

ELT today: From dilemma to professional responsibilities

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In order to develop individual and community identities in a globalising world, pedagogies of connection are compelled to move beyond a 'method' approach to English language teaching (ELT). A postmethod pedagogy looks to facilitate context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy which is based on an understanding of the local linguistic, sociocultural and political context. In this paper, implications of globalisation for ELT are discussed. Globalisation is defined and the ways in which it can be examined from a language perspective are explored. This exploration reveals that globalisation presents English language teachers with a significant dilemma: the domination of culturally based methodologies, such as communicative language teaching (CLT), which have accompanied the spread of the language itself. This paper argues that if this dilemma is seen as a professional responsibility we can derive some guidelines for an informed approach to ELT in a globalising world. The overarching goal of such an approach is to develop ways of teaching English that lead to additive bilingualism. In order to accomplish this goal, the researchers argue that English language teachers have three professional responsibilities to fulfil: 1) adopt a nuanced view of English as a global language; 2) focus on context; and 3) proceed in small steps.

Introduction

Globalisation is an important phenomenon that is closely related to the spread of the English language. Despite its prevalence, there is confusion over exactly what the term means (Held, McGrew, Glodblatt & Perraton, 1999; Scholte, 2000; Wiseman, 1998). Common to definitions of globalisation is the idea of connections and relationships that go beyond the immediate, local environment (Gray, 2002). One often cited definition is that offered by McGrew (1992):

Globalization refers to the multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation-states (and by implication the societies) which make up the modern world system. It defines a process through which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant consequences for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe. (pp. 65-66)

Globalisation has far reaching consequences for languages. Johnson (2001) and Fischer (1999) point out that in our globalising world, languages are no longer tied to or associated exclusively with discrete territorial areas or single nation states. Indeed, languages, along with “goods, capital, people, knowledges, images, communications, crime, culture, pollutants, drugs, fashions, and beliefs”, also “readily flow across territorial boundaries” (McGrew, 1992, p. 65-66). This applies especially to English. English obtained its position at the core of the global language system due to a variety

of historical reasons, namely “large scale migration and settlement of native language speakers, military imposition (colonialism), commercial or political power and prestige derived from scientific, cultural or other achievements” (Leitner, 1992, p. 186). English is now the main language of books, newspapers, academic conferences, science, technology, international business and medicine, and has official or special status in over 70 countries across Africa, Asia and the Pacific (Crystal, 1987; 1997). Certain culturally based methodologies, most notably CLT, have also spread along with the language. Globalisation therefore presents English language teachers with a dilemma relating to how we teach English. There is considerable pressure for English language teachers to use CLT; so powerful has been its impact that many governments, applied linguists and classroom teachers in their discourses have adopted it as ‘the way’ to address deficiencies in English teaching, curriculum and learning outcomes. However this does raise concern, as CLT may not be an appropriate method in all contexts and all situations from a sociocultural perspective.

If this dilemma is recast as a set of professional responsibilities, however, we can derive some guidelines for an informed approach to ELT in a globalising world. The overarching goal of such an approach is to develop ways of teaching English that lead to additive bilingualism. In order to accomplish this goal, English language teachers have three professional responsibilities to fulfil: 1) adopt a nuanced view of English as a global language; 2) focus on context; and 3) proceed in small steps.

Defining CLT

CLT is based on a view of language as a system for expressing meaning, and its goal is to prepare learners to use the language for real life communication. As Richards and Rodgers (1986, p. 66) point out, CLT is best thought of as an approach to language teaching rather than a method because “[t]here is no single text or authority on it, nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative”. This also means that the specific activities and techniques used to implement CLT may differ from one classroom to the next (Hiep, 2007). Despite this, we can still identify some defining characteristics which are typical of CLT:

- a focus on communicative functions
- a focus on meaningful tasks rather than on language *per se* (e.g., grammar or vocabulary study)
- efforts to make tasks and language relevant to a target group of learners through an analysis of genuine, realistic situations

- the use of authentic, from-life materials
- the use of group activities
- the attempt to create a secure, non-threatening atmosphere (Li, 2001, p. 150)

The global spread of CLT

As noted above, CLT has become the most influential and dominant language teaching approach of recent times and has spread around the world, along with English.

According to McKay (2002), there are three main reasons for this: CLT is seen as ‘modern’ and ‘advanced’; educators in many parts of the world have supported its use; and commercially produced teaching materials often embody a CLT approach.

Teaching methodologies developed in the West, for example Britain and the United States, are often portrayed as being the most modern, up-to-date and effective, while other methodologies are regarded as backward, old-fashioned or simply incapable of producing proficient English speakers (Phillipson, 1992). This applies particularly to CLT, which is often explicitly promoted as a model for all the world’s language teachers and learners to follow (Bax, 2003). As McKay (2002) says, there is a belief that experts from the the West have the knowledge and skills “to help modernize English language teaching in ‘underdeveloped’ countries” (p.109) through implementing CLT.

Many teachers, officials and policy makers in other parts of the world have also actively argued for the use of CLT in English language teaching because they believe it will better help learners acquire English language proficiency and enable them to use English for various purposes outside of the classroom (McKay, 2002). Both Japan and South Korea, for example, produced communicative curriculums in the early 1990s in the hope that they would lead to better learning outcomes (McKay, 2002), and many teachers and researchers in China have argued that CLT is best suited to producing learners able to use English in the context of China’s economic development and opening to the outside world (Li, 1984; Liao, 2004; Zhu, 2003).

Commercially produced teaching materials are often designed along CLT lines, especially those produced in Western countries (McKay, 2002). Any English language textbook produced by one of the major publishers, such as Cambridge University Press

or Oxford University Press, will more than likely contain an abundance of communicative activities. Teaching materials from other countries can also exemplify CLT. Morocco's Ministry of Education produced a secondary school English text called *Further Steps in English* which makes extensive use of communicative activities such as role plays, discussions and games (McKay, 2002), while China has recently begun to use a series of task-based textbooks in some of its secondary schools (Liao, 2004). The approach advocated in a textbook is an important factor in the spread of CLT because, as McKay (2002,) states, "the fact that the textbook specifies a way to undertake the activity creates an expectation among students – and teachers themselves – that this is the correct way" (p. 111).

The CLT dilemma

Reliance on imported methods and approaches as "correct way" models (McKay, 2002) for language learning demonstrate a lack of understanding in relation to the learning process. It is the prescriptive, imposed nature of CLT, and its harem of accompanying textbooks, that make it socially and culturally inappropriate and insensitive. Teachers need to be aware that its use may not be appropriate in all contexts and situations. This paper argues that it is necessary to rethink our predisposition to rely on particular methods, approaches and "correct way" models as presented in textbooks, and instead think of teaching and learning in terms of contexts of learning. In particular, we need to focus on how to teach English in a responsible way that minimises any harmful impact on local, regional and national languages and cultures.

Globalisation clearly presents English language teachers with very difficult issues to which there are no easy answers. However, if we view the CLT dilemma in terms of professional responsibilities we can derive some guidelines for the informed practice of English language teaching in a globalising world.

Professional responsibilities

We base our suggestions for English language teachers' professional responsibilities in a globalising world on the assumption that the central goal of English language teaching should be to develop ways of teaching English that lead to additive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism is achieved when learning a second or other language, in this case English, does not lead to the loss of the first language.

We propose that English language teachers can contribute to achieving this goal by fulfilling certain professional responsibilities. In line with the above discussion, these responsibilities can be firmly centred on two approaches – the ecological approach to language learning and teaching, and exploratory practice – both of which emphasise situated contexts in which the immediate participants, that is, teachers, learners, parents and local communities, are involved in the learning processes.

The ecological approach ultimately means that language teaching and learning are more complex than typically recognised and involve much more than just methodology. As Tudor (2001) explains, the ecological approach

portrays language teaching as an emergent phenomenon, that is, a reality which emerges dynamically from the actions and interactions of very many individuals working within specific contexts which operate according to rules that are proper to each as a reality in its own right (p. 2).

In line with this, Bax (2003) suggests the following aspects of a context all exert an important influence on language teaching and learning: individuals (personal differences, learning styles, learning strategies, personal motivation); classroom culture (group, dynamics, group motivation, classroom environment, school environment); local culture (regional differences, status of teachers and students in the community, attitude and behaviour of parents, local environment and so on) and national culture (political context, religious context, social context, national environment).

Exploratory practice, as developed by Allwright (2005), is a process that seeks to empower teachers by bringing a research perspective into their classrooms where familiar, everyday classroom activities and tasks are used to reflect consciously on their effectiveness in supporting learning. Exploratory practice ties in neatly to an ecological approach to language learning, in that it is ‘in situ’, contextualised and responsive to learner needs, resulting in a learning experience that is ultimately relevant and meaningful to learners. It is sensitive and inclusive of the sociocultural context. It takes into account the larger learning context and values the learners’ experiences and backgrounds. The message is empowering and supportive of the individual. The process of classroom investigation is not an artificial research structure imposed on the learning context, but instead draws on the familiar as investigative tools. These tools include a predisposition to reflect on the familiar and see it in a different light through the filter of new ideas.

Three responsibilities flow from these approaches. Teachers should: 1) adopt a nuanced view of English as a global language; 2) focus on context; and 3) proceed in small steps. Each of these responsibilities will be discussed below using examples from the contexts the researchers have worked in.

1. Adopt a nuanced view of English as a global language

English as a global language is complex and multifaceted. It is not simply just beneficial or destructive, good or bad, liberating or oppressing, but rather all of these things, to varying degrees, at the same time. Viewed from the perspective of the ecological approach, the meaning of English as a global language will vary from one context to another, and probably also from one group to another within each context. For example, Gil (2005) draws on experiences teaching and researching English in China to show how English has various impacts on the languages and cultures of China. English has some potentially negative impacts such as being a requirement for progression through the education system and for certain jobs but is also being adapted in both form and function to express Chinese culture and identity. Meanwhile, English currently appears to have little influence on the prospects of minority languages due to its limited presence in ethnic minority areas.

In order to fully understand English as a global language, English language teachers must therefore adopt a nuanced view of English as a global language which takes account of its multifaceted nature both within and across contexts.

2. Focus on context

Adopting such a view then requires us to have a thorough understanding of the contexts in which English language learning and teaching takes place. This means we need detailed studies of a variety of contexts. Such studies will form the basis for developing ways of teaching English that lead to additive bilingualism, as any solutions to the dilemma presented by globalisation must be appropriate to the context; in other words, language teaching and learning must be localised. As the ecological approach suggests, the process of language learning and teaching is influenced by more than the immediate learning environment. The process of language learning and teaching needs to be whatever is relevant to the learner and their language learning, whether present in the immediate setting or not. Traditionally, the classroom context has been the focus of research into what affects language learning outcomes; context has been valued, but

only the immediate context. An ecological approach to language learning requires that context is conceived as a holistic view of the learner's world, both inside and outside the classroom. Language learning and language learner development are therefore a socialisation process mediated by various social agents in contexts where language learning occurs (Norton & Toohey, 2001).

Therefore, approaches to second language learning must focus not only on internal learner characteristics, learning strategies, and linguistic production but on the communicative effect of these combined, that is, on the reception of their actions in particular sociocultural communities (Norton & Toohey, 2001). Gao (2006), for example, used interviews with students about their English language learning experiences to highlight the important influence parents have on Chinese university students' attitudes, motivation, use of learning strategies and learning beliefs, and argues that teachers should adjust their practice to complement and reinforce parents' efforts.

3. Proceed in small steps

The dilemma we have discussed in this paper is extremely complex, and therefore easy answers and overnight solutions are unlikely. Instead, the kind of research we have suggested will require long-term engagement with a specific learning and teaching context and regular reflection on the outcomes. Research into English language teaching in a globalising world is therefore likely to proceed slowly and gradually. Teachers should see additive bilingualism as a long-term goal rather than something they will be able to bring about in the short term. One example is by Najjar (2008) who reported on a longitudinal study with Chinese teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in which interviews, observations and written reflections were used to encourage EFL teachers to explore their engagement with their learning and teaching contexts. Indeed, Najjar (2008) concludes that what teachers know about teaching is largely socially constructed out of experiences and the classroom contexts in which they practice.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the implications of globalisation for ELT. It has shown that globalisation presents English language teachers with a significant dilemma, namely, the domination of CLT as an approach to teaching the language. It argues that if this dilemma is instead seen in the context of professional responsibilities, guidelines for an

informed approach to ELT in a globalising world could be developed. The overarching goal of such an approach is to develop ways of teaching English that lead to additive bilingualism, and it is suggested that English language teachers need to fulfil the three professional responsibilities of adopting a nuanced view of English as a global language; focusing on context and progressing research in a gradual way in order to accomplish this goal.

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