

SOME COMMON FALLACIES ABOUT LEARNING AND TEACHING ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

*Luis Guerra**

ABSTRACT: Over the past decades, English language teachers have become familiar with several terms which attempt to describe the role of English as a language of international communication. Presently, the term English as a lingua franca (ELF) seems to be one of the most favoured and adopted to depict the global use of English in the 21st century. Basically, the concept of ELF implies cross-cultural, cross-linguistic interactions involving native and non-native speakers. Consequently, the ELF paradigm suggests some changes in the language classroom concerning teachers' and students' goals as far as native speaker norms and cultures are concerned. Based on Kachru's (1992) fallacies, this article identifies thirteen misconceptions in ELT regarding learning and teaching English varieties and cultures, suggesting that an ethnocentred and linguacentred approach to English should be replaced by an ELF perspective which recognizes the diversity of communicative situations involving different native and non-native cultures and varieties of English.

KEYWORDS: Cross-cultural communication; ELT; English as a lingua franca

Introduction

Since the last decades of the 20th century, terms such as English as a Global Language/Global English, English as a World Language/World English, English as an International Language/International English or English as a Lingua Franca have been used to describe the role of English as an international language of communication.

* Doutor em Linguística Aplicada pela University of Warwick (Reino Unido). Professor Auxiliar da Universidade de Évora (Portugal).

Applied linguists have proposed a definition of English as an International Language (EIL) in order to distinguish it from concepts such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). While ESL and EFL have been generally related to interactions among non-native and native speakers of English, EIL can be described as “that English in all its linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects which is used as a vehicle for communication between non-native speakers only, as well as between any combination of native and non-native speakers” (CAMPBELL et al., 1983, p. 35).

Moreover, instead of proposing a monolithic approach to the English language, applied linguists have also suggested that there is a wide diversity of ‘*Englishes*’ – British English, American English, Australian English, South African English, Indian English, among others – which are distinct from each other, possessing their own sub-varieties. They also suggest that, in spite of these many different Englishes, another type of the language, referred to as International English or Lingua Franca English, has become necessary so that those who speak English(es) can communicate with one another. This becomes clear when McArthur (2001, p. 15) summarizes the tension in international English, by saying that “there are many and there is one (but in two principal parts). Although the many seek greater self-definition and acknowledgement at home and abroad, the one (...) remains a reality and a target.”

In addition, McArthur (1998) believes that standard and standardising varieties such as British English, American English, Canadian English and South African English, have already begun to form this international standard of English, although receiving and mixing elements from American English (AmE) and British English (BrE).

However, when considering the diversity of situations and multiplicity of interlocutors involved, native as well non-native speakers, in today’s communicative exchanges in English, it is evident that the language used in these contexts is not a native, nor second or a foreign language, but a language that is tailored and accommodated to the diversified communicative interactions.

All in all, no definition of English as a lingua franca (ELF) would be complete without taking into account a more sociological approach. Briefly, what defines English as a lingua franca is precisely its widespread use all over the world as a tool for cross-cultural communication.

ELF/EIL as cross-cultural communication

ELF/EIL aims at mutual intelligibility and appropriate language use involving speakers of different varieties of English. Fundamentally, the concept of ELF/EIL implies cross-cultural, cross-linguistic interactions. As early as in the 1980s, Smith (1983, p. 7-9) explains the idea of cross-culturalism when he affirmed that “when any language becomes international in character, it cannot be bound to any culture.” Likewise, he adds that EIL “is the means of expression of the speaker’s culture, and *not* an imitation of the culture of Great Britain, the United States or any other native English speaking country.”

Smith (1987, p. 3) also states that using English in cross-cultural contexts “does not change the interactor’s cultural assumptions and expectations about what is and is not appropriate language behaviour in particular situations”. Consequently, Smith suggests that a negotiation of meaning should be done when the following senses are present in cross-cultural interactions:

(1) *a sense of self*: factors such as race, gender, nationality, age, socioeconomic status, belief system and values, ethnic/religious/political background, etc. help define one’s identity which is not changed when one is using English (discourse patterns from the first language do not carry over entirely into the second language);

(2) *a sense of the other*: in the use of English, one needs to know something about the discourse strategies of the prospective other (using a common linguistic medium – English – does not mean that the discourse strategies are shared);

(3) *a sense of the relationship between the self and the other*: the degree or affiliation of distance between sender and receiver;

(4) *a sense of the setting/social situation*: English is used differently in London, Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Tokyo or Toronto so the geographic setting and the social situation should be taken into account;

(5) *a sense of the goal or objective*: having a clear understanding of the goal/objective is essential if we are to negotiate meaning successfully across cultures..

Teaching ELF/EIL

Considering the use of ELF at an international level, Widdowson (2003, p. 177) recommends that teachers rethink their goals as far as native-speaker norms and cultures are concerned:

I have argued that setting objectives for learners to achieve must take account of the way the language has been appropriated internationally as a means of communication, and that this should lead us to think again about defining such objectives in reference to native-speaker norms. I have suggested that rather than seeking to specify goals in terms of projected needs, which for the most part are highly unpredictable, it would be preferable, and more practicable, to focus on the development of a more general capability which would serve as an investment for subsequent learning.

To do so, an ELF paradigm of teaching should replace an EFL perspective which emphasises Standard English and its culture, usually British or American.

Adding to this proposal, Seidlhofer (2011, p. 193) admits that an ELF pedagogy would not change the essential pedagogic issues in ELT but it would instead change “the way we need to think about and act upon them”. According to Modiano (2001a, p. 340), there are two main pedagogic concerns in the teaching of English as a lingua franca: language varieties and culture. Modiano states that when teachers of English only emphasize BrE or AmE, students are likely to see other varieties as less important. In Modiano’s opinion, such approach to teaching “presents English as the property of a specified faction of the native-speaker contingency”. Also, Modiano (2001b, p. 162) states that when students learn English as a tool for intercultural communication, they are supposed “to develop the ability to comprehend a wide range of varieties but also strive to utilize lan-

guage which has a high likelihood of being comprehensible among a broad cross-section of the peoples who comprise the English-using world”.

As for the role of culture in the language class, ELF pedagogy considers that non-native speakers learn English to communicate successfully in intercultural exchanges which may or may not include native speakers of English (JENKINS, 2015) as opposed to the idea that learners are taught the language “for integrative purposes with the expectation that [they] would become proficient in English solely to interact with British subjects” (BERNS et al., 2007, p. 23). Today, most learners of English do not aim at joining a single community so the notion of culture in ELT has been critically re-examined. In view of this, the ELF approach does not favour or appoint any specific target culture or cultural context for ELT.

It is clear that changing attitudes towards the role of English varieties and cultures might bring about significant innovations in the language classroom. Although most teachers and students consider that learning English should be based on British or American standards and cultures, learners would certainly benefit from a non-ethnocentred and linguacentred approach to learning and teaching English which stresses its international context of use.

Aspects of ELF/EIL related to ELT

In order to develop students’ and teachers’ skills and attitudes towards an ELF perspective to learning and teaching English, the following five central aspects should be described and analysed (GUERRA, 2009, p. 64-65):

1. Varieties of English:

- exposure to and familiarity with as many varieties and accents of English as possible – English as a Native Language, English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language;

- any variety and style of English can be acceptable if it functions well in international communication;

- non-native varieties are not viewed as some kind of interlanguage on the path to native speaker English/no more prestige accents models

- mixing standards (AmE/BrE) – grammar, lexis, pronunciation, discourse and style

- understanding the differences between AmE and BrE

2. Cultural issues:

- contact with a variety of cultures not just cultures of the English-speaking world

- developing an understanding of the student's own culture

- developing a sensitivity and awareness toward understanding other cultures

- no desire of language users to become more like native speakers in their life style

3. International role of English:

- cross-cultural, cross-linguistic interactions, essentially in international communication contexts

- ELF/EIL is not the same as ESL or EFL

4. Language fluency:

- working toward a native English speaker communicative competence is neither necessary nor sufficient when English is to be used as a lingua franca

5. Ownership of language:

- English belongs to the world and not to its native speakers

- English is the means of expression of the speaker's culture, not an imitation of the culture of Great Britain, the United States or any other native English speaking country

In essence, the above issues may help establish a paradigm for learning and teaching English as a lingua franca. But in order to carry out fundamental transformations in the language classroom, it is imperative to break down common misconceptions about the current use of English all over the world.

Kachru's "Six Fallacies about the Users and Uses of English"

In an article about the teaching of international varieties of Englishes, Kachru (1992, p. 357-359) calls attention to the implications of the sociolinguistic realities of English and some attitudes which "are nurtured by numerous fallacies about the users and uses of English across cultures." Kachru comments that "the fallacies are of several types; some based on unverified hypotheses, some based on partially valid hypotheses, and some due to ignorance of facts." The following are the six fallacies suggested and commented by Kachru (adapted from KACHRU, 1992):

Fallacy 1: That in the Outer and Expanding Circles¹, English is essentially learned to interact with native speakers of the language. This, of course, is only partially true. In its localized varieties, English has become the main vehicle for interaction among its non-native users, with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In such interactions, the British English, or American English conventions of language use are not only irrelevant; these may even be considered inappropriate by the interlocutors. The culture-bound localized strategies of, for example, politeness, persuasion, and phatic communion developed by non-native users are more effective and culturally significant.

¹ Kachru (1985) provides a variant of the ENL/ESL/EFL model of describing international English by distinguishing three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, made up of norm-providing ENL speakers, the Outer Circle, with norm-dependent ESL speakers, and the Expanding Circle, with norm-dependent EFL speakers.

Fallacy 2: That English is necessarily learned as a tool to understand and teach American or British cultural values, or what is generally termed the Judeo-Christian traditions. This is again true only in a very restricted sense. In the pluralistic regions of the Outer Circle, English is used as an important tool to impart *local* traditions and cultural values.

Fallacy 3: That the goal of learning and teaching English is to adopt the native models of English (the Received Pronunciation or General American). This claim has no empirical validity. The Inner Circle is a “model provider” in a very marginal sense. There is schizophrenia about the perceived model and actual linguistic behaviour, but this is an issue of linguistic attitude. The concept “native speaker” is not always a valid yardstick for the global uses of English.

Fallacy 4: That the international non-native varieties of English are essentially “interlanguages” striving to achieve “native-like” character. This hypothesis has several limitations. Whatever the validity of this hypothesis in second-language acquisition in general, its application to the institutionalized varieties of English in the Outer Circle needs reevaluation.

Fallacy 5: That the native speakers of English as teachers, academic administrators, and material developers, provide a serious input in the global teaching of English, in policy formation and in determining the channels for the spread of the language. In reality, the native speakers have an insignificant role in the global spread and teaching of English.

Fallacy 6: That the diversity and variation in English is necessarily an indicator of linguistic decay; that restricting the decay is the responsibility of the native scholars of English and ESL programs. This fallacy has resulted in the position that “deviation” at any level from the native norm is an “error”. This view ignores the functional appropriateness of language in sociolinguistic contexts distinctly different from the Inner Circle.

On reflection, Kachru's fallacies identify some common attitudes towards English which need to be re-assessed. In practice, perhaps the first step to be taken is to examine some of the prevailing attitudes of students and teachers so that misconceptions about the use of English as a lingua franca can be prevented.

Thirteen fallacies about learning and teaching ELF

The following are some of the prevailing attitudes and beliefs about learning and teaching English which somehow do not harmonize with the concept of ELF.

Fallacy 1: BrE is the correct variety of English. There is still a strong monolithic and linguacentred belief that does not fit into the needs and uses of learners. Moreover, the belief that there is a correct variety has no linguistic grounds. In order to understand and explain this point of view, it is crucial to identify its source: textbooks, teachers, society? Although the ENL model is commonly used as a point of reference, it is vital that it should not be regarded as the only correct model of English (SUNG, 2013).

Fallacy 2: It is important that students get as close as possible to native-speaker accent. Having a native or near-native accent does not mean possessing the necessary skills to achieve communication. In fact, what native speaker are we talking about? (probably a British speaker, if we consider fallacy 1). Rather than dealing with the concept of native speakers, teachers and students should consider the idea of a competent speaker whose accent is intelligible even though it does not follow native norms. Gnutzmann (1999, p. 165) believes that although BrE and AmE will continue to be the theoretical model in ELT, students do not need to conform to these standards. In his opinion, "expecting learners to comply with the set of linguistic norms would probably put unnecessary pressure on them, since they would hardly be able to fully live up to such expectations." Jenkins (2000, 2002) shares a similar view when she challenges the native speaker model as leading to successful communication.

Fallacy 3: It is not important to know the differences between AmE and BrE. As AmE and BrE are the most common norms used in ELT worldwide, it is vital that language users produce and understand both varieties. Knowledge of just one variety certainly limits the user's ability to understand others and be understood.

Fallacy 4: We can only refer to the differences between AmE and BrE in advanced levels. Knowledge of the differences between AmE and BrE should not be regarded as advanced materials. Many of the differences are found in basic vocabulary (e.g. cinema/movies, football/soccer), spelling (e.g. colour/color, grey/gray) and grammar (e.g. use of Simple Past and Present Perfect). The differences between AmE and BrE can be introduced as soon as the first lesson (e.g. 'z', /zi/ or /zed/).

Fallacy 5: Students are expected to be consistent in one variety. Research (GUERRA, 2009; MODIANO, 1999; VIRTANEN and LINDGRÉN, 1998) has shown that a great number of learners mix both varieties and that mixing varieties should be expected. Moreover, some ENL and ESL varieties also display features of both AmE and BrE. The aim towards consistency generally leads to teachers punishing students for using both varieties when writing. However, many times teachers consider those different spellings, vocabulary or syntactic structures wrong due to their own lack of knowledge of the features of AmE and BrE. Although Sung (2013) observes that because the written language is more stable than the spoken language there is less variability in written English as far as ELF is concerned, mixing varieties should be regarded a valid feature of ELF.

Fallacy 6: BrE is formal English; AmE is informal English. There is a misconception that AmE is a substandard variety which is usually a deviation of the British norms. Many students believe that the use of 'wanna', 'gonna' or 'ain't' is associated with AmE. There

seems to be some confusion between the concepts of geographical varieties and register (*informal* and *formal* language).

Fallacy 7: It is not important to spend time with ESL and EFL accents and cultures. Interestingly, several textbooks and classroom practices give English-speaking communities of the Outer Circle a significant role in ELT. However, from the standpoint of ELF, this is a limited approach to learning and using the language since English is to be used with native and non-native speakers alike, regardless of their origin and first language. According to Medgyes (1999, p. 186) teachers should include “familiarity with other native and non-native varieties and tolerance toward non-standard norms” in their classes. Similarly, Jenkins (2006, p. 169) called attention to the need to lessen the “native-speakerist” element in ELT materials by incorporating more non-mother tongue speakers in their lessons.

Fallacy 8: The English language belongs to the English people. The idea of ownership has a very restricted sense if we consider English as the world’s lingua franca. English today has achieved a status which sets it aside from any other language. While it seems clear that Italian might be seen by some as belonging to Italians or German to the Germans, we cannot say the same about English. In an ELF approach, as suggested by Jenkins (2015, p. 51), “the notion that if a language is dominant, the nation that owns it dominates would no longer hold”.

Fallacy 9: There is no room or time for other native varieties and cultures other than the British and American. It is a fact that teachers struggle with limited classroom time. There is always a feeling that teachers cannot fulfil their goals due to the several constraints they come across in and out of the classroom. However, it seems that there is always the possibility of including materials from other native varieties and cultures if enough time is devoted to the preparation of classes. Is it really a problem of lack of time or materials or are these varieties/cultures seen as secondary in English learning?

Fallacy 10: It is more important to include cultural aspects of native countries than of non-native countries. This belief usually comes together with the idea that students should only contact native English. According to Miyagi et al. (2009, p. 268), students should “realize that communicating in English involves more than interaction with an idealized and essentialized standard native speaker”.

Fallacy 11: Students can only gain if they spend time in a native country. There is no doubt that intensive and total exposure to the language in native environments is highly positive to language practice and acquisition (especially because the learner will contact with a diversity of Englishes in these environments). However, it should also be considered that being in a non-native context where English is used as a lingua franca is also beneficial as students are faced with situations of real language use. In this case, the situation is conducive of the acquisition of receptive skills.

Fallacy 12: Students will learn to make mistakes if they contact with ESL or EFL varieties. The fear of making mistakes cannot be a sound argument to prevent students from dealing with ESL and even EFL varieties. There is no guarantee that by contacting native varieties students will acquire error-free standard norms. Also, it is important to distinguish practice in productive skills (usually norm-oriented) and practice in receptive skills, which would be the focus of activities centred on non-native cultures and varieties.

Fallacy 13: It is easier to understand a native speaker than a non-native speaker. The acquired status of native speakers led to the belief that they are the models of language acquisition and intelligibility. However, many times it is easier to understand a fluent non-native speaker (ESL or EFL) than a native speaker of a regionally marked variety. When discussing the reasons why native speakers need to learn to speak English internationally, Chong (2016) states that sometimes native speakers are the ones least understood for the

following reasons: (1) they tend to speak quickly; (2) they use a lot of idiomatic language; (3) they make use of humour and irony; and (4) they often require their listeners to infer from what is being said. So, instead of considering the native speaker, we should refer to a competent speaker of standard English.

Conclusion

In the early 80s, Trifonovitch (1981) observed the continuation of old attitudes in a novel model of learning and teaching English. He suggests that the ideas that had been taken in learning English to communicate with native speakers persisted in the perception of English as a language of international communication. Undoubtedly, many of these attitudes are still widespread today.

These prevailing linguacentric and ethnocentric attitudes of most English students and teachers are central to the ELF debate. According to Marlina (2014, p. 7), ELF pedagogy

means the act of professionally guiding students (...) to (1) gain knowledge and awareness of the pluricentricity of English and the plurilingual nature of today's communication; (2) inspire students to give equal and legitimate recognition of all varieties of English; and (3) develop the ability to negotiate and communicate respectfully across cultures and Englishes in today's communicative settings that are international, intercultural, and multilingual in nature.

All in all, it is imperative to answer one of the most relevant questions in the ELF debate, as suggested by Seidlhofer (2011, p. 197): should English teachers “persist in teaching a competence that learners rarely attain, and apparently do not need” or should they set “objectives that are realistic in that they both reflect the learning process and are attainable, and correspond more closely to the requirements of the majority of actual users of the language”?

ALGUMAS FALÁCIAS COMUNS SOBRE O ENSINO E A APRENDIZAGEM DE INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA FRANCA

RESUMO: Ao longo das últimas décadas, os professores de inglês familiarizaram-se com diversos termos que procuraram descrever o papel do inglês como língua de comunicação internacional. Atualmente, o termo Inglês como Língua Franca (ILF) parece ser um dos mais preferidos para representar o uso global do inglês no século XXI. Basicamente, o conceito de ILF significa interações transculturais e translíngüísticas envolvendo falantes nativos e não nativos. Consequentemente, o paradigma ILF sugere algumas mudanças na sala de aula relativas aos objetivos dos professores e alunos em relação às normas e culturas dos falantes nativos. Baseado nas falácias de Kachru (1992), este artigo identifica treze concepções errôneas em relação ao ensino da língua inglesa relacionadas com a aprendizagem de variedades e culturas, e sugere que uma abordagem etnocêntrica e linguacêntrica deve ser substituída por uma perspectiva ILF que reconhece a diversidade das situações comunicativas envolvendo culturas e variedades nativas e não-nativas do inglês.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunicação entre culturas; Formação em língua inglesa; Inglês como língua franca.

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