

# TESL

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## ESOL → EIAL

### A position paper on the teaching/ learning of English as an Inter- national Auxiliary Language

by Larry E. Smith

Recently I heard a well-known political scientist talking about foreign students living in the United States. He asked why they

spoke with varying degrees of accents. He said the Indians and Japanese have "heavy" accents while Indonesians and Filipinos don't. His question bothered me for two reasons. First, it indicated a lack of experience on his part. Indians and Japanese are usually identifiable by their speech but so are Indonesians and Filipinos. If he had more experience he would find that out. Second, and more seriously, the attitude underlying his question seemed to be, "English is the language of the United States. If foreign students plan to study here, why don't they get rid of their foreign accents and speak it the way we do (without accent)." At first this attitude angered me. It seemed a classic example of linguistic imperialism: "We have the best language. We speak it correctly. If you'll learn to speak it well, you'll be all right." As I thought more about it, however, I began to realize he was not unique in his thinking and we in English Language Education (ELE) around the world are partly the cause of it. We have led others to feel that English belongs to native English speakers: to Americans, Canadians, Australians, and the

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British. Too often non-native English teachers have been heard saying, "English isn't our language," as if it belonged to another race, nation, or ethnic group. EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) are the most frequently used terms for ELE in Asia and the Pacific. ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) is the cover term used for both EFL and ESL. English is said to be a foreign language in countries like Japan, Thailand, and Korea while it is called a second language in Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Singapore. I no longer believe that these terms (EFL, ESL, ESOL) are the most appropriate for our work in ELE, in that they don't accurately identify and reflect how English is being used. I think it is time for a change.

We in ELE need to find redundant ways to point out that English belongs to the world and every nation which uses it does so with different tone, color, and quality. Anyone who speaks English has an accent, no matter whether it is an American, a Malaysian, or a Zambian. It is true then that Indians and Japanese speak with accents when they speak English, but so do Canadians, Australians, and all the rest. English is an international language. It is yours (no matter who you are) as much as it is mine (no matter who I am). We may use it for different purposes and for different lengths of time on different occasions, but nonetheless it belongs to all of us. English is one of the languages of Japan, Korea, Micronesia, and the Philippines. It is one of the languages of the Republic of China, Thailand, and the States. No one needs to become more like the Americans, the British, the Australians, the Canadians or any other native English speaker in order to lay claim on the language. To take the argument a step further, it isn't even necessary to appreciate the culture of a country whose principal language is English in order for one to use it effectively. English belongs to everyone. If you accept this argument, then it is time to stop calling it a foreign language or second language. Instead, let's change ESOL to EIAL (English as an International Auxiliary Language), which more accurately reflects the present state of English language usage around the world.

If we do make this change several ques-

tions come to mind. "How and why has English become an international language?" "How does any language become an international language?" Even more basic questions are, "What is an international language?" "Who might use one?" "For what purpose?" Like pain, it is more difficult to define than to recognize. What is needed is an operational definition of an international language and let me suggest that *it is a language used by people of different nations to communicate with one another*. As you will notice, this definition doesn't bar any language from being used as an international language. Any of the 3,000 or more languages of the world can be (and many often are) languages used for communication by people of different nations. For example, Bengali qualifies as an international language when it is used by people from India and Bangladesh to communicate with each other. So is Bikol, a language of the Philippines, if

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it is used by an Indonesian to communicate with a Filipino. Then, an international language may be any of the languages of the earth, either natural or man-made, such as Esperanto or PL 1. It can be used for any purpose; trade, diplomacy and law, on a large scale between governments or transnational corporations, or on a very small scale between tourists and locals in a department store. While the ultimate goal of language usage is communication, the actual content of the transaction can be as varied as the populations involved.

If any language can serve as an international language then our questions, "How and why has English become an international language?" and "How does any language become an international language?" can be answered quite simply "English or any other language, is an international language when used by people of different nationalities to communicate with each other." Our questions may then become, "What is it that causes a language to be

frequently used as an international one?" and "What languages have been/are being used frequently?" I would suggest that in the past the most frequently used languages as international languages were Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic, Spanish and French. In the last fifty years the use of English has greatly increased and today French and English are perhaps the ones most frequently used as international languages. Why? It might be assumed that the *total number of native speakers* would have something to do with it. The more speakers, the more often the language is used. At first, the observation appears to be true. We note that there are only 28 languages which have more than 30 million native speakers. If we combine the total number of speakers of these languages the result is about 3 billion people. Of these 28 languages, there are only 17 with over 50 million native speakers and these comprise over four-fifths of the 3 billion total.\* It would seem then that the languages most frequently used as international languages would be this 17. This is true. Following this line of reasoning, we would expect the top three to be the most frequently used. This is not true.

The 17 languages which have 50 million or more native speakers, in order of decreasing magnitude, are: (1) Mandarin, (2) English, (3) Spanish, (4) Russian, (5) Bengali, (6) Hindi, (7) Arabic, (8) Portuguese, (9) Japanese, (10) German, (11) Wu (Shanghai), (12) Italian, (13) Javanese, (14) French, (15) Telegu, (16) Cantonese, and (17) Korean. Although French is frequently used as an international language, it ranks 14 on our list of 17. We are forced to the conclusion that the total number of native speakers does not correlate directly with the frequency a language is used as an international language.

What about *power and political influence* of the countries in which a language is used natively? These factors would appear to have an influence on language usage until we realize that French is more frequently used

\*Information taken from *Language and Development, A Retrospective Survey of Ford Foundation Language Projects, 1952-1974*, p. 13.

as an international language than Russian. Yet no one denies that the Soviet Union has much more power and influence than France.

*Colonial history?* France has many more former colonies than Russia so that helps in comparing them, but what about Spain which has more than France? Yet, Spanish isn't as frequently used as an international language as French.

*A language of big C Culture?* (That is, nations having a history of recognized fine arts). This definition certainly fits countries where Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit, Spanish, and French is or was spoken. But what about English compared with Mandarin or with Italian? There is no way English could win either contest.

*Wealth in natural resources of the countries which use the language natively?* If that were the case, then Indonesian and Arabic should be frequently used.

*Technological advancement of the countries which use the language natively?* If so, Japanese would be one of the most frequently used but (so far) it isn't.

*Number of countries which use the language natively as the principal language?* This seems like a possibility. English is used natively in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. But French is used only in France and western Switzerland, southern Belgium, and various former French possessions while Spanish is used as the principal language in Spain, most of Central and South America, Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. And Arabic is the principal language of Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and parts of northern Africa.

It appears to be very difficult to state the criterial attributes of a language which cause it to be used frequently as an international language. I must admit I don't know how or why English has become an international language of frequent use but I do know that it has. Never before has it been more readily used across frontiers. It is the language most  
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# ESOL -- EIAL

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frequently used on TV, in films, at international conferences, even in popular songs. It is the chief language of sports, the United Nations, export trade, air controllers, and captains at sea. It is the most widely studied language in the world. The present leaders of France and Germany use English in their political and private discussions. When Willy Brandt visited Israel, posters of protest and welcome were in English. Lee Kwan Yew used it in Peking when visiting Chairman Mao. It is the language of Japanese tourists in Thailand and Thai tourists in Malaysia.

If we all agree that English is widely and often used as an international language and we decide to change our EFL/ESL/ESOL classes to EIAL classes, what might the consequences be? I believe there are affective, structural, and rhetorical consequences to be considered. Let's consider them in that order. Under the affective component there are two principal changes. First the attitude of the teacher about English being "their" language rather than "ours" would change. English can and should be de-nationalized. It could then become an auxiliary language of any country wishing to teach it. English is not to be parallel or equal to the native language but is one of the languages of the country and the students then are native speakers of Thai-English, Filipino-English, Korean-English, etc. It is another language for each of them to use in their attempt to communicate with others. They maintain their own non-verbal cues and their own political opinions. They show anger, joy, affection, surprise, hate, etc. in the same way as they always have, but the language used is international auxiliary English. English becomes the auxiliary language used to explain and discuss their culture with foreigners. It may also be the auxiliary language used by nationals of the same country in government, education, or business or a combination of these as is the case in India, Singapore and the Philippines. This auxiliary English belongs to each country and has as wide or as limited a use as is felt desirable. It may even facilitate unity and nationalism.

Certainly it will have the "flavor" of each country using it while at the same time have an international character in that it is understood and accepted by non-nationals. The second change in the affective component is the attitude about the English spoken by foreigners. We must become more tolerant of the English used by others. Just because the other person doesn't speak English the way we do, doesn't mean he/she is wrong or speaking incorrectly. Tolerance can be gained by exposure to speakers of a variety of Englishes but students must be taught to expect differences, accept them and not be upset by them.

Under the structural component we would discontinue teaching what is common American and British English structure. Instead, we would begin with how best to communicate our ideas and ideals to others in spoken and written international auxiliary English. We'll have to consider that with different people we may have to use different structural approaches. The verb agreement, word order, and tenses may or may not remain the same but the paragraph arrangement will probably change. Almost certainly we'll have to display more acceptance of sentences like, "Doll clothes, you've got no more?" or "I went to visit my sister in the hospital. He had an operation," or "Despite he was lazy, he passed his examination." These traditionally aberrant sentences all communicate and communication is what language is for. These are not, however, the structures we would teach our students to use but to accept from others in spoken or written form.

Under the rhetorical component we will develop the style, pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm of our dialect of international auxiliary English, at the same time making sure that it is understandable to foreigners, allowing for a period of adjustment as is necessary across native dialects of English. It is "our" English and it should have our tone, color, and quality but it is also "theirs" and should be understandable to all.

Moving in this direction, we must re-think several things. Teacher training and adaptation of materials will almost certainly be different. What about students? Does

everyone need international auxiliary English? Can it be an elective subject for anyone at any age? Should it be taught in the public schools? Are the methods to be different? Is one skill more important than any other? Is the best teaching staff composed of locals, Americans, or a mixture of multi-nationals each of whom is speaking his/her own dialect of international auxiliary English? There is a danger that international English, with a single orthography, could become so fragmented that the different dialects would eventually be unintelligible to each other and we would have to communicate in writing. There is no sign of this happening, but we must keep it in mind and remember that it did happen to Chinese.

The major problem that I see is that there is no standard for correctness or appropriateness. We don't know what the parameters are for the affective, structural, and rhetorical components. English has been used frequently as an international auxiliary language for more than just a few years, yet no one seems to know just how different (in kind and degree) one dialect of international English can be from another dialect and still be mutually understandable, and acceptable. These are things we in ELE need to be working on. Operational research is needed and we should get help from the English Teaching Information Centre in London, the Center of Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C., the Central Institute of English Language in Bangkok, the Regional Language Centre in Singapore, the Central Institute of English at Hyderabad, the English Language Centre in Hong Kong, the Language Study Center of Philippine Normal College and the Culture Learning Institute of the East-West Center in Honolulu. However, let's not wait for someone else to provide us with answers that we need. Let us begin ourselves. First, let's stop calling the English we teach a FOREIGN or SECOND language or even ESOL and begin to call it an international auxiliary English. Second, let's change our attitude about the language. No longer should we feel that it belongs to someone else. This dialect of international auxiliary English is ours. Third, let's continue to keep in mind the goal for teaching English. It is not to learn about English culture, to broaden the mind,

or to learn new patterns of thought. Rather, it is to extend the ability of our students to communicate their ideas and their culture. It is to help them learn about all other cultures, and to be better able to participate in the world community which includes their home town as well as their country's capital. Fourth, I suggest as a standard for correctness, we have two criteria: (1) Is the meaning communicated? Would the non-experienced person on the street understand the message? (2) Is the register used appropriate for the situation? With this beginning I think we in ELE can discover the answers to our other questions.