Beyond teaching "just English": Blurred Boundaries and Their Implications for Contemporary Language Education

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on recent social transformations and technological innovations, this article argues that a holistic change is needed in the scope and identity of English language teaching. I argue that we must embrace a move away from teaching "just English", that is, concentrating on instruction that targets language in isolation from other forms of knowledge, and instead move toward a more holistic focus on global citizenship skills. These are better able to address the growing importance of the plurality of Englishes likely to be encountered by learners and are central to the development of broader critical literacy skills needed to participate in globalized communication. Finally, I conclude that a refocus is crucial to the long-term viability of English language teaching as a profession in light of the capabilities of emerging AI technologies in language instruction.

Keywords: Global Englishes, plurilingualism, generative AI, critical literacy, global citizenship

English language teaching (ELT) is a field with a strong core, both as a locus of academic research (a sub-field of applied linguistics) and as a professional identity common to a large and diverse body of practitioners across the world. Indeed, the dynamicity of current research in the field as well as the success of many teacher training programmes worldwide both suggest that ELT is as vigorous as ever and that its long-term future is assured. Yet, the reality is that contemporary ELT stands on unstable ground, particularly as a professional field, because many of its core tenets are being – or are about to be – questioned. In particular, this applies to the notion of teaching "just English" – that is, performing teaching activities whose primary (or only) stated aim is to facilitate the learning of English and that can be clearly distinguished from other forms of teaching (i.e., 'content' classes). While this may at present be key to how ELT practitioners distinguish themselves from other educators, the reality is that teaching "just English" is not only being increasingly questioned by scholarship but also that it is under serious threat as an independent profession.

One crucial reason that teaching "just English" is in question comes from within our own scholarly community, which has in recent years become increasingly skeptical of what "English" represents in teaching practice. Previously, the definition may have been relatively straightforward, with English conventionally seen as a bounded, homogeneous system where decisions about what is 'correct' in grammar, lexis, pronunciation and other features are clear. Such a black-and-white depiction seems increasingly difficult to uphold in today's world. Owing not only to the history of British and American imperialism but also to the intensive cultural exchanges typical of the globalized world, English is more diverse in its form and carries more contrasting cultural meanings and identities than ever before in its history (Rose & Galloway, 2019). For teaching, such diversity is a significant challenge, not only because it makes it harder to tell students that a particular form of language, while potentially understandable, is 'wrong', but also because it tasks us, teachers, with helping learners navigate the diversity they are guaranteed to encounter when communicating on the global stage (Prabjandee, 2020). In other words, the reality of English today means that we cannot teach "just English" because we need to prepare learners for a plurality of Englishes, and thus we cannot take conventional notions of language for granted anymore.

This highlights a second round of issues with teaching "just English": namely, that there is a need in the contemporary world to focus on a much broader set of skills than just language. To prepare students for the plurality of Englishes in the modern world, it does not suffice to give learners a list of linguistic differences and ask them to memorize it – aside from such detailed knowledge being irrelevant to most learners' future lives, the awareness that

differences exist in language and culture, and that these are natural and do not necessarily prevent mutual understanding, is most crucial for learners as emerging global citizens (Jindapitak et al., 2022). To build such awareness among learners, we must focus on developing their analytical skills (which allow them to observe differences and make sense of them) and their critical skills (which allow them to interrogate dominant ways of thinking about language and culture). The latter is particularly crucial because linguistic and cultural differences, while natural in any community, often continue to be portrayed or perceived as problematic. To enable learners to see beyond such dominant ways of thinking, we must focus on developing their ability to process and critically assess information, not simply to understand it, the traditional focus of ELT (for more on critical literacy, see Weninger, 2018). This move beyond teaching "just English" and furnishing learners with the broader communicative skill set needed for global citizenship is particularly important at a time when the trustworthiness of broadly circulated information is not assured, particularly on social media (e.g., fake news, identity theft, deepfakes). This ultimately also means that the once neat boundary between teaching "just English" and teaching content is not being questioned only because of the spread of English-medium instruction and content-and-language integrated instruction, but also because the very focus of ELT is in need of a rethink.

A final reason to move on from teaching "just English" is that it is about to be seriously challenged by the capabilities of generative AI. While AI's first shock to the ELT system came when it became clear just how easily students could use tools like ChatGPT to complete traditional homework tasks (particularly writing), its second 'hit' is likely to come with the availability of new tools that can convincingly perform work conventionally reserved for teachers. While the GPT 3.5 engine released in 2022 could already provide plausible corrective feedback to written learner input, particularly when given specific parameters, the version first demonstrated around the time of writing (GPT 4o) is capable of processing voice input and engaging in spoken interaction, including for instructional purposes (e.g., teaching learners about the difference between past simple and present perfect though a mix of explanation and tasks). While the instruction provided continues to be of a largely generic nature (i.e., not referring to specific contexts, not truly engaging with learners' personal experiences), this aspect of AI-driven instruction is in fact not dissimilar to much of contemporary ELT. Instructional materials, particularly global textbooks that increasingly define what English teachers do in their classrooms, are created to avoid references to any specific context or to evoke strong emotional responses from teachers or learners. This allows them to be sold widely across the world, but at the same time promotes a generic, detached form of ELT practice in which it

appears that the identities of teachers and learners as individuals are unimportant (Gray, 2010). While this de-humanized model of teaching "just English" may have seemed feasible until now, it appears clear that the emerging capabilities of generative AI make such a model a weak foundation for our profession in the future. In the end, if what we have to offer is virtually the same as what AI can offer at a much lower price, what – aside from the type of emotional support humans can provide – is there to guarantee that our jobs survive?

About the Author

Kristof Savski: Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Prince of Songkla University in Hat Yai, Thailand. His research explores connections among sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, critical discourse studies and language policy, with regard to, for instance, the globalization of language standards and transnational migration of teachers of English.

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