

Teaching English as an international language: Rethinking goals and perspectives.

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Teaching English As An International Language: Rethinking Goals and Perspectives

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Teaching English As An International Language: Rethinking Goals and Perspectives

Sandra Lee McKay (2002)

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While the last two decades has seen a plethora of books dealing with the teaching of English as a second language, there have been very few books written on teaching English as an international language. This topic is the focus of Sandra McKay of San Francisco State University. The main thesis of this work is simple: “teaching English as an international language must be based on an entirely different set of assumptions than the teaching and learning of English as a second language. The purpose of this book is to clarify these assumptions and advocate that they be considered in the development of English as an international language (EIL) teaching methods and materials.” (p. 1) It is intended for “those who teach English as a second language or those who are learning the language alongside one or more languages they speak to communicate with the growing global community¹ it will also be useful to individuals in English language curriculum development and those involved in English language acquisition research.” (p. 3)

The book is short (150 pages) but covers many topics. It is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of what constitutes an international language. McKay notes that an international language is not just a language that has a large number of native speakers. She claims that an international language has developed to where it is “no longer linked to a single culture or nation but serves the needs of wider communication.” (p. 24) In this chapter, she also examines why English has spread so widely. This was due not only to complex historical, geographical, political, and economic factors, but also to chance, luck and timing. McKay also briefly touches on the negative aspects of this spread of English, such as factors that hinder the language’s spread.

The next chapter, ‘Bilingual Users of English,’ looks at how bilingual users of the language are defined. McKay, as a bilingual user of English, she means “individuals who use English as a second language and their first language is not English.” (p. 27) Using Kachru’s famous circle classification of countries in which English is used, McKay notes that bilingual users in the Outer and Expanding Circle countries are in general different from those in the Inner Circle (due to migration needs). But she also notes that “in some instances this distinction is inadequate as users do come to use English in ways very similar to many Inner Circle users. Given the growing number of bilingual users and the diversity that exists among them, it is essential that more research be undertaken on the various ways in which they use English.” (p. 46) [-1-]

McKay also examines in detail the various problems associated with using the native speaker model. Pointing out that 80 per cent of English teachers around the world today are bilingual users, she notes that as English continues to spread, it is clear that the majority of users in the coming decades will be bilingual users. McKay argues that the native speaker fallacy be challenged. Challenging this fallacy will hopefully lead to a more complex understanding of the needs of non-native speaker communities around the world, a better understanding of how it is acquired in various contexts, and a recognition of the strengths of bilingual English-speaking professionals.” (p. 45)

Chapter three, ‘Standards for English as an International Language,’ looks at the controversy over what should be considered the standard for the international use of the language. McKay investigates the issue of intelligibility, examining attitudes towards, and the lexical, grammatical, and phonological standards. She also discusses rhetorical and pragmatic standards in English as an international language.

The next chapter, ‘Culture in Teaching English as an International Language,’ explores the role of culture in teaching an international language. In it, McKay maintains that it is essential that teachers institute “a curriculum that allows students that individuals gain insight into their own culture. These insights can then be shared in cross-cultural and international contexts.” (p. 100) In addition, McKay explains what aspects of culture should be included in the curriculum and general principles that need to be observed when introducing culture in EIL classrooms.

The next chapter, ‘Teaching Methods and English as a Second Language,’ is grounded upon the idea that the old Inner Circle should not long dictate English teaching methodologies. McKay believes that the old Inner

“replaced with one that recognizes that individual classrooms within one culture can vary teachers and students.” (p. 104) Interestingly, she criticizes current culture of learning’ the saying that the “comparison of various non-western cultures with western ones suggests hence should provide the model for the teaching of English. However, in the teaching of a be allowed to take ownership not only of the language but also of the methods used to tea which particular cultures of learning, particularly non-western ones, are depicted as less p the discussion of CLT.” (p. 107)

She also writes about communicative language teaching, the various objections that have view constitutes an appropriate methodology for teaching English as an international lang determining an appropriate methodology is what Prahbu calls a teacher’s sense of plausik methodologies that marginalize local teachers, if the teaching of EIL is to take place in a so control of the curriculum must be given to local teachers. . . .although it is essential to reco control of the design of an appropriate pedagogy, particularly in relation to the teaching o to recognize that local educators are composed of various interest groups, often having di .” (pp. 121- 2)

In the final chapter, ‘Conclusion: Rethinking Goals and Approaches,’ McKay ends the book and methods should inform the teaching of English as an international language. Among t thinking globally but acting locally is highly relevant to the teaching of EIL. The evidence cl grow, as an international language that belongs, not just to native speakers, but to all of its come for decisions regarding teaching goals and approaches to be given to local educator users of English.” (p. 129) [-2-]

In conclusion, *Teaching English as an International Language* is a brisk, clearly written intro book’s size, limited) of an increasingly important subject. McKay generally touches upon a offering concise and objective explanations of all of the major positions. I found her section Her principal argument that the EIL field needs to take a more inclusive, local, contextual (influences), pluralistic, intercultural approach which recognizes the importance of local ec (many books the last few years dealing with teaching methodologies and applied linguisti point well worth restating.

But she unfortunately deals only peripherally with the core meta-sociolinguistic question language, a question so basic that it is rarely raised in current discussions on the subject: r the average person to learn English in the first place? (particularly if they are a resident of a those countries where English is aggressively taught, is the large amount of money that is resources employed in teaching the language ultimately justified?

For example, take the current situation in East Asia, where I have taught for the last 14 year

spent annually on English education in South Korea, in Japan, it is much more (just for public schools). In South Korea, 1.5 billion dollars were earmarked this year for English education, an 8 fold increase over what was spent last year. In Japan, 200 billion yen (200 million dollars). English plays an extremely important role in these three nations (it is a key part of the college entrance examination). South Korean and Chinese students start at age 6, and Japanese start at age 13. In China, all university students must pass a TOEFL proficiency test in order to graduate. In Korea and Japan, most university students are required to pass a TOEFL major. Both the Korean and Japanese governments have debated making English the official second language. In 2000, a Japanese advisory committee dealing with the matter, made the recommendation that English should be made Japan's official second language).

In Japan and South Korea, many high and junior high school students, in addition to their regular school curriculum, attend English language schools. The ELT business is a huge lucrative business in all three countries. A large number of English language schools exist in each nation and it is easy to find Western textbooks in big bookstores (in China, these prices are much higher). To give an idea of the scale of this business, in China, 25% of all books published deal with English. There are numerous English learning shows on television and radio. Both Japan and South Korea have many English language schools at universities, language schools, and high schools, and the number of foreigners coming to study English is increasing. Knowledge of English has ostensibly become requisite for certain government and business jobs. In the major cities of these nations on public and private signs, in advertisements, clothing, and in many other ways, you inspect the latest East Asian governmental English education white paper with their slogan "English is the key to success." omnipresent ads for English schools and the newest teach yourself grammar/conversation books. The English learning race is going on. [-3-]

But much of this is deceptive. The bald fact is that the influence English has upon the daily lives of people in these nations is far greater than has been commonly assumed, and the strong governmental drives to get people to learn English are based on a variety of domestic political concerns, reasons of international image, and big business interests, rather than on a genuine desire to learn. South Korean and Japanese students are only studying English because it is required or have only a vague idea of why (they are not acutely aware that outside of school they will probably never be called upon to actually use the language, except for using the Internet, or encountering a foreigner). McKay mentions that one major reason for the emphasis on English is "a vast array of specific purposes." (p. 97) While this may be true, the purposes the average Japanese student has in mind are probably not exactly the purposes McKay had in mind. (Of course, this is not a blanket statement about all students in these countries, both Korea and Japan have students who are competent in the language—usually those who are studying abroad are generally in the minority. My focus is on the attitudes and performance of average students.)

The personal experiences of many TESOL teachers who have taught in Japan or South Korea, the results of the TOEFL test discussion sections of various Internet TESOL Websites, and the many papers which appear in the literature (including the general apathy of Korean and Japanese English students), as well as by recent TOEFL test scores, South Korea was ranked 119th out of 155 countries in terms of average TOEFL scores. In a recent newspaper, the *Korea Times*, commenting on this lackluster national performance, stated that it was "incredibly" that such a big trade and Internet power is near the bottom in terms of average

lower at 144th. During the 1990's, the boom years of English education in both of these countries, the upshot being that Korea is left comparatively in roughly the same position it was

In contrast, China's results have been much better, (it was ranked fourth in Asia), given the fact of studying the language taking the exam, the fact that the formal study of English is of more importance (English has been dropped from the school curriculum twice, and then restated), and the fact that it does not have access to the language schools and English learning materials that a Korean student has. English education in China today (and what makes it significantly different from Japan and Korea) is the scope of the government's emphasis on the language (in many ways, the stress is even more intense). Chinese students of English are often better motivated than Korean or Japanese (and frequently from a wider range of who is required to study the language and the ardor in which English is pursued) because it is out of proportion to what the country presently (and in the future) actually needs. I have two speech classes each term and have my Chinese students pick the topics they want to talk about. This is English education in China and raise many of the points I have just mentioned).

Accordingly, McKay is quite correct when she notes that "One major factor that has impeded the spread of English is that there is often little incentive for individuals, particularly in East Asia, to become familiar with the language." (p. 19) But she does not carry out her analysis far enough and does not begin with. We are all familiar with the standard arguments that have been advanced for learning English: international communication, important for access to higher education in a large number of fields (science, entertainment, business, publications, international travel, organizations, and politics, in short, 'global literacy'), but on a very practical and daily needs level, the stark question remains, how necessary is it to have knowledge of English in a region like East Asia? Is the enormous amount of time, money, and effort spent on teaching the language to generally all Korean, Japanese, and Chinese students, in the final analysis, warranted? In my opinion that it is, generally speaking, not, and that the effort and resources that have been expended on elaborate plans to begin teaching students English at even a younger age, as well as requirements for English, currently greatly increasing the number of immersion based 'Super English High Schools' and the pressure made upon students to acquire it, are not, in the end, warranted. Curiously, recent Korean interest in this topic, for it is revealing that both Japan and South Korea have become major and internationally competitive economies and high educational levels in spite of the fact that the general English level is low. The question is whether they can maintain this competitive edge with this language limitation,

Of course, each country has specific English needs (in order to stay on the cutting edge of technology and international business practices, in addition to general translation requirements), but one way to meet them is by the adoption of a two-tier educational system whereby those students who are interested in learning English, would be allowed to pursue a special track English education program or school (it does not have to be English) for a couple of years in junior high or high school so that they can be competitive besides their own. English should also be eliminated from the college entrance examinations and from college students and from job requirements (unless the job involves the actual use of the language).

Through the implementation of this streamlined approach to the formal learning of English requirements, social expectations, and resources (educational, economic) would be met. Funds would be able for a badly needed restructuring of the problem laden East Asian high schools more devoted to subjects that students are actually interested in or to fields that the country's academic and psychological burden would be removed from students (and their parents who are having to send their children to special English schools or engaging private tutors).

These broad but basic questions over the justification for studying English, and the attendant implications of learning it, the tension over social needs versus resources, and the real world issues that the field of teaching English as an international language must take a hard look at are not abstract concerns, for the way these matters will be resolved by the Outer And Expanded Circle like the type of English that will be taught, whom it will be taught to, and the role EIL teachers

[Ronald Gray](#)

Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

<mnenomic2000@yahoo.com>

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