

## Whither English: The Future of English for Teachers

As I walk around Kyiv I'm often handed flyers advertising English courses or lessons. People not only want to learn English; they also see the value in learning English. English provides opportunities – a way towards a new job, a higher salary, maybe travel, and – sadly – emmigre media propaganda Ukraine faces daily.

In Ukraine's push towards a closer relationship with Europe, English is an essential tool. But English teachers in Ukraine have their own daily reality. They want materials in English, class management tips, and ideas for making classes more engaging while meeting the needs of the curriculum. They want access to native speakers, preferably British, or American – though, in a pinch, Australians will do.

This article will examine that last idea: how important is *native* English for teachers in Ukraine? How is English's status as the primary language of the European Union – and indeed the entire world – changing the language itself?

And it is true. English *is* changing. That shouldn't scare you. English has always been changing. But as a result, teachers will need to readjust the way we *think* about English, and the way we think about what the best model is – e.g. British, American, Indian, Australian. We'll also need to consider what we define as correct and incorrect in English usage.

To understand why, we need to look at global English today – who is using English, and where. So, where do we find the most English speakers? It's not Britain, mother of the language, with it's 55 million or so English speakers. We can, however, make an argument for the following countries:

1. The US has almost 300 million L1 (English as a first language) English speakers.
2. India has 1.3 billion people and perhaps 1000 languages. In India, English is the language of legislature and education. How many people actually use English in a functional way? Probably between 100 - 350 million.
3. China is learning English. About 300 million are learning English and the numbers appear to be growing.

We have three different models here: In the US, English is the default first language, with mostly native speakers. In India, there are few native speakers (2 million) but the language is official and pervasive: in legislature, education, television. In China, there are few native speakers. People are just learning English.

What's important to note is that native-speaking countries (America, Britain, Ireland, etc.) have very low birth rates. The populations are not growing. Countries with English as an additional language tend to be growing: India, Nigeria, Mexico, Brazil. As their English grows, they publish in English, record music in English, make films in English. They contribute to the worldwide pool of authentic English. They may throw in their own words or phrases. It's also natural that the hundreds of millions of Chinese learners will incorporate some Chinese terms into their English (as India has been doing for 200 years). Many of these will remain part of Chinese English dialect. Other words, phrases, or structures, may catch on internationally, and become part of world standard English. It's not something to fear. Think of "C'est la vie." It's a whole French phrase, and yet it's part of English. You can say it without even trying to Frenchify your accent. (You can even say it in Ukrainian or Russian. Just last week I heard a taxi driver say "такая селяви.")

So here we are. English is changing. We must accept it. What's does it all mean for English teachers?

Well, it's probably time to soften your stance on some issues. I will leave you with three tips for thinking about the new world English and its applications for the language-learning classroom:

### **1. Don't focus so much on what's correct and incorrect**

Teachers are comfortable with what is right and wrong in language, correct and incorrect. They want just one correct answer. "We came home last night at about eleven" is correct. "We come home last night about eleven" is perceived as wrong – even though in some dialects *come* can be used in the past.

I know dozens of people who speak English well without using the past tense at all, or by never adding an "s" to "He like." My view is that they will get it with time. So relax.

But this is the fundamental grammar of English, the things that our tests are often based on!

True, but take the phonemes eth /ð/ and theta /θ/ that appear in words like "thin" and "these." These are fundamental sounds of English. They don't occur, though, in Ukrainian or Chinese or French. Many non-native teachers just replace the sound with "z." But that will not appear on any exam, will it? And in fact, is it wrong? Native speakers in some British dialects replace eth with "f": in American they replace it with "d." Can we expect this unusual phoneme to survive in the future when native speakers (even those who pronounce /ð/ and /θ/) are far outnumbered by non-native speakers?

Instead of probing for right and wrong distinctions, isn't it time to encourage students to explore the language and take risks? I would rather hear a student speak for a minute with 20 mistakes than two words for fear of making mistakes.

Defining right and wrong may be a necessary for evil for testing, but it doesn't have to be the foundation of classroom activities.

### **2. Do more World English listening practice**

I continue to hear, "We learn British English." I don't know what that means. There are hundreds of dialects among native speakers. Listen to BBC news for 15 minutes and you'll hear accents from Scotland, Pakistan, Argentina – all reporting in English.

Chances are your students are going to speak English more often with people from Germany, Sweden, Italy, Japan, than America and Britain. That's the nature of global English. It is used as an additional language for international communication.

Shouldn't our listening activities reflect those broad diversity of voices? I think so. Listen to short texts from speakers of Japanese, Swedish, Arabic, Spanish. Keep them short. Don't ask students to repeat or pronounce. What is important is practice – and I emphasize the word practice – at hearing a variety of Englishes. In fact, if your students think they are learning British English, open their eyes and ears by playing a short selection of British voices – there are so many dialects within the British Isles that students may see the need for a broader approach to listening comprehension.

For more details and activities, See my article in *English Teaching Forum* "Practical Tips for Increasing Listening Practice Time:" <http://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/english-teaching-forum-volume-53-number-51#child-1887>

### **3. Don't focus on the native speaker model**

By all means, take advantage of visitors from American, Britain, New Zealand. Students love hearing "genuine" English. But while the English of these speakers is motivating, as we have seen, it is rarely not representative of an international standard. In other words, your students shouldn't aspire to sound British, should they? If so, I would ask, What British? From the east, west, Scotland? And what would that accomplish anyway?

What is, in my opinion, valuable about the presence of American and British language teachers in Ukraine is not their/our approach to teaching, which is based less on grammar and the correct/incorrect dichotomy and more on allowing students to actively investigate language, to play with it, to explore, while the teacher relinquishes the dominant role in the classroom.

Some of these ideas will be hard to accept. That's fine. But think of the word "whither" that you find in the title of this article. It's an old word meaning "to where." English no longer distinguishes between movement to a location and being in that location: Where are you going? Where are you? It's all the same. It's a little less accurate than in Ukrainian, but it's not too terrible is it? Change happens.

C'est la vie.

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