

# Basic Assumptions in Teaching English as an International Language

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## Introduction

The worldwide growing interest in English stresses the need for a new approach to English language teaching. This new orientation is called English as an International Language (EIL). Basic to this approach is the realization of the world's exceptional condition in terms of human relations, made possible by improvements in communication technology. As a result, English as an international language and several other names with relatively similar conceptual frameworks have been proposed as viable substitutes for the old EFL/ESL models. Among the proposed models are English as an International or Intranational Language (EIIL), Smith (1978); English as an International Auxiliary Language (EIAL), Smith (1983); and English as a World Language, (EWL), Nunan (1999/2000). Partly to overcome the inadequacies and imprecision of the previous models and partly to respond to the evolving needs of the learners, who are undoubtedly affected by the process of globalization, EIL opens new avenues for research and investigation. This article is an attempt to evaluate this model and its basic assumptions with the purpose of investigating the eventual effects and changes it brings about.

## What is *English as an International Language* (EIL)?

EIL refers to the use of English by people of different nations in order to communicate with one another.

## Basic Underlying Assumptions

The wide range of expectations from such an initiation presupposes certain outstanding qualities on its part. Accordingly this work attempts to put the proposed assumptions from different perspectives under a new framework. Based on proportionally vast but disorganized and distracted resources available, it is claimed that central to the EIL approach is the assumption that EIL is descriptive, reformative, functional, non-artificial, intervarietal, cross-cultural, universal, multicultural, and intercultural. The following headings together may constitute the core of this approach.

### **English is an international language.**

As a lingua franca of the past century and the new millenium, English is one of the most important means for acquiring access to the world's intellectual and technical resources. Though Shaw (1981) recognizes it as a vestige of British colonism or the sign of the American cultural imperialism, English is now seen less as a symbol of imperialism and more as a viable candidate for the world's most important international language. (Smith 1983; Kachru 1982; Alptekin & Alptekin 1984; Jenkins 1998). At this point in the world's history, English is the pre-eminent language of wider communication. It is used as a library language, as the medium of science, technology and international trade, and as a contact language between nations and parts of nations.

### **EIL is descriptive.**

Baxter (1980) characterizes EIL as a description of how it functions today throughout the world not a prescription for how English should be used. Approving the learners' equal right to take advantage of this international tool, it directly deals with how people use English to maintain their relationship. As a result, the arising of different varieties of English is naturally expected.

### **EIL is reformative.**

EIL can be justified as a natural reaction to the drawbacks of the previous approaches. "The initial impetus for this approach is found in realizing the inadequacies of EFL/ ESL models" (Baxter 1980). EIL approach, thus, claims to reflect the international functions of English with greater accuracy than either EFL or ESL. It is, therefore, a new achievement evolved as a result of the growing similarities between EFL and ESL programs.

### **Interactors in EIL are unpredictable.**

For EFL/ ESL the interactors are predictable. EIL, however, is characterized distinct in terms of its interactors. In an EFL situation, one interactor is always a native speaker. In ESL situation, the interactors may be non-native speakers communicating with native speakers or the interaction may be between two local non-native speakers, using English interationally. However, in EIL the interactors can be nationals of different countries.

### **EIL is intervartial.**

As there are many varieties of English, EIL is an intervartial way of communication. From EIL perspective no speaker is realized as extreme. "They are all users of English, no matter whether a black English, a Cockney, or an Alabaman tourist" (Baxter 1980). The listener can be any speaker of English, native or non-native. In addition, experience points out the learners' need to prepare for understanding intervartial spoken English in face to face interactions. As far as spoken English is concerned, Received Pronunciation (RP) may no longer be considered the ultimate model. "The acquisition of native like accent is no longer the ultimate objective of the majority of the learners" (Jenkins 1998). This assumption has also been asserted by Stern (1992) since she notes that language pedagogy is taking a more positive view than it did in the past of the existence of varieties of language, dialects and sociolects within a speech community

Admitting the fact that English has always been characterized by diversity, the president's message to TESOL (1999) expresses dissatisfaction that this diversity has not been seen as strength. "This diversity reflects the global spread of English -- a trend that has been accelerated by globalization" (ibid.).

### **EIL is functional.**

EIL refers to functions of English not to the given form of the language. Thus it is concerned with the use of English by people of different nations and different cultures in order to communicate with one another. It is conceptually different from Basic English. It differs from English for Special Purposes (ESP) as well in the sense that it is not limited to any specific domain or field. In this relation Hardin (1979) has pointed out "the simple fact is that international communication cannot be reduced to the limited range and patterns of communication which are, I think, characteristics of ESP. Neither can it be seen as the sum of all kinds of ESPs since it is a language not a corpus."

### **EIL is non-artificial.**

Though Zamenhof's Esperanto is so well known as an international means of communication that, as Crystal (1992) reports, several countries transmit radio broadcasts in it, it has no native speakers Thus EIL differs from Esperanto in a sense that the latter is artificial. In fact English is an exceptional natural language able to obtain international appreciation. "For the first time a natural language has attained the status of an international (universal) language", (Kachru 1982). Even if we can accept Prodromou's (1988) parallelism between English in international setting and Algebra, again the latter is not a real means of human communication.

### **EIL is cross-cultural.**

Students must somehow be prepared to operate with English in unknown situations, which is characterized by variation in linguistic and cultural behavior. Diversity in the learners' cultural background and the forms of English around the world is a fact. Recognizing the fact that the objectives in EIL are broader cross-cultural communication, Baxter (1980) notes that students need practice in listening to English in the real world. They have to have the chance to hear actual spoken English with its inherited diversity. Accordingly as a pioneering advocate of EIL, Smith (1983) proposes a value free or cosmopolitan English that is quite independent of any cultural background but able to represent, describe and illustrate all cultures with equal vigor.

### **EIL is multicultural.**

The unpredictability of the English speakers discussed above, on the one hand, and their divergent range of cultural backgrounds on the other, portrays a multicultural perspective for English in international conditions. Approving this position Campbell et al. (1980) note; "A major principle of EIL is that when speakers of more than one country or culture interact,

more than one set of social and cultural assumptions will be in operation". It seems worth mention that EIL will not de-emphasize or undermine the interest in culture but it is to say that English culture is not the sole referent. This point is also stressed in Stern (1992) as it notes; "In teaching of English as an international language, there would be no particular culture to which the second language could be related" (ibid.).

### **EIL is universal.**

"English is the language most frequently used in international trade, diplomacy and tourism and that it is studied by more people than any other language" (Smith 1983). Crystal (1992) reports that non-native speakers of English comprise more than two thirds of its potential speakers. This seems to be an appropriate edge to argue that English, in international settings, does not belong to any one group of people. In fact people from different nations all around the world may adopt this key for a variety of reasons. Under these conditions, for overcoming misunderstandings a process of mutual adjustment amongst interactors may automatically be activated.

As a typical instance, Smith (1983) reports that the German chancellor and the French prime minister speak English while having secret negotiations. This instance, by no means, can be interpreted as a sign of diminishing their native language or cultures. Rather it depicts that, as an accessible resource available to all, English is used for its power in creating mutual intelligibility. This quality has rightly attracted Campbell et al. (1982) to argue that "EIL can summarily be defined as that English in all its linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects which is used as a vehicle for communication between non-native speakers, as well as between any combination of native and non-native speakers".

Similar to these positions, but in a different way, TESOL's (1999) president message argues for the growth of English as a world language, . "In fact ,with the spread of globalization and the rapid expansion of information technologies has come an explosion in the demand for English worldwide" (Nunan 1999).

### **EIL is intercultural.**

The use of English and any other language is always culture bound, but the language itself is not bound to any specific culture or political system. In EFL & ESL specific varieties of English and specific cultures can be dealt with. This may not be considered valid for EIL. "It is clear that in teaching of EIL the goal cannot be knowledge of details of a given variety or culture or even numbers of these" (Smith 1983). Ways of speaking and patterns of discourse are different across cultures. Americans may speak English natively yet may not be properly understood by a Briton. A native English speaking Australian may have similar problems with an American or an Indian.

### **Both native and non-native speakers need training in EIL.**

Smith and Rafiqzad (1979) clearly demonstrate that native speakers have serious problems in understanding English spoken internationally. It thus recommends that native speakers of English need training in the use of their own language in the international settings. Non-native speakers of English also need training in the use of English not just with native speakers but with non-native speakers as well. "Presently such training is not adequately dealt with in the fields of EFL and ESL" (Campbell et al. 1982).

Today non-native speakers use English quite frequently with other non-native speakers and they need specific training for that. Thus Smith (1983) points out that native English speakers should study English as an international language if they plan to interact in English with non-natives or with other native speakers who use a different national variety. " The basic problem in miscommunication is caused by two false assumptions.1.If a person has native or native-like grammar, lexis, and phonology, appropriate communication will automatically follow; and 2.ways of speaking and discorsal patterns of all fluent speakers of English are the same" (ibid.).

It is important for the individuals working in the field of second language acquisition to note that though a good command of English grammar, lexis, and phonology is necessary to facilitate international communication, it may not be sufficient. Accordingly, both native as well as non-native English speakers should have assistance in their use of English for international communication because of the different functions of English across cultures.

Approving native speakers' problem in understanding non-native speakers using English internationally, Smith and Bisazza (1982) also note that the assumption that non-native students of English will be able to comprehend fluent non-native speakers

if they understand native speakers is clearly not correct. "They seem to need exposure to both native and non-native varieties in order to improve understanding in communication" (ibid.).

## Final Remarks

Moving in the direction of EIL, we must rethink several assumptions. As an incredibly globally spread language, English should no longer be considered as a property of its native speakers. It has already grown into a world property. Likewise, language learners might not be considered as mere consumer of this Anglo-Saxon tradition. With no attempt to de-emphasize the national practice of English for English speaking countries, the international function of English is thought to be a different aspect, which deserves particular attention. The existence of different varieties for English warns us against the danger of limiting the scope of practice and learning to certain limited varieties. Accordingly students are suggested that they should get familiar with different varieties, native and non-native. Our curriculum for teaching English should, thus, be improved with the inclusion of varieties of English spoken by different native or non-native speakers. This measure will help students broaden their appreciation and knowledge of the language they use and get prepared for any variety not yet known to them.

As far as the culture is concerned, due to the diversity among native speakers on the one hand and the heterogeneous population of non-native speakers on the other, the culture of native speakers can no longer be imposed. In contrast to the idea of language hegemony or linguistic chauvinism, nonnative speakers of English may use it to express, react or even propagate their ideas to affect a relatively larger part of the world, including native speakers. The increasing trend of globalization may indirectly make us take immediate measures to live up to the demands of the oncoming era, one of whose basic demands is the ability and readiness to communicate and understand via an international language. Thus it seems urgent that individuals in all parts of the world be adequately equipped with this effective tool as soon and as much as possible.

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