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Teaching World English

Introduction

Once learners of English have achieved some basic skill in English, they will begin to learn from sources outside the classroom. Students will either come across or actively seek out English in its written and spoken forms. Any teacher will want to encourage this and reward students for what they learn outside the classroom. The students' desire to hear and read English will be recognised as a sign of commitment.

But all teachers need to give some thought to the kinds of English their students may bring back to the classroom, and need to anticipate some of the difficulties that exposure to the complex world of real English can bring about.

The sources or real English which are available without travel to an English-using place include:

- conversations with foreigners;
- newspapers & magazines;
- radio;
- satellite TV, undubbed film or TV programs with/without subtitles;
- song lyrics;
- web chat rooms & newsgroups;
- web pages.

Many kinds of English will be used in these texts, from the most formal to the most informal, and the observant learner will acquire usages that the teacher may not approve of (and may not even recognise).

All of these settings of English potentially reveal English in its international clothing. The foreigners that a Mexican or an Italian or an Indonesian speaks to in English, in real

life or electronically, may be from Germany or from Korea. Our imaginary learner in Mexico or Italy or Indonesia will also meet people from a huge range of English-using countries, including places as diverse as Jamaica, or India, or Nigeria.

When we say that English is a world language, we do not only mean that it is used in many countries around the world, but also that there are many contexts in which it is used across borders, in an international context. The traditional emphasis on teaching the language alongside cultural aspects of English-using cultures (usually US or UK) detracts from the sense of English as a language which is not linked to any particular culture(s), but which is used to express a great many cultures, in a great many contexts.

Once students are past the initial stages of learning English, and are in a position to read and listen with a degree of independence, they need to be helped:

- to be made aware of the different degrees of formality, and to understand that structures considered normal and appropriate in some contexts are not considered correct in others;
- to be made aware of some of the common differences between the (Standard) Englishes of different parts of the world;
- to learn how to express their own culture through the medium of English.

These issues have been extensively discussed in the context of the Englishes of those places where English is widely used, either as a result of the presence of substantial numbers of people whose ancestors came from the British Isles, or as a result of processes of colonisation or of enslavement (see for example Schneider, ed., 1997). However, publications are only just beginning to appear (for example Gnutzmann, ed., 1999) that explore the implications for the teaching of English in places (such as mainland Europe, China, Japan, and most of South America) where English has no local roots.

What's right?

The notion of Standard English is extremely important for all users of English, and of course for teachers. Standard English is the kind of English that is required in most written contexts. The concept of 'Standard English' is not very important in speech, and there is no single accent of English which is standard – there are many possible ways of pronouncing English, although individual words may have standard pronunciations (for example, it is non-standard to pronounce the first sound of *chaos* and *chutzpah* the same as the first sound of *chew*). As we will see, written Standard English varies very little from one part of the world to another. There is no academy for English: no central body decides what is and what is not right. Standard English changes (a little) over time, and it is the practice of prestigious users that determines what is considered standard. Dictionaries change to reflect that usage. For example, if you look up the word *disinterested* in several dictionaries you will find that some dictionaries give two meanings:

(1) "impartial"
(2) "uninterested".

But some dictionaries will give only the first of these meanings. Many dictionaries will include some indication that some people think *disinterested* should only mean "impartial". The word *disinterested* is in the process of change, and the dictionaries reflect that change. It would be a very poor modern dictionary that did not include under *gay* the meaning "homosexual", a sense that began in the middle of the twentieth century, and which in the last twenty years has become the principle meaning of this adjective. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s second edition (1989) labels this meaning of *gay* as 'slang', but it seems unlikely that the third edition will continue to do so – in the case of

gay the new meaning has pretty well pushed aside the older one ("happy"). In grammar too, as fashions change, the grammars and styleguides of English change with them.

There are a set of Standard English usages (e.g. ending sentences with prepositions, beginning sentences with *and* and *but*, split infinitives), which some strict people object to – they are usually called 'disputed usage'. I feel that in some advanced English classes an undue amount of time is wasted on disputed usage, time which in my opinion should be spent more important aspects of usage. Here are some examples of disputed usage found in recent UK newspapers. They are Standard English, but disapproved of in some quarters:

- As you are sat in the traffic jams on Bank Holiday Monday, ask yourself if there might not be a better way to live.
  [*are sat* – widely used in many varieties of British English where other varieties would use *are sitting*. *Are sat* is disapproved of by many speakers even of British English.]
- The amount of injuries have risen in the last 10 years.
  [Two issues here. One is the choice of *amount* vs. *number* before a plural noun – some stricter people disapprove of *amount* here. The other (*have*) is the following of 'notional concord' (with the plural *injuries*) rather than the syntactic concord with the singular *amount/number*.]
- And only by going to university, we imply, will they be saved from a lifetime of breaking rocks in the hot sun and being paid in peanuts.
  [Sentences beginning with *and* and *but* are disapproved of by some extremely strict people, but are very common indeed even in the most formal texts.]
- A group of travelling actors went to last month's G8 summit in Genoa to peacefully demonstrate against globalisation.
  [The so-called 'split infinitive' (*to peacefully demonstrate*) is a famous example of a common English structure which the very strict disapprove of.]

As soon as students start reading real English they will see texts which use these these disputed features: it will only mislead students if their teachers simply tell them they are 'wrong' or 'bad English'. Teachers need to make a distinction between the way in which they correct features which are really none standard (e.g. *I am here since five months*), and the way in which they correct disputed usage. This is partly because errors in writing Standard English need more correction than do structures which only some users think

are wrong, and secondly because students can come to distrust teachers if the teacher corrects structures which the student then sees widely used outside the classroom. are corrected in the same way as clearly non-standard usage. It's appropriate to teach advanced students what is considered best practice, but students should not be given the impression that these are 'wrong English'.

People learn to write Standard English – it's a skill. Some users of English are regarded as more skilled than others, and it cannot be assumed that just because someone is a native speaker of English that person will automatically be able to write Standard English. Nor can it be assumed that someone who is not a native speaker of English will not be able to write it. Here are some examples of written texts by native speakers of English from the UK, all of which include some feature that can be regarded as non-standard.

- He was autistic, and eventually put him in a home.
  [The ellipsis of the subject of put in this sentences means that the grammatical subject is *he* (the autistic man). In fact, the subject of *put* is someone else, from an earlier sentence, who put the autistic man in a home. This is a non-standard ellipsis.]
- The results of a post-mortem examination is expected today.
  [The subject of *is expected* is *the results*, which is plural, so the verb should be *are expected*. The writer is confused by the singular *post-mortem examination*, which is closer to the verb.]
- Human growth hormone used to be very difficult to buy but it is now relatively easy to get hold.
  [You don't "get hold something", but "get hold *of* something". Someone has probably told this writer not to end sentences with prepositions, but the writer has simply cut off the *of*, and created a non-standard sentence. This sentence illustrates the dangers of too much concentration on disputed usage.]

I would say that these are all errors in the writing of Standard English, and not something students should imitate. But they will see, and perhaps imitate sentences like

these. I could find comparable sentences in the English of any part of the English-using world. Learners need to know that all writers can make mistakes.

Occasionally writers of English deliberately use non-standard English for effect. One of the most common ways of using non-standard English in informal writing is by using 'sensational spellings' (e.g. *gonna, gotta, nite, U*). It's important that students know these are not new standard spellings, but that they also learn how to recognise and use them in appropriate informal contexts.

There are also certain genres where there are conventional changes in grammar and spelling. These include newspaper headlines, small ads, and chat. For example:

> ADVENTUROUS male 30, no ties, WLTM good looking female for fun, laughs, hopefully leading to relationship.
> [UK newspaper ad. Reduced language, culturally restricted but conventional abbreviations, e.g. *WLTM*, 'would like to meet'.]
>
> E.B.Baidya, B.A. 26+/5'-4" tan, good looking, knows recitation, suitable employed Baidya/ Brahmin groom wanted.
> [Indian newspaper ad. Reduced language – no main verb, culturally restricted but conventional abbreviations, e.g. E.B., "East Bengal (ancestry)." *Baidya* and *Brahmin* are examples of the culturally specific vocabulary found in all English-using societies – these refer to aspects of the caste system.]
>
> Hi gals out there, my name is Mark, 24 yrs old, working as a Driver. If U're 18 yrs old & above. Pls leave me your msg with your contact no. so that I can contact U ASAP.
> [Singapore newspaper ad. In full sentences, but using many abbreviations associated with informal written genres such as text messages and chat, e.g. *yrs, U, pls, msg, ASAP*]

The other place students are likely to see knowingly non-standard English is in literature and humour, where the Englishes of different places are represented for characterisation or satirisation. Conventional non-standard spellings are used, which are supposed to suggest something of the pronunciation to the reader. A number of websites exploit the stereotypical features of various dialects by offering to 'translate' your input

into various dialects. For example, the *Geordie Web Site* has instructions in nine British dialects:

> You can now send **emails** in different dialects! Having written your email, you can choose a translator which will magically convert your message into the dialect of your dreams!
> [unlabelled variety – this is of course Standard English, and the fact of its being unlabelled is a sign that it is regarded as what is normal for writing]
>
> Try aht the bleedin' bran' new Chitty Chitty Bang Bang translator! Hairy Biscuits and Cheese type a phrase into the Charles Fox in 'ere, and learn 'a ter Rabbit and Pork like a true Londoner!
> *[Cockney Rhyming Slang* – London*]*
>
> Check out da Ali G translator! Just type in wot ya want to say, an' da whoohoo.co.uk translator will convert hit into Ali G speek!
> [*Ali G* – a UK comedian who imitates what could be called an Indo-Pak-Caribbean youth variety]
>
> Awright and welcome ter de sea-pie translator! Click e' ter rabbit like those people from Tay Town! Dis is one o' de largest databases ever compiled o' de dialect!
> [*Scouse* – term for dialect from region Liverpool in North-west England]
>
> T'Yorksher people are also given eur mention with this champion translator. Really feel as if theur are up north just like in Chicken Run!
> [*Yorkshire Chicken Run* – Yorkshire is a Northern region of England, and *Chicken Run* a recent film using some Yorkshire accents]
>
> Try yeut the Geordie Translator! Enter ye phrase into the box and watch as the clivvor thing translates the English into Geordie-speak!
> [*Geordie* – term for dialect from region of Newcastle upon Tyne, North-east England.]
>
> Scotland is nae missed oot wi' this stoat addition tae the whoohoo.co.uk site!
> [*Scottish* – based on Scots, which is officially one of the languages of Scotland]
>
> Well I say - if you want to speak just like royalty, then this is the place for you! This is the propah weay to speak you knoh.
> [*Posh* – satirises the English of the British aristocracy.]
>
> Welcum ter the Brummie Translator! This bostin translator woe fettlingly convert yer phrase into Brummie talk! Go on - gie it a goo!
> [*Brummie* – from Birmingham in the Midlands of England]

Stoddard's *The Dialectizer* also translates into eight varieties (only one of which, Cockney, is shared with the *Geordie Web Site*). Sites like these could be used by students to get some idea of the features that are used in writing to signal some of these dialects.

Standard Englishes of the World

Texts written in Standard English in different parts of the world are written in the same kind of Standard English. Here are examples from current newspapers (August 15 2001) from a number of countries. I have taken the first line of the first article from each of the newspapers I have accessed on the web:

Australia

JAPAN'S central bank moved unexpectedly yesterday to pump more funds into an economy now plunging into its fourth recession in a decade – and potentially the most threatening to Australia and the international economy. (*The Australian*, <www.theaustralian.news.com.au/>)

Ghana

A mouth-piece of the former ruling government of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the Ghana Palaver has been cited for evading tax over a period spanning three years. (*The Ghanaian Chronicle*, <www.ghanaian-chronicle.com>)

India

In a new twist to the Sailen Das murder case, senior police officials said today that the chairman of the Dum Dum municipality may have been "silenced" for knowing "too much" about the murky land deals in the area. (*The Telegraph*, <www.telegraphindia.com/>)

Jamaica

OPPOSITION LEADER Edward Seaga has ruled out dialogue with Governor-General Sir Howard Cooke stating in radio interviews yesterday he would not be responding to Sir Howard's invitation to write to him outlining his objections to the appointment of the Commission of Enquiry into recent outbreaks of violence in West Kingston and its environs. (*The Jamaica Gleaner* <www.jamaica-gleaner.com/>)

Malaysia

Immigration Department director general Datuk Mohd Jamal Kamdi said that Taufik's international passport, issued in 1993, was seized in 1996 following recommendations by the Home Minister. (*New Straits Times*, < www.nstp.com.my/>)

Saint Vincent

Dominica Minister Pierre Charles has challenged United States Policy, regarding the

treatment of immigrants from the Caribbean and its negative impacts on the region. (*The Herald*, St Vincent <www.heraldsvg.com/>)

Singapore

The threat of instability in neighbouring countries is the key challenge facing Singapore, said Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. (*The Straits Times,* < straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/home>)

Sri Lanka

New Left Front Leader Dr. Wickremabahu Karunaratne said on Monday that only a person who had the courage to tear the present Constitution and burn it could govern the country properly. (*Daily News*, < www.dailynews.lk/>)

UK

British soldiers could be in Macedonia by the end of the week after an ethnic Albanian rebel group, the National Liberation Army, agreed to hand over their weapons to Nato troops. (*The Guardian*, <www.guardian.co.uk>)

USA

Legal experts predicted Tuesday that the state Supreme Court would be unlikely to uphold the actions of a Sedgwick County judge who ordered the county commission to approve his budget and cited the five commissioners for contempt when they didn't. (*The Wichita Eagle*, <web.wichitaeagle.com/>)

These newspapers are all written in Standard English. As we can see from these first sentences, there is little in the grammar, spelling or vocabulary that distinguishes the English of one place from that of another. Occasionally we come across one of the handful of spellings that distinguish the US from the UK spelling traditions (*neighbouring*, from Singapore, *dialogue* from Jamaica), or we come across one of the minor grammatical features, often to do with idiom*s*, that are possible in some varieties of Standard English but not in others (e.g. *impact(s)*, *to tear (up) X*, *write (to), (on)Tuesday*) – you have to work very hard to find these.

However, these Standard English texts are culturally marked in a number of ways that may make them hard to read. Leading articles are usually locally based. International actions (e.g. Japan's recession, the Macedonian National Liberation Army's handing over its weapons) tend to be presented in the light of their local impact. The articles assume a cultural knowledge which an outsider may not have (what is *Ghana Palaver*? What

happened in the *Sailen Das murder case*? Which bits of *Datuk Mohd Jamal Kamdi* are name and which are title? Why is a judge fixing a budget?), and they use expressions which refer to local cultural and political organisations (e.g. National Democratic Congress, municipality, Governor General, Home Minister, New Left Front, Supreme Court, county commission / commissioners). Exploration of the inner pages. and especially the lifestyle pages, would also throw up words that relate to cultural habits (e.g. food terms, styles of entertainment), and some use of local informal words.

The various English-using cultures use local words for a number of concepts and institutions. Some of these relate to clearly defined local institutions, but others may be *heteronyms* (a term invented by the German sociolinguist, Manfred Görlach), i.e. local words for referents that also exist in other places. Here are some sets of heteronyms:

- stream, creek, burn, brook, beck;
- flip-flop, thong, slipper, chappal;
- bum bag, fanny pack, pouch;
- motorway, freeway, expressway, highway.

Some of these words are widely known across the English using world, while others are much more restricted. Sometimes a word has one meaning in one region and another meaning elsewhere (e.g. in some parts of the world a *creek* is a small river, while in others a *creek* is an indentation in a coastline). Heteronyms are usually a minor problem, but learners need to be aware of their existence, and need to extend their comprehension. There are also a few of these words (*fanny* is one of them) which are taboo words in some parts of the English-using world, but not in others.

English speakers accept that they need to learn some special words for new places, and this expectation is related to the issue discussed in the next section.

Expressing your own culture in English

It is important that learners understand that you do not have to become a foreigner, or behave like one, when you learn a foreign language. Because English is a world language, English can be learnt without any sense that the learner wants to assimilate some English speaking culture (this may be an aim of some learners, of course, but not of the majority).

A very real need for all learners at some stage will be to express their own culture to foreigners. When learners use English to speak to others who speak English, they do not cease to be themselves and need to project their own personalities in their speech. They are also likely to be called upon to explain aspects of their own culture to others. This happens in speech and in writing.

When dealing with concepts and structures that are very culturally specific, it is usually unwise to use the nearest English term. You can find yourself using a word which is specific to one of the English-using cultures, but not shared across them. For example, in many cultures important, perhaps externally marked, examinations, which control university admission, are taken at the end of school education (around age 17-19). These terms are extremely specific to their cultures. One especially confusing term is *baccalaureate*, which in the American (and older) usage refers to the university level qualification of a 'Bachelor's degree' (the lowest university degree, typically attained at age 21-25), but which in other parts of the world is used for qualifications (French, Swiss and International) which serve as school-leaving and as university-entrance qualifications. German students of English are taught to translate *Abitur* (the name of the German school-leaving qualification, taken at around age 19) into *A-level* (the name of

the equivalent examination, taken around age 18, in England and Wales, and in some other Commonwealth countries). Numerous CV websites in Germany, and even some on the servers of US universities, indicate their writer's success in "Abitur (A-Levels)". This is a poor solution, as, firstly, the term *A-level* will not be well understood by those from English-using societies which do not have this examination, and, secondly, because the German and English/Welsh exams are very differently structured. Even if the German word is used alongside the English one, it is not a useful translation, and can create cultural dissonances, as, for example, when it is used to refer to a German examination taken in the 1880s, long before A-levels existed in England.

One alternative to these inappropriate, and perhaps confusing, translations is to leave the names of the qualifications in the original language, providing an explanation that everyone can understand. We can see the advantage of this if we compare two web sites, both explaining the Italian education system to non-Italians.

A: Italy in Pakistan

> Education in Italy is divided in two main sectors: institutional and vocational. Primary and junior secondary schooling for children aged 6 to 14 is compulsory and it consists of eight years (five of primary and three years of junior secondary school). At the end of the compulsory schooling, students have a wide choice between the different types of senior secondary schools: classical, scientific, technical, mechanical, accounting, linguistics, artistic. All senior secondary schools have a five-year duration. At the end of it this course the students can choose any university faculty. The Italian universities are some of the oldest and best reputed of the world.
>
> *[Introducing Italy*. <www.embassy.italy.org.pk/introduc.htm>]

B: School System (Secondary Education)

> With 2 exceptions when it is reduced to 7 years, secondary school in Italy consists of 8 years of study: 3 years of "scuola media inferiore" (junior high school) which is obligatory for everyone, and 5 (or 4) years of

"scuola media superiore" (high school). Enrolment in the secondary school system takes place after successful completion of 5 years of elementary school. The "scuola media inferiore" is the same for everyone, but there are several types of "scuola media superiore": "Liceo" (two types, classical and scientific; "Istituto Tecnico" (several types, each specializing in a different area, e.g., agriculture, building & construction, industry, business, languages, nautical education, etc.); "Istituto Magistrale" (4 years, teacher education); "Liceo Artistico" (4 years, education in the arts).

Upon completion of the "scuola media inferiore" program one receives a "licenza". The title conferred after completion of the "scuola media superiore" differs according to the type of school: "maturit" for the "liceo", and for the various types of "Istituto", "abilitazione" in the relative field (agricultural, technical, industrial, teaching, business, art, etc.).

[*Italy*<www.agr.kuleuven.ac.be/intorg/ica/guide/italy/page1.htm>]

[Part of *Interuniversity Conference for Agricultural and Related Sciences in Europe* – web site home page is in Slovenia. Part is in Belgium, *Higher Education in Agricultural and Food Sciences: Guide to Courses within Europe, This document has been arranged for the World Wide Web by the Norwegian Agricultural students: Olav Helland, Gunnar Weld and Bård M. Holtbakk. Italian section by Gualtiero Baraldi, Facultà di Agraria, Università degli Studi di Bologna.]*

In Text A, G Simpore, the webmaster of the Italian embassy in Pakistan, has as his main readership Pakistanis, and this allows him to use, as far as he can, educational terms from the British Empire tradition, which will be familiar to his readers (e.g. *primary, secondary*). These terms would be less useful if the world were the target, as other speakers of English would be more familiar with the terms coming from the US tradition (e.g. *elementary*, *high*). Even in cultures which use one or another of these terms, the age at which schooling begins and transitions are made varies. It is also not at all clear what is meant by saying that there are “two main sectors: institutional and vocational.”

Text B is drawn from an ambitious and carefully constructed website which aims to explain all the European education systems to other Europeans. A decision has been made to use the Italian terms, sometimes give them a brief gloss, but to explain the structures in terms everyone will understand (years of study, system of progression).

Where there are glosses the terms chosen are those drawn from the US tradition (e.g. *high school*), as is the spelling (e.g. *enrollment*, *program*), but the glosses are not carrying the weight of the meaning and do not imply an equation with any other education system. It seems to me that this is a far better way to represent one's own culture to the world.

Conclusion

It is up to each teacher, working with real students, and subject to a variety of administrative and pedagogical requirements and constraints, to decide how to respond to the reality of English as a world language. The foreseeable needs of individual learners will vary. But this issue is not something any teacher can ignore, and it is bound to arise in almost every context of English learning. At national, institutional, and personal levels we need to develop strategies that will best help learners to learn from the real Englishes which they read and hear.

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