

## **English as an international language: Challenges and Implications for choosing teaching material.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The spread of English language all over the world has been immense. English is seen as the first and foremost candidate for the role of a global language. It is the mother tongue for the majority of people, it is used as an official language in over 70 countries and it has a privileged status as a foreign language taught at schools in over 600 countries (Crystal 1997).*

*However as English steadily grew into a lingua franca, many implications arose for the English language teachers. There was a strong ethnocentrism among TESOL teachers who had by and large neglected the special needs of their international students. They preferred to use a methodology and materials that naturally emanated from those countries where English was spoken as a 'native' language. As a result students found themselves less than adequately prepared to use the language effectively for cross-cultural communication, experienced inability to understand one's otherness and where led to alienation and stagnation.*

*This paper attempts to examine a set of proposals that have been made for teaching EIL and culture as difference, as an integral part of social interaction, developing learner's cross cultural awareness and understanding.*

**KEYWORDS:** *International language, Cultural awareness, teaching material.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The spread of English language all over the world has been immense. English is seen as the first and foremost candidate for the role of a global language. It is the mother tongue for the majority of people, it is used as an official language in over 70 countries and it has a privileged status as a foreign language taught at schools in over 600 countries (Crystal 1997).

However as English steadily grew into a lingua franca, many implications arose for the English language teachers. There was a strong ethnocentrism among TESOL teachers who had by and large neglected the special needs of their international students. They preferred to use a methodology and materials that naturally emanated from those countries where English was spoken as a 'native' language. As a result students found themselves less than adequately prepared to use the language effectively for cross-cultural communication, experienced inability to understand one's otherness and where led to alienation and stagnation.

This paper attempts to examine a set of proposals that have been made for teaching EIL and culture as difference, as an integral part of social interaction, developing learner's cross cultural awareness and understanding.

First, this paper concentrates on issues and suggestions concerning the materials and the pedagogy that should be used for teaching EIL, secondly, we will focus on the current debate of over privileging the native speaker teachers, on how we can develop students awareness of the otherness, of the target culture, different dialects, not only as product (output of facts about culture) but also as a process that determines, beliefs actions and ways of thinking.

Finally this paper will demonstrate how these proposals can be applied and what implications they might meet in the Greek context.

#### **EIL materials and methodology.**

Smith (1976) argued that learners do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers, the educational goal is of knowing a language according to Smith is to enable students to communicate their ideas and culture to others. Smith's opinion was further developed by Kachru (1992) who supported that English must be dissociated from the colonial past and not necessarily be linked to 'westernization'. In a similar manner Widdowson (1994) points out that the time has come to assume ownership of English by using it for specific purposes and modifying it to meet our needs. This separation of the English culture has several implications for

teaching: The materials should not be limited to the native culture. Learners should be able to communicate their culture to others and the ELT materials should provide them with the vocabulary and the information to do this by including local culture contexts. Furthermore as Roux(1999) suggests no communication can be culturally neutral so, as Alptenkin (2002) argues only by proceeding instructional materials that emphasize the diversity both within and across cultures can one perhaps avoid presenting English meaning in fragmented and 'trivialized ways' where communicative functions are conveyed as simple speech acts realized through specific structures and portray an idealized image of the English culture. Teachers of EIL Alptenkin suggests, should incorporate instructional materials and activities rooted in local as well as in international contexts that are familiar and relevant to the language learners' lives. Materials according to Cook (1999) simply need to demonstrate that L2 users exist in the world as role models for students to emulate. Moreover Seidhofer (2002) claims that teachers themselves can and should take activities a few steps beyond the what is prescribed in textbooks to enable students to move in and out of cultures. Likewise Dendrinos(2001) claims that English lessons must endow students with the capacity to move freely from their L1 to their L2 and vice versa. She claims that learners will not be monolingual users of the newly acquired language but they will have to act as interpreters and report language information that they have processed from one language to another. Therefore she suggests that language classrooms must necessarily provide the conditions for them to practice new skills rather than focusing on artificially monolingual communicative settings.

Teachers, furthermore, should problematize the cultural message of the textbooks, as Canagarajah (1999) supports, in order to assist students on forming a critical understanding of the competing communicative practices. Therefore any cultural conflicts that arise in class should be exposed by the teachers, and explored critically. Teachers should not simply correct the cultural question by providing the right answer, on the contrary, they can explore, elaborate on them and help students develop their sociolinguistic competence. Jiang (1999) supports that even by using cultural bumps ('cases where an individual from one culture finds himself in a different or uncomfortable situation when interacting with people of a different culture') teachers can teach language and culture simultaneously. McKay (2002) also claims that while teaching English, educators should also recognize the value of including topics that deal with the local culture. Educators, furthermore, should find and support a methodology that is appropriate to the local educational context. In extension to this idea McKay supports that the EIL teaching methodology should allow a locally appropriate pedagogy to be implemented. McKay argues that just as the context of EIL materials, the methodology should no longer be linked exclusively to native English speaking countries. Each country should take ownership of the language and select methods and books that are appropriate to the local context. She refers to the case of Chilly as a country where this is successfully happening, meaning professionals thinking 'globally but acting locally' (Kramsch and Sullivan 1996)

McKay(2002) also proposes devoting time and attention in class to the local culture as a means of empowering learners to and give them the opportunity to share their own culture with other speakers of English.

Canagarajah (1999) moves on a bit further suggesting an EIL pedagogy. She believes that a context sensitive and a culture specific approach to language teaching must be developed; an approach that will enable periphery countries to conduct language learning relevant to their sociocultural needs and that will help students handle culture successfully and solve cultural misunderstandings. Teachers in Canagarajah's opinion must support students to use language creatively according to their needs and not slavishly parrot specific communicative chunks. Canagarajah claims that this 'critical pedagogy' promotes more pluralized forms of English and encourages students to develop a meta-cultural awareness, be reflective and modify the new codes to suit their needs and this can be achieved even by constructing and using in classroom hybrid texts.

The second issue that arose in EIL teaching and this paper will examine is the need to expose students to a broader range of accents and dialects as well as the effort to increase the status of the non native teachers as role effective learner models students can relate and imitate.

English is contented to be an international language because many speakers are acquiring some familiarity with English as their second or third language. Prodromou(1997) estimated that up to 80% of communication in English takes place between non native speakers.

English language therefore can no longer be linked native speakers accents and dialects. Learners thus must develop their understanding of many different cultures and of many different accents. Modiano (1999) stresses that EIL educators must be very careful while teaching so as not to extend and promote the forces of 'linguistic imperialism'. If a teacher he claims, explains implicitly to his students, by for example presenting vocabulary based on one variety without providing students with equivalents from other varieties, he may install into their minds that this variety and accent is superior to others and that the other varieties are less valued. Students will assume that this is the proper more prestigious register they are supposed to use. As a result according to Modiano (1999), a prejudice and a diminishing attitude towards the other usually periphery varieties will be established. In addition students will become coerced into a 'nation centered' view and not to

an international view of the language. Kachru (1986) states that one way to safeguard and promote international communication is to promote more indigenized varieties of English as a socially acceptable means of communication.

Llurda (2004) supports that people proclaim their membership in particular ways through the language they use. It is therefore unnatural to promote an attitude and a pedagogy that focuses only on one variety. In this way learners will not be forced to hide which part of the world they are from and they will not be considered failures if they have foreign accents. Trifonovitch (1981) claims that it is very important to sharpen our students 'linguistic frequency' and make them effective interlocutors. Teachers according to Trifonovitch's point of view must teach their students how to communicate and not 'speaking'. He supports that this can be achieved by exposing students to a broad range of accents through specially designed listening materials that are based on non standard varieties of English. Detecting and accepting different varieties, even varieties from the outer circle, will enable students to learn about different cultures and develop a ways of seeking clarification and establish rapport.

Trifonovitch (1981) expands his view suggesting an examination system that does not rely on English speaking countries culture. An examination system as he envisages it, that takes into consideration the different values in different social contexts, depending on the needs and interests of the students. In this way students will become conscious that English is a medium of communication that belong to everybody (Canagarajah 1999) and will develop a tolerance and acceptance of different varieties and accents.

In addition teaching different varieties as Medgyes (1994) claims minimizes the threat that many students from the expanding circle face: meaning being dominated or 'ostracized' by the academic community. Periphery learners will have chance to negotiate with English to gain positive identities and will use language in their own terms, rather than accept typical values the new language embodies with all the unfavorable representations it provides.

The 'context and the speaker' approaches Canarajah (1999) proposes( meaning: use materials and methods acknowledged by the students, make use of the language generated by students) will impute equality and democratic attitudes to discourse communities. HE does however stresses the limitations of this method since as he supports 'it is not sufficient to challenge the power of the dominant codes the dominance is sustained by economic and political relations and learning about their dialect may make students feel good but it is not enough'

McKay as well as several linguists advocate the importance to recognize the value of topics included in textbooks, support the selection of an appropriate methodology but most importantly they recognize the value of the non nativeenglish speaker teachers (NNEST). In fact Carddol (1999)contents that in not too distant future, NNEST will surpass the number of native teachers.

Due to this fact Cook (1999) argues for the need to avoid comparing native and non native teachers and move beyond the model of the native teacher. NNEST do have several disadvantages as Medgyes(1994) points out. They have a linguistic defect, they are poorer listeners and writers than native users. Vocabulary and speaking are the most common problem areas for the non native even though grammar is an area they might have an advantage to native speakers. However even in grammar their knowledge remains 'bookish' since they were taught by grammar books that provide a standard very controlled view of the language as a system based on strict rules, and only by hard work and exposure to the language they can minimize the problem but still as Medgyes(1994) states the problem can not be entirely solved.

In addition as Medgyes(1994) research shows, non native teachers are doomed to assume roles while teaching since even though they have scanty information about the culture of English speaking countries in classroom they have to appear as well informed sources in all respects. This Medgyes (1994) supports may result to an "inferiority complex" and anxiety that can even harm the learners since a stressed teachers is likely to transmit his anxiety to his students too.

However nowadays there is a tendency to promote the non native speaker teacher model. The work of many EIL researchers focuses on the advantages of the NNEST. In this vein Cook (1999) supports that bilingual teachers can act as models of successful language learning as they present a more achievable model for imitation. Learners may feel overwhelmed by the native speaker who has achieved a perfection that is out of his students needs. On the other hand Cook supports that non native teachers can by traveling and with the spread of various channels become just as informed of english culture as their native counterparts.

Most importantly both Cook(1999) and Medgyes (1994) claim as the most salient advantage of the NESTs the fact that they have lived through the process of becoming bilingual and express themselves in a different language, and can really understand their students needs and thus prevent and anticipate students difficulties successfully. In addition they are able to use to set more realistic goals for the students by matching their potential with the social demands (Medgyes 1994). They are therefore, inherently endowed with expertise in guiding students to successfully manage a language. McKay (2002) also supports that the strength of a NEST

is his familiarity with the local culture. NEST can really understand their students' needs and adjust any new teaching methodologies accordingly.

Finally NESTs can be as McKay (1999) supports more empathetic to their needs and problems and make use of LI to solve any problems that may emerge in the teaching process.

### **Implications and applications in the Greek context.**

Before discussing how the ideas discussed above can be applied in the Greek context and obstacles they might encounter I will mention a few things about the historical context of language teaching in Greece and the mentality of the people as far as languages are concerned.

Greece according to Kachru (1985) circles belongs to the expanding circles which means that in the Greek context English is a foreign language selected by the Greek state for pupils.

Triandis and Vasiliou (1972) have defined argue that the Greek character and culture is consistent with the ecology and the history of the country-mountainous country scarce resources and a long occupation by Ottomans.

Triandis and Vasilliou (1972) also argue that seem to be very friendly and ready for all sacrifices for family and friends while very suspicious of strangers very competitive towards the outer group. In addition English language had negative associations and was 'marked' due to the American interference in ethnical issues.

However the Greek traditionally monolingual community has experienced in the past two decades two important changes: its accession to the European union in 1981 and a massive flow of immigrants that started in the late 1980s. These changes influenced people and especially teacher's attitudes towards EIL issues.

Greeks started to recognize english as a lingua franca and incorporated english language teaching in the national curriculum. Students are now taught English from the third grade onward.

As in other expanding circle countries English taught in Greece derive from the inner circle varieties, mainly British and American english (although as mention above American English are less popular due to the history of the country)

Although Sifakis and Sougari (2003) claim that recent curricula in state schools refer to the need to integrate the international character of english, it is not clear to what extend teachers are ready to implement EIL practices in their classrooms.

As far as the issue of using native or non native speaker teachers is concerned I believe that although some educators support the use of native teachers and advocate in favor of materials based in English speaking cultural tradition( with Oxford and Cambridge publications being highly preferred ) and express a lack of confidence in non native teachers usually using the argument that they are private and having native teachers raises the number of students, increase the prestige of the institute and becomes more attractive to learners. On the other hand in state schools native and non native teachers must pass an examination that tests their language proficiency and their knowledge of ELT methodology. So only competent teachers are employed not regarding the fact of native or non native competence.

Furthermore quite a few course books are published every year by Greek publishing houses based in both cultures (Greek and British or American).

Moreover many educators try to develop a locally based pedagogy revise the context of course books, adjust the ELT methodology since they concluded that some aspects of the method are not effective in the Greek context.

On the other hand the picture becomes more complicated if we consider the issue of teaching different varieties and accents of english especially varieties that come from countries of the outer circle.

This reaction against other varieties of english besides the standard one can be explained when one considers the massive flow of immigrants in Greece. The present condition of high unemployment and increasing economic uncertainty have contributed to the widespread negative opinion about immigrants (Dimakos&Tassiopoulou 2003) and the little interest that generally Greeks show in the immigrant's own sociocultural identity and communicative habits. Greeks feel that the purity of their own language is threatened by the languages of immigrants (Sifaki and Sougari 2003). Thus they uphold strong views about the importance of inner circle norms for the international lingua franca. In Sifakis and Sougari (2003) research on the extend to which Greeks hold a stereotypical attitudes toward inner circle varieties, concluded that teacher themselves believed that they ought to attain a good english pronunciation. The majority of teachers felt that native accents are important as accent models and only a very small number saw an intelligent accent as an appropriate model. On the other hand teachers that took part in the research seemed to believe that none of the rules and standards are crucial in order to communicate. In addition the fact that Greek teachers seemed to equate a good accent with a native speaker accent, as Sifakis and Sougari argued can be enhanced by the prevalence of the Ns proficiency tests in Greece. Many of the proposals discussed in the first section of the assignment have started being applied in the Greece, however, they must be worked upon to improve their context and validity and

promoted properly. For instance a new examination system called KPII (based on the needs of students and on local culture) was introduced 2 years ago as an alternative to the Ns proficiency exams but it still needs more time in my opinion to be improved and become widely established. However if teachers realize what Timmis states, meaning that non native teachers are entitled to use a variety of English that belongs to them. And that we ought to focus on those aspects of the language that are essential to international communication, the new theories about pronunciation and dialects will be adjusted to the context and be applied too.

## II. CONCLUSION.

This paper demonstrated the need to train students from different cultural backgrounds to be able to handle the foreign language successfully develop awareness of a greater variety of cultures including their own, ensure intelligibility among speakers of English ,what positive effects these may have and how they can be applied in different contexts with reference to the Greek context.

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