

Learning English as a Lingua Franca: going beyond the “Orthophonic” stage of Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper is voluntarily written as a defence for a change in the status of English from that of foreign language to that of lingua franca in our schools and universities. We consider that teaching English as a lingua franca rather than as a foreign language, as is the case today, responds to the learners' psychological and sociological needs observed in the classroom.

Foreign language learning has been given prominence in the recent education reforms. The developmental factor of the critical stage for learning a language has been taken into account since French and English are taught earlier in the third year of primary school for the former and in middle school, year one for the latter. Similarly, the allotment of at least 3 hours a week for learning each of these languages falls within international psychological norms of learning a foreign language. These last months, the educational authorities, following in this international trends, are investigating another psychological problems related to school rhythms, an investigation which might eventually lead to the teaching of foreign languages at late hours of the day. A similar reform has been undertaken at university level wherein foreign language learning has also been accorded the high importance it deserves. Apart from teaching foreign languages like French, English, Spanish, German, etc as specialised subjects in various departments and faculties within the LMD system, foreign languages, generally English and French are set as requirements for graduation in all the other departments and faculties of our universities across the country.

So, whether at the primary, middle, secondary or tertiary levels, foreign language learning is looked at as a vital factor for the personal development of the learner as well as for international communication and economic growth and integration into the global economy. However, when confronted to the facts or reality of language study, one can note that the level of performance at the *Brevet*, *Baccalauréat*, or graduation exams remain very poor. What we ordinarily refer to as “pleasure” or “light” subjects, we mean foreign languages, very often turn out in a very short time into a terrific challenge for many of our students. To date, the issue of why the case is so bad has been widely overlooked by educational researchers, syllabus designers and teachers alike. This paper seeks to relate this foreign language block or difficulty to the learning of English at university at the first year level of the licence course in English to the status of “foreign” accorded to the language. We shall argue that unless the status of English as a Foreign Language is reconsidered in the light of recent research into the learning of English as a lingua franca, the difficult will persist and will forfeit further the chances of success of our students. In other words, we shall put the case that the teaching of English as a foreign language creates, for the reasons we shall detail below, learning disabilities strangely reminiscent of clinical problems diagnosed in orthophonic subjects.

Learning disabilities in foreign language learning is still a controversial issue among educationists. Researchers like Kenneth Dinklage recognise the problem and the urgency of its treatment. Schwartz goes beyond the causes of difficulty for learning a foreign language that analysts in the field of language acquisition have singled out as inhibiting or blocking factors. Among these, we can mention anxiety about making mistakes in grammar, pronunciation, etc. Anxiety can lead to a negative linguistic insecurity diminishing the learner’s capacity, effort, and therefore, motivation to learn the language. Poor language habits and poor language aptitudes are other factors that may lead to poor performance in foreign language learning. Following Kenneth Dinklage, Leonore Ganscho and Robin L. Schwartz have recently conducted studies seeking to demonstrate that these factors do not fully explain the phenomenon of failure in foreign language learning in some subjects, relating it instead to a diagnosed learning disability. Other researchers like Richard Sparks

reject their claim as to the existence of such a disability refuting both the process of diagnosis and identification of the problem. In support of this refutation, these researchers refer to lack of evidence for establishing differences in terms of cognitive and academic achievements between students suffering from the so-called foreign language disability (FLD) and poor foreign language learners. The diagnosis tools like the discrepancy between scores in standard measurements of intelligence (IQ) and academic achievement are equally faulted for their lack of precision as differentiating means.

The issue here is not to take sides for one or the other camps in this controversy among professionals in education. We are rather interested in the way English language classes and courses are designed and conducted in the classroom. Observation shows that teachers and students function with an orthophonic agenda in mind. Students are from the beginning looked at as disable learners whereas the instructors see themselves as teachers-cum-orthophonists. Notwithstanding the not-so-recent findings about the counterproductive effects of according too much importance to language mistakes in pronunciation and grammar, for example, many teachers continue to behave otherwise in this regard. Fault finding and correction or remedy sometimes goes so far as to replace communication in oral and/or written modes as the main objectives of the language class. The academic space unwittingly turns into a clinical space with students assuming the role of patients and their teachers that of clinical psychologists for which they are not prepared at all.

Looked at it closely, this assumption of perverted roles other than the healthy ones with which these pedagogical partners usually undertake their respective tasks seems to have much to do with the status of foreign language accorded to English in our country. Learning and teaching English as a foreign language imply among other things the taking of the native language speaker of English as a benchmark of performance and judgement about the mastery of language. In other words, the foreign language learner will seek to achieve a near-native mastery level of English. Similarly, the teacher judges his performance at school with the same native standards. Of course, it goes without saying that appreciation of language mastery according to foreign standards creates a deep sentiment of a linguistic

and psychological lack *vis-à-vis* what the pedagogic partners consider as the right owners of the language. Frantz Fanon has analysed deeply the psychological and orthophonic troubles resulting from the desperate attempt to be linguistically what one is not in his ***Black Skins, White Masks***. So there is no need to go over them here. Instead, we shall instead investigate them in the light of the recent critical research about learning and teaching English as foreign language conducted by researchers interested in English as a lingua franca.

Proponents of English as a lingua franca (ELF) like Jennifer Jenkins (2008) seem to follow up in the steps of those who speak of the spread of English as “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson Robert, 1992). For the latter, English is just another way of perpetuating the imperialism of Britain through linguistic means. What is sought is the substitution of the British Empire for the Empire of English established and maintained through the economic, cultural, political and especially military might of the countries whose native language is English. ELF proponents argue that those who defend English as a Foreign Language (EFL) neglect the post-colonial fact that English no longer belongs to those who initially spread it worldwide for various reasons. English has no copyright, and so legitimately belongs to the global international community because of historical evolution. Pedagogically speaking, this means that there exists a global variety of English called English as lingua franca that deserves to be taught in what now is called the global village. Resistance to ELF by many educationists at the inner or outer levels (Kachru, B.B, 1991) is seen as a self-interested attempt to preserve British educational book industry and its accessories, which in our post-colonial world constitutes the “jewel in the crown.” The rejection of ELF on the basis of the criterion of intelligibility is explained in terms of power relations. Those who consider themselves as the legitimate owners of the language hold both hegemonic and coercive power. This puts them in the sociolinguistic position to dismiss any other varieties of English than the home-grown ones as being less intelligible just because the global interlocutors in the expanding circle (Kachru, B.B., 1991) are judged to be of an inferior status. Lingua Franca is, therefore, an eminently ethical question aiming at linguistic decolonisation, and the establishment of linguistic democracy at the global scale through the acceptance of accentuated “Englishes”.

The pedagogical implications of a shift of teaching English as a foreign language to teaching English as a lingua franca are various. Presently, if we consider how phonetic, listening and speaking classes are conducted, we can see that what matters is not teaching the phonetic and phonological system of English mainly for communication purposes, but for remedial work of what are regarded as pronunciation deficiencies in terms of native standards of the language. Students speaking English with an Algerian accent are less likely to attract the teacher's attention than those who manage to be good imitators of native speakers. The halo effect is in full operation when students try to put off their own linguistic identities and to put on that of the native speakers. We leave the harmful consequences of this disavowal of linguistic identity for psychologists to study. Here, we shall content ourselves with pointing out the danger of turning accent into a pathological phenomenon that it is not. We shall argue that this danger can be warded off if English is taught as a lingua franca.

The educationists who propose the teaching of English as a lingua franca have shown that accent does not relate to phonological deficits in the mother tongue. It is part and parcel of the linguistic identity of the learners, and has to be accepted as such to reduce negative affects. For example, teaching indiscriminately all the sound system of the target/native speaker's language as it is the case today in Departments of English across our country is counterproductive. Indeed, as we have tried to suggest above, this discrete approach to the teaching of the phonological skills is strangely similar to the Orton-Gillingham method devised for learners with a foreign language learning disability. Approaching the teaching of the phonological skills from a lingua franca perspective as Jennifer Jenkins writes will "promote mutual pronunciation intelligibility in ELF communication[...]and encourage acceptance of those pronunciation features that are regularly and systematically pronounced 'incorrectly,' and found not to impede intelligibility for a NNS [a non-native speaker] listener (2008:22-23)." For Jenkins L1-influenced pronunciation features that pose no problems of communication among non-native speakers are normative features of English as a lingua franca. It follows that these intelligible pronunciation features do not have to be corrected in an orthophonic manner to fit into the Received Pronunciation or General

American English norms. Among other things, they resolve “the intelligibility-identity conflict by enabling NNSs [non-native speakers] to express both their L1 identity and membership of the international ELF community (p.25).” For learners of English, this also means trimming the traditional EFL phonetics and phonology syllabus to the manageable proportions of an ELF syllabus. The latter, for example, makes a small case of teaching items (e.g., weak forms, pitch movement) deemed unnecessary for mutual intelligibility among NNSs.

Grammar skills constitute another area where the obsession with native speaker norms shows up. A glance at the way our teachers correct students’ written compositions is enough to confirm the extent of this obsession. The missing “s” in third-person singular, irregular verb forms given as regular ones, the addition of the preposition “on” to verbs like “stress” and “emphasise” are considered as “errors”. Most teachers regard such “mistakes” as “canonical,” and yet they continue to hold them as markers of performance in spite of the fact they do not obstruct communication. For their part, researchers across the country continue to be involved in contrastive and error analyses as a follow-up work to the diagnosis of mistakes without trying to distinguish between the L1-influenced written features that do and those that do not block communication. This sanitised and gate-keeping approach to written English speaks of the same orthophonic approach to teaching phonological skills. Here, too, we shall not concern ourselves with the harmful effect of fault-finding about the written performance of our learners. Psychologists will do a better job than us. So we shall limit our observation to the complaint about the writer’s block that teachers often underline in their marking of students’ written exam papers. These papers are often handed in without the assigned composition, whose reserved space is often left empty and gazing blankly at examiners. We shall argue that an ELF approach to writing provides a healthy alternative to the present EFL approach in the sense that it seeks to normalise regular and intelligible L1-influenced written features of written English by non-native speakers.

In conclusion, we shall say that the communicative approach that is presently recommended for teaching English dovetails better with the conception of English as lingua franca than that of English as a foreign language. The latter conception looks at non-native speakers’ accent

whether in the written or oral modes as a linguistic and cultural deviancy from native speaker norms. It leads non-native or native teachers of English to assume similar roles with reference to their students as those that orthophonists play with their clinical subjects. Admittedly, there is a role to play for confirmed orthophonists in the foreign language classroom because as Dinklage shows foreign language learning triggers in some rare cases orthophonic problems wrongly thought to be left behind them. However, it would be against ethics and linguistic ecology to consider indistinctly all learners of English outside the inner circle of native speakers as disabled learners and to foist the role of orthophonist on their teachers just in order to maintain the hegemony of English as a foreign language. The conception of English as a lingua franca appears, therefore, as a case of a legitimate linguistic decolonisation aiming to appropriate English for communication in the post-colonial global village without abrogating the diversity of written and oral accents of its speakers. As a parting word, it has to be noted that one of the original sites of Lingua Franca is sixteenth-century Algiers, and Baba Aruj Brother Kheir-Eddine, according to many historians of the Regency of Algiers, one of its best practitioners. It follows that this concept to which our country had contributed at the no less global age of the sixteenth century has to be taken hold of by our educational policy makers in relation to English in order to widen the scope of communication with speakers of English on more egalitarian and democratic bases.

References

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- Kachru, B.B. "Liberation Linguistics and the Quirk Concern," in *English Today* 7:1 (1991) pp.3-13. According to Kachru, the speakers of English fall into three circles: the inner, outer and expanding circles. The first circle is constituted of native speakers, mainly British and American. The second circle consists of the British ex-colonials like

Indians, Nigerians who adopted English as second language at independence. The third circle called the expanding circle includes all those non-native speakers of English in countries like China, who have come to learn and use the language for international communication.

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