usually used by news presenters. 3) Its usage relates to the speaker's social class and education."

McArthur (2003, 442) also suggests that Standard English is generally

considered "the variety most widely accepted, understood, and perhaps valued within an English speaking country." We can see that the community decides what is acceptable and what is not, what is *correct* usage and what is not. Yet, for example, a Canadian's definition of what is standard may vary dramatically from that of an Irish person. This lack of a clear, agreed-upon definition of the term *standard* presents a problem for learners and teachers of English, especially when learners say they want to learn Standard English and when their teachers are supposed to instruct them in this standard.

As teachers of English, we look to the research in the hope of finding answers that will clarify what this standard is so we can teach it, and what we find is even more confusing. Teaching Standard English can in fact have negative consequences for the language learners (Tollefson 2002) for the following reasons:

- Standard English is a native-speaker model which may be unattainable for many second language learners. Therefore, it may be unrealistic to use a native-speaker model for language learners who, by definition, can "never become native-speakers without being reborn" (Cook 1999, 187).
- Insisting on Standard English can devalue other varieties of English that exist around the world. For example, so-called non-standard varieties, such as Singlish in Singapore (McArthur 2004; Qiong 2004), are often considered illegitimate because they are believed to be failed attempts at being Standard English. Anything that is different from a standard is considered inferior. By idealizing Standard English, and consequently devaluing non-standard varieties, some governments and language teachers may in effect be actually devaluing their own local varieties of English. An example in Singlish is the absence of past tense marking, such as "What happen yesterday?" (see Farrell and Tan 2006 for a detailed discussion of teaching Singlish). Singlish does differ from so-called Standard English in some grammatical features and lexical items, but can we then say it is inferior because of these differences?
- Teaching Standard English may promote discrimination. Some employers, for example, may discriminate against speakers of American English or Irish English by saying, "Oh! You don't speak British English, which we prefer for this position." Given that accent is often "an implicit code for race or ethnicity" (Tollefson 2002, 150), discrimination based on accent can even be considered a form of racism.

World Englishes

If Standard English is supposed to be an example of only one norm of the English language, then the term *World Englishes* would be the norm that includes all varieties of the language. Kachru (1985) categorizes the usage of English into three concentric circles: the *inner circle*, the *outer circle*, and the *expanding circle*. He maintains that the inner circle represents the more traditional bases of English that are used in places like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The outer circle includes countries which "have gone through extended periods of colonization, essentially by the users of the inner circle varieties" (Kachru 1985, 12), and includes Nigeria, Singapore, and India. Unlike the outer circle, the expanding circle does not have the same effects of colonization as the inner circle; in the expanding circle, English is used mainly for business and international purposes. The expanding circle includes such countries as China, Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, and represents the largest expanding numbers of English speakers in the world today (Crystal 2003). Considering the large population of English speakers located in various parts of the world, Kachru (1985, 14) proposes that English now comprises "a unique cultural pluralism, and a linguistic heterogeneity and diversity."

In light of this ever-expanding outermost circle of English language usage, it is conceivable that the continued use of *inner circle Standard English* as the target of instruction in classrooms worldwide should be re-examined and may even be somewhat inappropriate in a global context. As Widdowson (1994, 381) has pointed out, inner circle Standard English "is not simply a means of communication but the symbolic possession

of a particular community, expressive of its identity, its conventions, and values." Many speakers of World Englishes use English in their own way as an expression of their identity and their cultural values because language is "a major means (some would say the chief means) of showing where we belong, and of distinguishing one social group from another" (Crystal 2003, 22).

A balanced approach to English language instruction

If English usage is taken to be a means of identity, then the question is: Which variety of English should be taught as a second or foreign language? One important factor that makes this decision difficult is that many of the new varieties of English may be mutually unintelligible (Smith 1992). Singlish, for example, is generally regarded as being unintelligible to other English speakers outside of Singapore (McArthur 2004). Some unique features of Singlish are shown in the following examples (see Farrell and Tan 2008 for more detailed examples):

- Absence of possessive inflections: "My mummy friend"
- Use of particles: "Hurry up lah!"
- Use of borrowings: "Don't be so kiasu."
- Inversion for questions with *be*: "You don't want to go is it?"
- Inversion for questions with *can*: "Like that can or not?"

Although learning these features of Singlish would be an achievable goal for Singaporeans, teaching these features may limit the learners' ability to communicate with speakers of English outside Singapore.

Since teaching local varieties of English (such as Singlish) may be just as problematic as teaching inner circle Standard English, English language teachers may find themselves in a quandary as to what type of English to emphasize to their students. We recognize that many English language teachers may not have the luxury of deciding what variety to emphasize and teach to their students because this may already be mandated by Ministries of Education, school boards, and/or school directors. Nevertheless, we suggest that teachers can inform their practices about the different varieties of English that exist and consider a balanced approach to teaching English. Such an approach would include three key considerations (each of which is discussed in more detail below):

1. Teachers need to carefully consider their teaching context (McKay 2002).
2. After choosing their target of instruction based on that context, teachers should value their learners' current English usage (El-Sayed 1991).
3. Teachers need to prepare learners for future international English encounters by exposing them to other varieties of English (Matsuda 2003) and by teaching them strategic competence when interacting with speakers who speak other varieties of English.

Consider the teaching context

The key to following a balanced approach is "to be culturally sensitive to the diversity of contexts in which English is taught and used" (McKay 2002, 128). The variety of English emphasized should be based on the teaching context, the teachers (including their own teaching abilities and style) as well as the learners' educational and cultural needs (McKay 2002). In such a balanced approach, teachers may or may not decide (if they have such a choice) to teach inner circle Standard English. However, as Petzold (2002, 424) points out, the "specific variety choice is influenced by factors such as the teacher's own education, attitudes toward models, the model's prestige or usefulness, [and] availability of materials and tests." For instance, El-Sayed (1991) maintains that British Standard English may be an appropriate choice for the target of instruction in some schools in Western Asia, such as the Doha English Speaking School (DESS) in Doha, Qatar. This school follows the British curriculum and hires teachers with UK-recognized qualifications. Furthermore, due to a history of British colonization, Qataris value British Standard English and are exposed to it through British media. They have greater access to British books and materials, and are probably more likely to visit the United Kingdom than other English speaking countries. Thus, teaching British Standard English would be the optimal choice for a teacher at DESS.

With so many variables to consider when choosing the target of instruction, it is important to remember that there is no single *correct*

choice for all contexts (Christenson 1992). Choosing to teach British Standard English in Doha can be just as appropriate as choosing to teach China English in Beijing (El-Sayed 1991; Qiong 2004). The point is for teachers to choose the model based on context and learners' needs; as a result, the decision will potentially be different for every teacher (Petzold 2002).

Value learners' English

The second important aspect of a balanced approach is that, regardless of the English variety being taught, teachers should help their learners understand that the chosen variety is just one type of English, and that the learners' own English is valuable even though it may differ significantly from what is presented in class. For example, teachers should encourage learners to "refer to idiomatic expressions of their own language and enrich the communicative dialect of English with exotic and poetic elements" (El-Sayed 1991, 166). Dutch speakers of English for instance, might say, "If you need help, just pull on the bell," which is a word-for-word translation of a Dutch expression. The so-called standard English equivalent would be, "If you need anything, just let me know." When the Dutch shopkeeper asks customers if they need help finding anything, and the customers reply no, the shopkeeper would say, "Well, if you need anything, just pull on the bell" (even though there is no bell to pull). Although this expression is not one that a native speaker of Standard English would use, the message is clear to Dutch speakers, so there is no need to *correct* the speaker or to provide an alternate English expression within this context. Rather than being thought of as unsuccessful Standard English speakers, these learners would be considered successful English language users who make contributions to their speech community (Cook 1999). It is likely that this change in perspective would positively affect learners' ability to acquire the target language since it would increase their confidence and desire to communicate in English (Cook 1999).

Prepare learners for intercultural communication

Since English truly is a global language (Crystal 2003), all English language learners need to be prepared for future encounters with speakers of varieties of English that differ from their own (Jenkins 2000, 2006). One way to prepare learners is to expose them to different varieties (Matsuda 2003). Examples of different English varieties are available on the Internet, radio, television, and in different newspapers from around the world (Cook 1999). For example, on the Internet teachers and learners can access the *International Corpus of English* (www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/ice), which provides samples of many national and regional varieties of English. Students and teachers can also access *World-Newspapers* (www.world-newspapers.com), which provides links to English language newspapers from around the world. On the Internet it is also possible to view English language television channels from around the world, such as New Delhi Television (www.ndtv.com) from India, in which the broadcasters speak Indian English.

In addition to exposing learners to different varieties of English, teachers should focus on teaching both *strategic* and *intercultural* competence skills which will help learners be able "to adjust their speech in order to be intelligible to interlocutors from a wide range of [first language] backgrounds, most of whom are not inner circle native speakers" (Jenkins 2006, 174). Strategic competence skills help learners negotiate for meaning in a communication breakdown; these skills are consciously and explicitly employed. Examples of such skills include slowing the rate of speech and articulating clearly (Petzold 2002). Students should be taught strategic skills such as how to ask the interlocutor to slow down, to repeat, or to wait while the student chooses the appropriate word. For example, teaching students to say: "Could you please repeat that more slowly?" or "Could you please wait a moment while I search for the right word?" would be very useful.

Intercultural competence skills are those which help interlocutors overcome sociolinguistic differences (Alptekin 2002; El-Sayed 1991). Learners should be able to talk about the sociocultural norms of their own cultures "so that sociocultural convergence can be negotiated within the ad-hoc speech community" (El-Sayed 1991, 166). For example, Qatari students could be given the opportuni-

ty to explain why they must greet their fellow Muslims in Arabic, no matter what language is being used in the classroom. Similarly, Dutch students could be given the opportunity to explain that being assertive is considered polite in Dutch culture. Allowing students to maintain (and explain) their cultural differences will decrease misunderstandings because it will foster greater tolerance for the uniqueness of human cultures. Teaching such meta-pragmatic awareness skills (the specific skills to be taught would depend on the context) will help prepare learners for the intercultural interactions that are likely to occur in the existing global village (Jenkins 2006).

Sample classroom activities

We now present two sample activities that can be used in a balanced approach: international idiomatic expressions and exposure to Englishes. Because we are aware that contexts will differ, we suggest that teachers adjust these activities by making lesson plans that suit their local context and students' needs. Teachers can also use these ideas to develop other classroom activities.

International idiomatic expressions
Level: Low-Intermediate to Advanced

Objective: To help students identify idiomatic expressions in their native language(s) that they can use in English.

- ***Sub-objective 1:*** To build students' confidence as they make English their own by contributing to their speech community.
- ***Sub-objective 2:*** To increase students' awareness of the different ways English can be manipulated.

Materials: Bilingual dictionaries (optional: poster paper, markers)

Main Activity: Ask students to brainstorm and think of idiomatic expressions in their native language that they use on a regular basis. To get them started, provide some examples in English such as "Don't count your chickens before they hatch," and "It costs an arm and a leg." Ask the students to translate their expressions into English and write them down. Then, in groups or pairs, have students share their English versions with their partners. They should discuss the meanings of each expression. They should also determine whether or not the expressions make sense in English, and if an English speaker could understand them with no, or little, explanation. The students could then rate each expression on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the easiest to understand (requiring no explanation) and 5 being the most difficult to understand (requiring much explanation). The students could then each pick an expression or two to present to the class. They should present each expression in a sentence in order to show the appropriate context of use.

Note: This activity can be adapted for any number of students from any language background. Depending on the students' abilities and backgrounds, this activity can be done as a quick warm-up or expanded into a longer period of time.

Exposure to Englishes
Level: High-Intermediate to Advanced

Objective: To increase students' awareness and comprehension of different varieties of English.

Materials: Computers with Internet access and software that can play media programs such as Windows Media Player.

Warm-up: Elicit discussion about different types of English. Ask students if they have ever noticed or been exposed to different varieties of English. Could they hear a difference? Could they understand the different varieties? What do they think about different varieties? How did the varieties make them feel?

Main Activity: Put students in pairs or small groups. Assign two countries to each group. Then have students watch news reports from their assigned countries via the Internet. The students can listen to each report several times, noting down vocabulary and pronunciation differences between the reports. Students can listen to two reports on the same topic, such as a report on a speech by the U.S. president from the BBC in England and a similar report from a news broadcasting system in Australia; or students can listen to news reports on two completely different topics. The main point is to note in general terms the differences in vocabulary and pronunciation in the two reports. Students will then present a brief synopsis of the news reports to the class. They should present the content of the report as

well as the differences that they found in the varieties of English.

Follow-up Discussion: Ask the students about their experiences listening to the different varieties of English. Which did they find more difficult to understand? If they were speaking to people from that country, what could they do or say to help their comprehension?

Note: The teacher should find the reports before class in order to save time during the lesson. The reports should include interviews of *regular* people so that students can hear *common* language use of the different varieties, not just the reporters' language use. In the unlikely event that such reports cannot be found, this activity is still useful as it clearly demonstrates differences between Englishes.

Possible websites to use for this activity are:

- India: www.ndtv.com
- Ireland: www.rte.ie/live/index.html
- New Zealand: http://tvnz.co.nz
- Singapore: www.channelnewsasia.com

Conclusion

This article suggests that English language teachers should consider all varieties of English, not just British Standard English or American Standard English. In order to better prepare students for the global world, and to show them that their own English is valued, teachers can implement a balanced approach that incorporates the teaching and learning context as well as the learners' values. It also helps to prepare learners for future interactions with speakers of different varieties of English. The guidelines to following a balanced approach presented in this article are not meant to be prescriptive, nor do they claim to be comprehensive; we recognize that not all teachers have a choice about which variety of English to emphasize in their instruction. However, these guidelines can be adapted by all teachers who wish to help their students prepare for real world interactions.

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