Going ever more multidimensional: the mantra of English language teaching in the 21st century

Saksit Saengboon[1]
Graduate School of Language and Communication, NIDA

This position paper argues that English language teaching (ELT) in the 21st century will be going ever more mutidimensional. Myriad factors come together to shift the ELT terrain in ways that require the teacher and other stakeholders to reconsider such dimensions as globalization, the role of non-native English-speaking teachers, varieties of English, teaching methods and values. All these factors necessitate the reconceptualization of ELT, a discipline that has almost invariably struggled to strike a proper balance between theory and practice.

Key words: multidimensional ELT, globalization, the role of non-native English speaking teachers, varieties of English, teaching methods and values

[1] Saksit Saengboon is an Assistant Professor of English at the National Institute of Development Administration's Graduate School of Language and Communication. His research interests lie in second language acquisition, teacher education and World Englishes.

บทความวิชาการนี้นำเสนอมุมมองพหุมิติต่อเรื่องการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในศตวรรษที่ 21 ปัจจัยต่างๆ อันก่อให้เกิดความเป็นพหุมิติประกอบด้วย โลกาภิวัตน์ บทบาทของอาจารย์ผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่ไม่ได้เป็นเจ้าของภาษา ภาษาอังกฤษรูปแบบต่างๆ วิธีการสอนและเรื่องค่านิยม ปรัชญาและความเชื่ออันเกี่ยวเนื่องกับการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ กล่าวโดยสรุปบทความวิชาการฉบับนี้เน้นประเด็นความสำคัญในการผนวกเรื่องการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ ซึ่งมีลักษณะเน้นการปฏิบัติเข้ากับความรู้เชิงทฤษฎีที่ส่งผลให้เกิดความเป็นพหุมิติในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ

คำสำคัญ: พหุมิติในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ โลกาภิวัตน์ อาจารย์ผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่ไม่ได้เป็นเจ้าของภาษา ภาษาอังกฤษรูปแบบต่างๆ วิธีการสอน ค่านิยม

Going ever more multidimensional: the mantra of English language teaching in the 21st century

Saksit Saengboon
Graduate School of Language and Communication, NIDA

Introduction

When it comes to English language teaching (ELT), the sentiment is that there has been enough bad news, along with relatively few success stories. The small percentage of successful second language (L2) learners epitomizes the success stories, and the overwhelming majority of not-so-successful L2 learners represent the "bad news." To support this claim, Gass and Selinker (2008), in defining second language acquisition (SLA), argue that "[SLA] is the study of why most second language learners do not achieve the same degree of knowledge and proficiency in a second language as they do in their native language" (p.1). To this author, the mere mention of ELT itself conjures up the parable of the blind men and the elephant. One (mistakenly) believes that ELT is all about communication, narrowly defined as listening and speaking, whereas another may still hold on to the idea that grammar is what matters most, while yet another calls for more emphasis on pragmatic competence (Taguchi, 2011), underscoring the importance of appropriate use of all the four skills of language.

This position paper will argue that in the 21st century the parable of the blind men and the elephant will still be an accurate description of the general state of ELT, although

the blind men will have attained greater sophistication. That is, ELT theorists and practitioners will still have their own individual understanding of the ELT business; however, there must be a fresh perspective on such givens as "communication," "grammar," and the like. The impetus for this re-conceptualization is the dynamic, ever more multi-dimensional nature of ELT, a mantra of the ELT business in the 21st century.

This paper will first discuss the factors that make ELT in the 21st century ever more multifaceted, and second, suggest what Thai teachers of English might do to stay informed of the latest trends.

Globalization. As Arnett (2002) points out, globalization has had far-reaching impacts on most, if not all, aspects of contemporary life, including cultural practices. Considering the fact that language is the expressive dimension of culture (Saville-Troike, 1989), it's a given that ELT in the 21st century has much to do with globalization and vice versa. Indeed, according to Canagarajah, 2006 (as cited in Kennedy, 2010, p. 87), "Why people learn English, where and when they learn it, how it is learned, who learns it, and what they learn, can be traced back to political and economic forces and in many cases deliberate decisions on the part of governments, institutions, and groups. Such decisions may benefit communities but there are as many cases where differential access to English can divide societies" (p. 87). Moreover, Kennedy (2010) goes so far as to assert that "English is a carrier of the globalization process and of the values and culture attached to it" (p. 88). That said, the challenge is how the ELT terrain will shift as a result of globalization. In this

regard, Baker (2009) suggests that English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) will supplant English as a Foreign Language (EFL), thereby necessitating the re-conceptualization of culture in the ELT classroom. That is, culture in the English classroom must be perceived as belonging to both the traditional native speakers and their non-native counterparts. In fact, the latter is gaining currency now, for it is evident that the number of non-native speakers communicating in English with other non-native speakers is dramatically increasing. In a nutshell, the impact of globalization in this realm has more to do with intercultural communication rather than being restricted to the traditional concept of being a native speaker of English. Given the changing face of English as used by non-native speakers, it is imperative that the role of non-native speaking teachers be considered, a topic I discuss next.

The role of non-native English speaking teachers. Braine (2005), among others, argues that "…native and nonnative teacher issues have now become a legitimate area of research… [and] that …multi-lingual (nonnative speaker) teachers are probably more capable and qualitatively different from monolingual (native speaker) teachers" (p. 21). This line of reasoning suggests that local teachers, such as Thai teachers of English, who normally constitute the majority of English teachers in many an EFL context, need to be better prepared in terms of language proficiency and teaching techniques. The preparation, however, should not be for them to blindly follow Western-conceived ideas of how best to teach English. Rather, they should cultivate their own critical understanding of English instruction in their own contexts. In other words,

local teachers should be armed with local wisdom, yet well-informed enough to keep abreast of changing trends in theory and practice of ELT. Although relying on their years of teaching experiences may help, ELT teachers will be required to familiarize themselves with research into various areas of ELT, from the role of grammar to pragmatics and language testing. With all the speech communities converging to form a truly "international" linguistic scenario in the sense that "… [there emerge] hybrid trends and varieties [of English that] raise all kinds of theoretical and pedagogical questions … [which] blur the long-standing distinction between 'native' and 'non-native,' and between 'first', 'second' and 'foreign' language…" (Crystal, 2012, p. 177), ELT teachers may feel the urge to foster critical attitudes toward their profession. Teaching the rudimentary rules and skills of language is not enough, nor does it suffice to simply emphasize the communicative use of English in daily life; rather, putting an emphasis on the issue of identity and language awareness will be the order of the day. Unlike in the past where English was learned as a language that belongs to others, especially the traditional native speakers, in the 21st century EFL learners of English, Thai learners included, may need to be encouraged to think about using English because English belongs to them as well. In this respect, we touch on the notion of "ownership of English," which according to Kennedy (2010) "…is closely connected with the emergence of new varieties of English associated with communities of English-users" (p. 90). According to Nelson (2011), classroom life that is illustrated through narratives could promote self-actualization and soul-searching, whereby non-native English speaking teachers will be able to foster language awareness and develop professional

identity. For example, Thai EFL learners may benefit from reading stories and novels about their own culture written or translated into English. Watkhaolarm (2005), based on her study on discourse strategies in literary texts as employed by two Thai authors, suggests that "Thai English has potential to develop further since English continues to have a strong presence in the professional lives of many Thais" (p. 145). In sum, the role of non-native English speaking teachers will not only be instrumental but also inherent in the charting of the ELT landscape in the years ahead—a role that transforms them into reflective teachers so they do not become "… detached from reality…" (Groom, 2012, p. 55). This is so because non-native English speaking teachers, who begin to see their role not as a transmitter of external knowledge but as part and parcel of that knowledge itself, should be in a better position to enable their students to become legitimate owners of English. That EFL teachers and learners have for a long time been restricted to a particular set of models of English knowledge has allowed them to become "detached from reality." The 21st century should enable both the teacher and learner to become more cognizant of all the linguistic differences that confront them daily. Certainly, judicious selection of the differences in forms and functions of English should be gradually introduced to the students. We should let all the flowers bloom.

Varieties of English. As mentioned earlier, the issue of appropriate use of English following the pragmatic rules will become even more important and multi-dimensional. The concept of World Englishes, which has gradually established itself in the linguistic and ELT landscapes, will

become even more forceful, although the concept itself is fraught with "…problems, properties and prospects" (Hoffmann & Siebers, 2009). For example, Nelson (2011) has discussed the issue of intelligibility in World Englishes and de Klerk (2009) has approached World Englishes through corpus linguistics, citing Xhosa English, which is spoken by the Xhosa people in South Africa in response to "… attention on World Englishes [that] to date has been focused on the more elite, acrolectal inner and outer circle varieties, some of which are barely distinguishable from the educated first-language speakers of British or American English" (p. 5). An argument in support of a more forceful stance on World Englishes lies in the empowered non-native English speaking teachers who will have a pivotal role in "…setting the principles and norms on which this *lingua franca* will be taught in the future" (Llurda, 2004, p. 314). That is, the teachers will need to shoulder heavy responsibilities in making judicious use of the varieties of English to be taught to their students. They will need to sensitize their students to the fact that there is no one best English for all situations. There is no real-world need for most, if not all, of them to speak perfect British English or American English, nor are they to be content with their Thai English spoken with thick accent. The point is for them to come to the realization that there are differences in the way English is used globally and, although they may not enjoy them all, those differences should be perceived as differences, not as superior or inferior. They have to decide what kind of English they want to "own." As much as these shifts will be grammatically and communicatively diverse, they will pose real challenges for both native and non-native speakers of English alike, potentially leading to new paths of research

and pedagogy that will keep ELT in the 21st century going.

Teaching Methods. Any discussion of ELT in the 21st century should also include the role of teaching methods. With the flagship teaching approach called communicative language teaching (CLT), second language acquisition (SLA) and classroom teachers have managed to explore what appears to work, or not work, in developing language proficiency. In the 21st century, the notion of method has been challenged, most prominently by Kumaravadivelu (2003). Among the arguments he has made, the misguided effort to search for the best method stands out. That is, clinging to one particular method is not conducive to desired results because, in line with Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) complex systems focusing on the incessant change in any system, including ELT, a particular method no matter how well chosen can address the "complex" issues of ELT only in a piecemeal fashion. The fact that any one particular teaching method may not deliver does not mean that we should go to an extreme, and discard any and all principles to guide our teaching. Rather, in the 21st century all stakeholders—be they language policy makers, researchers, school administrators, language test writers, teachers, or students—should be involved in the making of successful English teaching. There must be a practical mechanism that will serve as a platform for these concerted efforts to materialize. For instance, conferences, seminars or workshops could be organized to allow Thai teachers of English, especially those at the primary and secondary levels, to become familiar with new varieties of English so that they can decide for themselves whether there is room for the inclusion of global English in their teaching. Textbook

writers should incorporate more examples of non-white people using English successfully, so that students will not have this tunnel vision that correct English can be found only in the kind of English used by middle-class white Americans or Britons. Although old attitudes die hard, Kumaravadivelu's (2003) call for context-specific and culturally-sensitive ways of teaching must be encouraged and implemented. In short, teaching methods must go beyond the overriding concern of what method is best.

Values. In conjunction with the aforementioned themes, values in ELT are no less important. Crookes (2009) has already provided a succinct caption of values, philosophies, and beliefs in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. His seminal work impresses practitioners with the idea that practicing teachers, rather than outside experts, need to construct their philosophy of teaching and make well-informed decisions about both day-to-day teaching activities and long-term teaching endeavors. As much as we talk about learner autonomy, we must pay equal attention to teacher autonomy. This implies that existing structures governing the roles of teachers have to be modified to give them a real opportunity to be autonomous. As mentioned above, teacher autonomy could mean that teachers themselves are given learning opportunities. Such learning opportunities could be accorded through classroom-based research programs whereby they can judiciously select what will provide optimal benefits for themselves and their students—be they teaching methods, teaching materials, or learning assessment. With autonomy comes responsibility on the part of the teacher, of course, and this line of reasoning

may seem too idealistic. But without autonomy, the teacher will find it extremely difficult to realize these goals.

In conclusion, I began this paper with the understanding that ELT, which is a practitioner-oriented field of inquiry, will become ever more multi-dimensional in the years ahead, for new knowledge about how a new language is learned, or fails to be learned, keeps emerging. Drawing on any one particular area of study will be inadequate. This is because ELT in the 21st century is shaped not only by the changing linguistic landscape, World Englises as just one case in point, but also social and cultural factors that permeate almost every area of social sciences, including English education. It remains to be seen whether the blind men and the elephant parable, which I consider an apt description of today's ELT, will spawn many more versions. But we can rest assured that ELT in the 21st century will be ever more evolving and multi-dimensional.

References

Arnett, J. (2002). The psychology of globalization. *American Psychologist*, *57*(10), 774-783.

Baker, W. (2009). The cultures of English as a lingua franca. *TESOL Quarterly*, *43*(4), 567-592.

Braine, G. (2004). The nonnative Englsih-speaking professionals' movement and its research foundations. In L. D. Kamhi-Stein (Ed.), *Learning and teaching from experience: Perspectives on nonnative English-speaking professionals* (pp. ???). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Crookes, G. (2009). *Values, philosophies, and beliefs in TESOL: Making a statemen*t. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2012). A global language. In P. Seargeant & J. Swann (Eds.), *English in the world: history, diversity, change* (pp. 151-177). New York, NY: Routledge.

De klerk. V. (2009). *Corpus linguistics and world Englishes: An analysis of Xhosa English*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Gass, S., & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Groom, C. (2012). Non-native attitudes towards teaching English as a lingua franca in Europe. *English Today, 109, 28*(1), 50-57.

Hoffmann, T., & Siebers, L. (2009). *World Englishes—problems, properties and prospects*. Germany: John Benjamins.

Kennedy, C. (2010). Learning English in a global context. In S. Hunston & D. Oakey (Eds.), *Introducing Applied Linguistics: concepts and skills* (pp. 87-84). New York, NY: Routledge.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Llurda, E. (2004). Non-native -speaker teachers and English as an International Language. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 14* (3), 314-322.

Nelson, C. (2011). Narratives of classroom life: Changing conceptions of knowledge. *TESOL Quarterly, 45*(3), 463-485.

Nelson, C. (2011). *Intelligibility in World Englishes*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Saville-Troike, M. (1989). *The Ethnography of Communication: An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Taguchi, N. (2011). Pragmatic development as a dynamic, complex process: General patterns and case histories. *Modern Language Journal, 95*, 605-627.

Watkhaolarm, P. (2005). Think in Thai, write in English: Thainess in Thai English literature. *World Englishes, 24*(2), 145-158.