

Teaching English as an International/Lingua Franca or Mainstream Standard Language? Unheard Voices from the Classroom

Awad Alhassan

Department of Languages & Translation
College of Arts & Applied Sciences, Dhofar University
Salalah, Sultanate of Oman

Abstract

Over the last two decades there has been an upsurge in the voices among TESOL/applied linguistics scholars calling for the teaching of English as an International (EIL) and Lingua Franca (ELF) language as opposed to the mainstream Standard English (MSE). These calls seem to be rather theoretical than empirical intellectual debates among those scholars without taking on board the voices of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and learners themselves as stakeholders. Focusing on a Sudanese EFL context, the present study therefore duly aims at empirically contributing to this intellectual debate by involving those stakeholders in the debate and by offering a reconciliatory third way forward. The study attempts to address two main research questions: (i) what kind of English(es) do Sudanese EFL teachers and learners want to teach, learn and identify with? And (ii) how do they view EIL and ELF language and to what extent are they willing to teach and learn this variety in the classroom? The study adopted a qualitative interview-based methodology and thirteen EFL teachers and learners took part in the investigation by allowing face-to-face interviews. Results of data analysis showed that both teachers and learners reportedly prefer to teach, learn and identify with the mainstream Standard English. They also showed unawareness of EIL/ELF as an emerging and competing variety to the MSE. Teachers and learners also reported varied views towards the potentials of teaching and learning EIL/ELF in the classroom. The pedagogical implications and insights for TESOL research and pedagogy were discussed.

Keywords: critical TESOL, English as a lingua franca, mainstream Standard English, new Englishes, Sudanese EFL context

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1. Introduction

There has, recently, been an upsurge in the number of voices among TESOL/applied linguistics scholars calling for the teaching and learning of English as an International language (EIL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) instead of the mainstream Standard English (MSE). These calls are particularly common in the outer/expanding circles. Many keynote speeches/plenaries and conference presentations have focused on this issue. The underlying arguments behind these calls can broadly be summarised as follows: English is widely used outside the inner circle as a language of communication (Lingua Franca) among speakers from different first-language backgrounds. English is therefore predominantly used among non-native speakers. English non-native speakers are hugely and steadily outnumbering native speakers. Another factor perhaps is related to the increasing development in the collection and description of the non-stream Englishes. There is a growing body of literature on the nature and description of EIL/ELF. Huge corpora of EIL/ELF are now available such as Voice corpus: Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English jointly developed by Oxford and Vienna universities and which can be accessed at: https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/corpus_information. The English non-native speaker teachers are outnumbering the native speaker teachers (see e.g., Graddol, 2006; Graddol et al., 2007). What is characteristic with these calls is that they take some sort of scholarly and intellectual debate among applied linguistics and TESOL researchers and practitioners, and they do not seem to be touching on the grounds and realities. What seem to be missing, though, in this debate are the voices of EFL teachers and learners themselves (as core elements of teaching and learning process). Put simply, EFL teachers and learners' views, attitudes, preferences and perceptions seem to have been ignored by those scholars with regard to what kind of English(es) they want to teach and learn and identify with. We need to substantiate this intellectual debate by engaging ourselves into more empirical research that moves beyond debates and get down to the grounds and realities of TESOL actual practices in the outer/expanding circle contexts. The present study attempted to empirically fill this gap by moving beyond the debate and involved both EFL teachers and learners as stakeholders in the debate and explored their stances towards the issue. The study reported in this paper is part of a large research project that was set to empirically investigate the attitudes and preferences of both EFL teachers and learners in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries regarding the kind of English(es) (mainstream or critical) that they want to teach, learn and identify with. At the current phase of investigation, the project focused on the Sudanese context and it involved both EFL teachers and learners in the investigation. The study empirically contributes to the current philosophical and intellectual debate, in the literature among Applied Linguistics/TESOL scholars regarding the mainstream vs. critical TESOL, by moving a practical step forward beyond the debate and involving, in the issue both EFL teachers and learners as the core element of the teaching and learning process. The implications of the findings of the study are intended to better inform and empower both EFL teachers and learners in their choices regarding the kind of English(es) they would like to learn, teach and identify with? The implications of the findings of the study are intended to better inform and empower both teachers and learners in their choice of which English(es) they can teach and learn. The implications could also inform the ELT textbooks publishers and designers to consider, when designing and publishing ELT materials, the language teachers' and learners' perceptions and attitudes. The study will also empirically contribute to the on-going debate in the literature between the mainstream and critical TESOL approaches to the teaching and learning of English.

2. Context of the study

Sudan is an African sub-Saharan country situated in the north-east of Africa. Arabic is the official language in the country and English is the second official language. English is also taught as a subject in schools. The study was conducted at the British Educational Institutes, Khartoum, Sudan. These institutes are private English language institutes, established more than 30 years ago, with many branches in the country. They offer General English courses for the public (adults and young learners). They heavily use the OUP Headway International Series as main textbooks. The institutes attract large number of learners and they have high rate of enrollment with classes running in both morning and evening times.

3. Literature review

Following the publication of the 1999 special issue of TESOL Quarterly, 33(3) on critical approaches to TESOL, there has been, over the last two decades, an upsurge in the voices in TESOL/applied linguistics literature promoting the teaching of English as an International language and lingua franca, adopting critical approaches in teaching and learning as opposed to the long-standing and predominant mainstream pragmatic approaches. The underlying argument behind that as stated above seems to have stemmed from the premises that English is no longer owned by the inner circle countries and it has become an international Lingua Franca and spread across the expanding/outer circles. The spread of English worldwide from the original small inner to the outer and expanding circles worldwide (see Gradol, 2006; Kachru, 1985) has indeed attracted extensive research looking into the future and status of English being used outside its origins in various domains by speakers of other languages. This reality would indeed have implications on the teaching and learning of English in these outer circles. Applied linguistics and TESOL literature is replete with studies (e.g., Canagarajah, 2007; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Graddol et al., 2007; Pennycook, 1999; Widdowson, 1997) debating the use and status of English in such outer/expanding socio-contextual and socio-cultural spheres. Accordingly, the orthodox original Standard mainstream variety of English has changed into many other Englishes collectively referred to as world or global Englishes including English as an EIL or ELF.

The attempts (e.g., McKay, 2003) at describing EIL/EFL pedagogy have always been theoretical in nature with counter-assumptions to challenge the orthodoxies of ELT pedagogy that is wholly based on the Standard mainstream English. However, there is a lack of empirical attempts that go further and materialize and take these assumptions forward into a practical alternative pedagogy.

There have been many attempts (see e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, et al., 2011; Seidlhofer, 2004) to describe the EIL/ELF. Some corpora of it as I mentioned above have also been developed which have advanced the research on documentation and description of this kind of English. Below are some common and salient characteristics namely lexico-grammatical of of EIL/EFL based on VOICE corpus and as discussed by Jenkins (2006) and Seidlhofer (2004):

- Non-use of the third person present tense-s (“She look very sad”)
- Interchangeable use of the relative pronouns who and which (“a book who,” “a person which”)
- Omission of the definite and indefinite articles where they are obligatory in native speaker English and insertion where they do not occur in native speaker English (Moon is

nice today. I am going to have break. I will go back the home after the class/I spoke to the nice lady. I met her in the restaurant yesterday).

- Use of an all-purpose question tag such as isn't it? or no? Instead of shouldn't they? ("They should arrive soon, isn't it?")
- Increasing of redundancy by adding prepositions ("We have to study about . . ." and "can we discuss about . . .?"), or by increasing explicitness ("black colour" vs. "black" and "How long time?" vs. "How long?")
- Heavy reliance on certain verbs of high semantic generality, such as do, have, make, put, take.
- Pluralisation of nouns which are considered uncountable in native speaker English ("informations," "staffs," "advices").
- Use of that-clauses instead of infinitive constructions ("I want that we discuss about my dissertation").

Corpus research on EIL/EFL has undeniably been significant in attempting to provide a full description, understanding, analysis and documentation of such non-standard mainstream varieties. However, there still seems to be a long way to go until we reach to a fully-fledge pedagogy to effectively teach and learn EIL/EFL. In addition to this, more empirical research seems to be needed to explore the attitudes and preferences of TESOL stakeholders, particularly teachers and learners, towards the learning and teaching of the various varieties of English. Put simply, were learners asked which kind of English(es) they want to learn and identify with? Which approaches, mainstream and/or critical under which they would prefer to be taught? Same questions would apply to teachers as well. We seem to have an apparent lack of empirical studies to investigate the perceptions, views and attitudes of both language teachers and learners, as a core element of the learning process, towards this ongoing debate. Teachers' and Learners' voices should be taken into consideration into any study attempting to promote the teaching and learning of English from a non-mainstream critical perspective.

Teachers may well have different views to those highlighted in such debates among TESOL researches. For example, Davies (2013) notes that these debates on the non-standard mainstream English(es) were mostly intellectual in nature and these types of English were only material for research and debate. People do research about them but they have not been practically taught in the classroom. Davies cites an incident that some Asian English language teacher trainees refused to take a training language test made locally and they believed that the test was not based on the MSE.

The present study attempts to fill this gap by taking a qualitative methodology to investigate the attitudes and preferences of EFL teachers and learners towards the teaching and learning of English. At the current phase of investigation, the project will focus on the Sudanese context and will involve both EFL teachers and learners in the investigation. The study strives to address the following two research questions:

1. What kind of English(es) do Sudanese EFL teachers and learners want to teach, learn and identify with and what are the reasons behind both parties' attitudes and preferences?

2. How do Sudanese EFL teachers and learners view English as an international and Lingua Franca language and to what extent, if given the opportunity, are they willing to teach and learn EIL/EFL in the classroom?

4. Methodology and design

4.1. Participants

Thirteen participants took part in the study. Participation was completely voluntary after signing a participant consent form. Participants were also reassured that their data would only be used for research purposes and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. Participants were seven advanced-level EFL learners and six EFL teachers (5-10 years of experience in teaching English in EFL contexts).

4.2 Methods of data collection

To address the research questions, the study adopted an exploratory qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviewing being as the principal method of data collection in addition to the use of some prompt cards during the interviews in a discourse-based format to talk around text and elicit more specific, focused and in-depth responses (see Odell et al., 1983; Lillis, 2001). Follow ups and probe questions were also asked. Thirteen face-to-face tape recorded interviews were conducted with the participants (see appendix A for the interview schedules). Each interview lasted between 30-40mins. Interviews with learners were conducted in a mix of Arabic and English (the Arabic bits were translated). Interviews with teachers were conducted exclusively in English.

4.2.1 Samples of EIL/ELF

Besides the interviews the study also used some documents as prompt cards during the interviews. Samples from EIL/ELF were used during the interviews as prompt cards (see appendix B for an example prompt card) and participants were invited to provide their comments on them. Participants were shown example phrases of EIL/ELF and were asked to react/comment on them. The examples were adapted from Seildhofer's (2004, p. 220) article based on VOICE corpus and Jenkins's (2006, p. 169) article.

4.3 Interview coding and analysis procedure

Interviews were transcribed and coded. An open and inductive coding was adopted to gain as many themes as possible from the data. Coding scheme was checked by another coder and applied to the transcripts to achieve reasonable inter-rater reliability check. The coding and analysis approach in the present study was based on a cross-sectional qualitative coding approach whereby thematic coding was followed and themes were generated from the data with representative quotes (see e.g., Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Mason 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interview themes were described, presented and links were established among the themes and further analysis and explanatory commentaries on these themes were provided through presenting, linking, comparing and contrasting of the themes and concepts in order to gain a multi-perspective analytical view on the data.

5. Results

Both groups of participants reported a strong association with teaching, learning and identifying with the mainstream Standard English. Participants reported that Standard English, particularly,

British English is the mainstream English and is the most common and standard language and it is the variety that they have learned and have always taught in schools and universities in Sudan. Surprisingly, both teachers and learners reported unawareness of the existence of EIL/EFL. When shown the examples of EIL/EFL during the interviews, they both reacted negatively towards the examples. They described the examples as an incorrect English with no grammar or rules and as a deviated kind of English, from the Standard language. They also reportedly added that- when asked about whether they would teach and learn it in the classroom- they would never teach or learn it in the classroom. However, learners somehow viewed it as an 'easy' form of English to learn to practice speaking. Teachers also reported that even if they would teach it, they would still need clear pedagogical applications and guidance (training, textbooks, materials, methods of teaching and assessment).

Teachers reported preference to the mainstream English believing that it is the authentic and most common variety:

I prefer **British English** because it is **everywhere**. The English language is **British so why should I have variations**. Why would we deviate from the **original** language (T5). Font size added throughout for emphasis and square brackets were also used to give some further analytical explanations.

Learners also went in the similar vein as their teachers showing a preference for learning the two mainstream English varieties to any other varieties of English:

I **prefer** both **British** and **American** English but we are **used to** the British English most. I like the British English most. It is **eloquent** and **civilized** language and it is the **original** language. (L1)

Perhaps, surprisingly, teachers reported unawareness of the existence of IEL/ELF as a competing variety to the orthodox MSE:

I have **no idea about EIL/EFL**. As far as I know English is **divided into two kinds: British** English and **American** English. British English is spoken all over the world. People would easily understand you if you speak either of these two varieties (T3).

When shown the samples of what supposed to be the EIL/ELF, teachers describe it as incorrect form of English and they reportedly claimed that they would not be willing to learn such non-Standard English:

I **will not teach it** [EIL/ELF]. There are **a lot of mistakes**. This is not **Standard** English. I must teach English in the right way. As you can see 'here she like pizza' she likes pizza. I would refuse to teach it. Even students **will not accept** to be taught this kind of English. **Standard English is grammatically correct not like this one** [EIL/ELF] you showed me (T2).

Furthermore, teachers when asked about whether they would be willing to teach such kind of English, they reported that even if they were willing to teach it they would still need to know

about it and they also need some guidance and pedagogical training to help them go about teaching and assessing such kind of English:

I think this kind of English causes **a lot of problems. I need a training to teach it. How would you teach it?** It is not acceptable to me. But who knows maybe in the future it would be acceptable. If I knew more about it I would teach it. I notice there are many mistakes in word order. **I need certain models to follow.** The first question I would ask is how can I teach it? **If I find explanation I can try it out. It is not an easy job to teach this kind of language unless I have training.** I can't give you a final answer now but I can when there is **a clear syllabus like teacher's book, materials,** and then I can say I may teach it (T1).

In contrast, learners, when asked about whether they would accept to be taught EIL/ELF in the classroom, they reportedly claimed that they would not mind learning EIL/ELF despite that it is incorrect English but they find it easy to learn and helpful in developing their communication skills, compared to the mainstream Standard English:

It is a little bit **confusing** [EIL/ELF]. It is **not connected** very well. There are **incorrect sentences.** I am going to **have break not a break?!** There are some mistakes. **I think it is possible to learn it because it is easier than the British English.** Very easy and you can learn it **without any worries** about making correct sentences and you **would speak without any difficulties** (L2).

Some learners also went further showing interest in knowing about EIL/ELF and suggesting that teachers could teach them EIL/ELF beside the mainstream Standard English so as to develop their communication skills.

It is very easy [EIL/EFL]. I feel that sentences don't follow grammar rules. It is very easy and **I prefer that teachers teach it to us.** Compared to British English, it is easier. I should **find out about this English** so that I can **learn** about it. **Teachers can teach it to us for fun after our British English classes.** British English is strong and standard. This [EIL/EFL] can help us **learn English for communication** (L3).

6. Conclusions, implications and recommendations for TESOL

This current small-scale study is phase one of an ongoing large research project investigating the attitudes, preferences and choices of EFL teachers and learners in the MENA region in relation to the mainstream standard English and the international/lingua franca English. The study attempted to explore the attitudes, perceptions and preferences of Sudanese EFL teachers and learners in relation to the debate of whether to teach, learn and identify with EIL/ELF as opposed to MSE in the outer/expanding circle classrooms. Caution should be taken when interpreting the findings of this study as they are not intended to be generalisable due to the small-scale nature of the investigation and its limitation to only one context. However, the findings are still illuminating with significant insights and implications which can be transferable to and applicable in other similar EFL contexts. The study findings suggested that scholarly and intellectual debates in TESOL need to be substantiated with some empirical research in order to

better inform TESOL pedagogy. Applied Linguistics and TESOL researchers and practitioners need to move on from the intellectual debates to the reality and engage themselves into more empirical research involving the main stakeholders (EFL teachers, learners, institutions, policy makers, etc).

As the findings suggest, EIL/ELF, arguably, could be taught and learned but the lack of clear pedagogy has always remained the prime weakness. This is indeed validating the legitimate and powerful questions/arguments raised by the EFL teachers in the study as to ‘how would they teach and learn EIL/EFL and they don’t have a clear pedagogical orientation (e.g., textbooks, materials, assessment)?’ The findings also suggest that the ongoing theoretical/intellectual debates on and the description of EIL/EFL is not sufficient. We need to develop some practical pedagogical materials that can be used in the classroom.

Furthermore, as the findings of this study showed us, it might perhaps be disappointing and shocking news for applied linguistics and TESOL researchers and practitioners to know that, there are some EFL teachers and learners out there in some parts of the outer/expanding circles who have not even heard about EIL/ELF as a ‘competing’ variety to the MSE, let alone their awareness about these ongoing scholarly and intellectual debates about the issue. The study findings also suggested that EFL teachers and learners could have differing views regarding the usefulness of teaching and learning EIL/EFL in the classrooms. Despite the overall resistance and negative attitudes shown by the study participants towards EIL/EFL at first, they later-after I had explained to them IEL/EFL-showed some kind of readiness to try out this kind of English as they viewed it as ‘easy’ and could work out well for developing their communication skills. Such degree of positive attitude and acceptance towards learning of EIL/ELF resonates with some previous studies (e.g., Ahn, 2014; Bernaisch & Koch, 2016) on attitudes of teachers and learners towards local varieties of English due to its high degree of intelligibility and easiness. Such findings suggest that teachers and learners should not shy away from trying out such non-standard mainstream variety of English. On the contrary, they should view the learning and teaching of such varieties as an opportunity and basis for the increase of learners’ level of communicative competence for effective use of language in various domains of life.

Finally, MSE and the critical EIL/EFL should not be viewed as mutually exclusive varieties of English. Critical TESOL researchers and practitioners should be flexible and they:

“need to be constantly careful lest critical theory come to play a role that is equally unchallenged as the ideas it seeks to challenge. Thus, critical pedagogy in TESOL must not become a static body of knowledge but rather must always be open to question” (Pennycook, 1999, p. 345).

In the researcher’s view, there should be some sort of a reconciling and non-confrontational relationship between the advocates of the critical TESOL and those of the Standard mainstream TESOL. As TESOL researchers and practitioners, we should think of a third way out. For example, we could adopt a critical pragmatic approach to teaching and learning English in the outer/expanding circles. That is, we could start off with teaching and learning MSE. Then, we can move on to teach, learn and raise learners’ awareness of the existence of other global

Englishes that are also realistically spoken, in the outer/expanding circles, by and among non-native speakers of English who have different L1 backgrounds. Indeed, the study findings on that students would somehow prefer to be taught the EIL/ELF would further support this critical pragmatic approach to TESOL and EFL teachers should find some ways whereby they could raise learners' awareness of and expose them to EIL/ELF varieties of English by for example, as Matsuda (2003, p. 723) suggests, bringing speakers of multiple varieties of English into the classroom or instated use these varieties with learners via e-mail exchanges, projects and also through movies and video clips of World Englishes speakers.

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About the Author:

Awad Alhassan is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Department of Languages and Translation, College of Arts & Applied Sciences, Dhofar University, Oman. He is also affiliated to the Department of English, University of Khartoum, Sudan. He has taught in Sudan, Gulf region and the UK. Alhassan has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Essex, UK. His teaching and research interests include TESOL, EAP, English Medium Instruction (EMI) in higher education, corpus linguistics and the use of corpora in ELT and translation. He has attended and presented in a number of international conferences and has published in peer reviewed journals.

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Appendices

A: Interview schedules

Interview schedule for EFL students/learners

Background questions

1. What is your area of study/specialty/profession?
2. Why do you want to learn English?
3. How long have you been learning English?

Materials and learning methods

1. How do you learn English?
2. What materials/textbooks do you use to learn English, and why?

Attitudes towards the mainstreams & International English (IE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

1. What variety (s) of English do you prefer to learn, and why?
2. What do you know about International English (IE)and English as a lingua franca (ELF)?

Perceptions and attitudes towards the mainstreams & critical approaches to teaching and learning of English: discourse-based interview questions

1. Here are some examples from IE and ELF:

- A. Would you like to be taught this English by your teachers in the language classes? why/why not?
- B. What types of English(s) do you think your teachers should teach you in the classes, Why?

C. If you were given the chance to learn this IE and ELF varieties, how would you learn them? Why

Additional comments

1. Do you have any other comments or would you like to add anything to what we have been talking about throughout this interview?

Interview schedule for EFL teachers

Background questions

1. What is your area of specialty/profession?
2. How long have you been teaching English?
3. Can you tell me a little bit more about your educational/professional background?

Materials and teaching methods

1. How do you teach English?
2. What materials/textbooks do you use to teach English, and why?

Attitudes towards the mainstreams & International English (IE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

1. What variety (s) of English do you prefer to speak, and why?
2. What do you know about International English (IE) and English as a lingua franca (ELF)?

Perceptions and attitudes towards the mainstreams & critical approaches to teaching and learning of English: discourse-based interview questions

1. Here are some examples from IE and ELF:
 - A. Would you teach this English to your students in your language classes? why/why not?
 - B. What types of English(s) do you think your students want to learn, Why?
- C. If you were given the chance to teach this IE and ELF varieties, how would you teach them? Why?

Additional comments

1. Do you have any other comments or would you like to add anything to what we have been talking about throughout this interview?

B: An example prompt card

Examples of EIL/ELF

1. She look very sad/ He like pizza very much.
2. Who book is this? The boy which you met is my friend.
3. Moon is nice today. I am going to have break.
4. I will go back the home after the class/I spoke to the nice lady. I met her in the restaurant yesterday.
5. They should arrive soon, isn't?/ He like pizza, isn't it?
6. We have to study about physics...and can we discuss about physics.
7. My shirt is black colour/How long time are you going to stay here?
8. I do carpenter/ I do pizza/I make my homework/ I have smoking/
9. I have many infromations for you. He is one of the staffs. I need your advices, teacher.
10. I want that we discuss about my dissertation. I need that I go now.