Current 'Shifts' in English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I offer my observations of the epistemological shifts that have taken place in the TESOL discipline as a result of the inexorable forces of globalisation. Specifically, the article highlights how the multicultural, multilingual, and multimodal nature of communication in the 21st century has disrupted various assumptions on how English is conceptualised, learned, and taught, prompting a shift in disciplinary discourses from a modernist to postmodernist orientation. Readers will gain insights into how the TESOL discipline is increasingly aligning itself with discourses that endorse inclusive plurality, emphasize processes and practices, recognize the role of everyday contexts, promote situated pedagogy, and advocate agency-giving.

I must confess that it is insurmountably challenging to offer a comprehensive discussion on what constitutes current trends in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) due to space constraints and varying perspectives. A google scholar search in December 2023 yielded almost eighty thousand publications; each offering their views on what the trends were. Additionally, TESOL is a messy and dynamic discipline as scholars are constantly engaged in modifying, revising, and appropriating scholarly discourses in light of the changing social and intellectual contexts. As observed by Canagarajah (2015), "this plurality of discourses and practices in TESOL may not cohere neatly any time in the present or in the future" (pp. 33). Therefore, instead of offering what I see as the 'trends', this short article will offer observations of epistemological shifts that have taken place in the TESOL discipline as a result of the inexorable forces of globalisation.

The increase in human mobility across the globe and the technological advancement have largely changed the nature of today's communicative exchanges. The time-space compression facilitated by technology, migration, and travel has not only heightened exposure and awareness of diverse communities, cultures, traditions, and languages, but also changed the nature of communication in the 21st century to be largely multicultural, multilingual, multidialectal, and multimodal. These changes have disrupted various assumptions on how English is conceptualised, learned, and taught, prompting a shift in disciplinary discourses from a modernist to postmodernist orientation. In other words, the field of ELT has increasingly geared towards promoting discourses that advocate inclusive plurality, processes and practices, role of everyday contexts, situated pedagogy, and agency-giving (see details in Canagarajah, 2015).

Reconceptualising English

One prominent shift in the field of ELT, primarily propelled by the various outcomes of the global expansion of English, is a recognition of English as a global lingua franca characterised by its heterogeneity. This recognition is evident in a plethora of research grounded in one or more of research paradigms such as English as an International Language (EIL), World Englishes (WE), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and Global Englishes (GE). Hence, ELT scholars, (practitioner-) researchers, and practitioners have increasingly become more attuned to the following key insights generated by empirical enquiries from the aforementioned paradigmatic orientations:

1. The view of English as a homogeneous, static, and monolithic entity spoken exclusively by the so-called 'native' English speakers (NES

henceforth) has been rendered anachronistic by the empirical findings from the scholarship of WE on the kaleidoscopic plurality of the use, users, and forms of English.

2. Evident in the ELF research, communication in English predominantly involves multilingual users of English who creatively and strategically draw upon a wide range of communicative strategies from their rich multilingual repertoire to negotiate meanings and ensure mutual understanding.

3. English, as an international lingua franca, is not confined exclusively to any particular group; the linguistic ownership extends to all users of English.

The above insights have spurred numerous sociolinguistics and applied linguistics research inquiring into diverse linguistic processes through which multilingual users of English adeptly employ linguistic practices and communicative strategies distinct from those employed by NES, yet achieve effective communication. They also hold profound impact on the learning and teaching of English, necessitating a shift away from the modernist orientation of ELT. This shift entails transcending teaching a set of discrete linguistic items and/or NES' lingua-cultural practices (Marlina, 2022).

Reconceptualising Language Learning

Diversity is the inherent property of ELT as our language learners come from diverse linguistic, cultural, social, and socio-economic backgrounds (Liu & Nelson 2018). These learners bring to the classrooms their linguistic and cultural capital, knowledge traditions, worldviews, ideologies, preferred learning cultures and strategies, and learning experiences and histories, illustrating how permeable the ELT classroom walls are. The forces of globalisation have contributed further to the porosity of these walls as learners in our classroom may come from diverse sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and socio-political contexts. Hence, the "linguistic-cognitive paradigm" (Ortega, 2014, p.33) – which posits grammatical knowledge as the foundation for language competency, and views language acquisition as a deterministic process predictable through conditioning learners' neural responses within tightly controlled learning environments – has been challenged. Despite ongoing advocacy by scholars with the aforementioned paradigmatic commitment, a burgeoning body of research has urged ELT communities not to overlook:

• language as a complex adaptive system: recognising language as a system that evolves through interaction, rather than a static set of rules. "It is not that there are no norms; norms evolve in practice. Meaning and form are constantly reconstructed in situated interactions from the diverse resources

people bring to communication" (Canagarajah, 2015, p.14). Hence, the process of language learning occurs as individuals negotiate meanings and lingua-cultural norms as they move from one social setting to another. While learning specific norms may help to establish some kind of foundation, it is crucial to mindful and receptive to the evolving nature of the norm; and the paradox of communication as norm-dependent as well as norm-altering.

     • the role of technology in language learning: highlighting how technological advancements has transformed communication and language learning. Communication is no longer about using words or relying on utilitarian language. Instead, meaning making requires the accompaniment of various multimodal elements, including semiotic systems (e.g. sounds, graphics, images) and other ecological resources (e.g. gestures, body, objects). In the current era where many learners are deemed 'digital natives', language learning is more than likely to occur autonomously (as in outside the classroom) and digitally, utilizing a variety of multimodal and ecological resources for learning assistance.

     • the role of identity in language learning: emphasising the socially situated nature of language learning, which accounts for diverse learning beliefs, interests, learning styles, and trajectories in language acquisition; and

     • learners' investment in the language; stressing the need to go beyond the conventional understanding of learning commitment as a mere by-product of motivation. Language learning outcomes, whether successful or challenging, cannot be simply explained through the lens of a unitary, fixed and ahistorical 'personality', or the dichotomies associated with traditional conception of learners such as motivated vs unmotivated, anxious vs confident, and introvert vs extrovert (Darvin, & Norton, 2023). Learners are social beings with multiple and complex identities that are continually changing over time and space. In addition to asking whether or not learners are motivated, many ELT research works have increasingly addressed the extent to which learners and teachers are invested in the language practices of a given community. Are the language practices of the community racist, sexist, elitist, anti-immigrant, or homophobic, preventing equal learning opportunities for all learners? To what extent are learners' identities positioned desirably within the socio-political contexts of language learning? These issues have been regarded foundational in the current language education discourse (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

Reconceptualising Language Teaching

     Given the diversity and complexity of the use, users, forms, learners, and teachers of English today, there have been numerous gentle reminders

for practitioners and practitioner-researchers to consider the following discourses on language teaching:

• Postmethodology (Kumaravadivelu, 2012): while this concept is not new, they have been consistently underscored in the current disciplinary discourses. Rather than subscribing oneself to pre-packaged one-size-fits-all methodologies, ELT practitioners have been encouraged to exercise their agency to adapt their approaches through ongoing negotiation with their local institutional (e.g. the institution's vision, mission) and sociolinguistic (e.g. the role and function of English, the varieties of English, lingua-cultural attitudes) contexts (Selvi & Yazan, 2021). Additionally, consideration of the subject positions of teachers and students, encompassing aspects like race, age, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, is crucial in this adaptive process.

• Translanguaging spaces: considering the adaptive nature of language and the prevalence of bilingual learners, language instruction needs to go beyond teaching a set of discrete linguistic items or fostering internal reproduction of the external target system as declarative knowledge. While having such knowledge may be valuable, there is an increasing emphasis on providing opportunities for learners to use what they really know and can do with language. These translanguaging spaces – where students are empowered to leverage their entire rich linguistic and semiotic repertoire to learn language and engage in meaning making – should play a central role in ELT classrooms. Allowing such spaces can also help to challenge raciolinguistic ideologies that promote the supremacy of monolingual-culturalism (Li & Garcia, 2022).

• Task-based language teaching or TBLT: an approach to teaching in which learners acquire communicative abilities and participate in social activities relevant to their present or future goals. Instead of assigning learners to do decontextualized language exercises, TBLT teachers engage learners in using language(s) to get things done. TBLT is growing in popularity due to its clear design tailored to learners' needs, evidence-supported benefits from comparison studies, preference over other methods by students and teachers, compatibility with other pedagogical approaches such as bilingual education and CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning), and alignment with SLA research on linguistic development and learner factors (Ahmadian & Long, 2022).

• Technology-enabled language teaching: the multimodal nature of communication, the digital nativeness of our language learners, and more recently the evolving mode of delivery as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 have led to a growing emphasis on utilising digital technologies and generative AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools in language learning classrooms (Moorhouse, Wong & Li, 2023). With technology becoming a norm in language teaching in many contexts, there is a growing body of

research addressing the efficacy of digital technologies in facilitating language learning and teaching; the essential competencies required from ELT practitioners in today's post-pandemic digital age; and the professional development strategies to enhance teacher's competence in using digital technologies for teaching.

In closing, the current shifts in disciplinary discourses in the field of ELT have prompted a critical reassessment on what constitutes evidence of 'good' language learning and teaching. It may be true that the inexorable forces of globalisation have transformed the field of ELT to the extent that language educators may find themselves unsure about the content they should teach and the real-world scenarios their students need preparation for. Despite these, one should consider adopting a more optimistic perspective to view these diverse and competing disciplinary discourses as opportunities for the profession to develop more robust discussions and practices for continual improvement. Therefore, one should look forward to reading, listening, and disseminating more renewed disciplinary discourses in the years ahead.

About the Author

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