

2005-11-01

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### Recommended Citation

Saengboon, Saksit (2005) "On English as an International Language," *PASAA*: Vol. 37, Article 4.

DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.PASAA.37.1.3

Available at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/pasaa/vol37/iss1/4>

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## On English as an International Language

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### **Abstract**

In this position paper, I argue that English as an International Language (EIL) is meant to elucidate the current practice of English teaching, and more importantly to broaden the scope of inquiry focusing on such issues as English language policy, teaching approaches and materials (e.g., use of non-native literature). Being context-sensitive and culture-specific, EIL tries to answer a local question as to what constitutes “standard” English, etc. In addition to a tentative model of EIL, I also provide a list of eminently researchable topics revolving around the notion of EIL.

### **Introduction**

For certain applied linguists (e.g. Jenkins, 2000; McKay, 2002, 2003, Smith, 2004), English as an International Language (EIL) is a new hope. For some classroom teachers, it is tantamount to a passing fad. While conclusive stances on this issue remain speculative, it is worthwhile to learn more about EIL. In this article, I first discuss the characterization of EIL, including its principal tenets. Second, I compare and contrast it with its predecessors, EFL and ESL, in order to ascertain its strengths and inherent shortcomings. Finally, I provide a model of teaching English as an International language and a list of potentially researchable areas of EIL.

### **The Characterization of EIL**

EIL is by no means operating in a vacuum. Several social and cultural factors shape and are shaped by it such as Widdowson's (1994) notion of "the ownership of English," and Kumaradivelu's (1999) "critical classroom discourse." As such, it is not an overstatement to suggest that EIL originated from the belief that English as a second or foreign language learners (L2 learners) have been subject to the patronizing rhetoric (of the native speakers in Kachru's Inner Circle countries<sup>1</sup>) at best or to the ego-shattering experiences, at worst, of having been unable to achieve the native-like mastery of the language. This implies that most L2 learners are "born losers" because they are evaluated as deficient L2 speakers. To rectify this lop-sided situation, advocates of EIL (e.g. Kachru 1992; Brutt-Griffler 1998; McKay 2002) have come to realize that something is needed to lessen, if not eliminate, the frustration felt by many English L2 learners and their teachers. That something is EIL.

Because EIL deals primarily with a variety of Englishes in actual use around the world, it runs counter to the long-held tradition of Chomskyan linguistics, which focuses almost exclusively on the "ideal" competence of a speaker at the expense of performance. In this respect, Cook (2003) aptly argues that "...[l]inguistics currently concerns itself with monolinguals and single grammars, not with multilinguals with more than one grammar in the same mind..." (p. 217). In sum, the monolingual is the only norm.

However, following Alptekin (2002), for EIL the notion of communicative competence must necessarily go beyond the well-formed sentence structures produced by English native speakers belonging to Kachru's Inner Circle countries. Indeed, EIL suggests that performance rather than competence matters the most. In this regard, EIL reflects what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossic."

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<sup>1</sup> Kachru categorizes countries in which English is used into three main circles. They are Inner Circle countries e.g. USA, UK, Australia; Outer Circle countries e.g. India, the Phillipines, Singapore; and Expanding Circle countries e.g. Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand. See Bruthiaux (2003) for the critique of Kachru's categorization.

According to Bialystok and Hakuta (1994), this notion of a heteroglossic society "... comprise[s] a multiplicity of discourses that vary in purpose and style: there is no English spoken here, but *Englishes* (italics in original)" (p. 185). Also, because of its primary focus on varieties of use, EIL aligns more closely with sociolinguistics and pragmatics than Chomskyan linguistics. As such, its goal is to capture the nuances of language in *real* use by *real* people in *real* situations instead of imaginary use of language by *ideal* speakers and hearers of a language, entirely divorced from realities. In a nutshell, EIL is for *real*.

Because it is concerned with real Englishes, EIL emphasizes intercultural communicative competence (Alptekin, 2002). Broader in scope than the traditional model of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980), intercultural communicative competence has as its major goal to make the teaching of English around the world as realistic and practical as possible. Scholars in favor of EIL such as Alptekin, Brutt-Griffler, and McKay, to name a few, suggest that EIL has to place the highest premiums on the instructional context if its goals are to be attainable. As Alptekin (2002) puts it, "[a] new notion of communicative competence is needed, one which recognizes English as a world language. This would encompass local and international contexts as settings of language use..." (p. 57).

Granted that EIL involves intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the importance of social and education contexts, ICC factors in the following: 1) successful bilinguals rather than the monolingual native speaker are the norms against which successful communication is gauged; 2) L2 learners are continually made aware of differences in the use of English around the globe; 3) L2 learners are encouraged to develop their English proficiency to the fullest extent without their losing sights of the importance of their very own linguistic cultures; and 4) both native and non-native literatures are equally important as authentic L2 input for the learner. These four factors, in short, will render the goal of EIL realistic and hence highly attainable, for success is no longer singular in form, adhering to the traditional

and, perhaps, outmoded concept of American or British English being the only correct English.

In addition to its emphasis on context-sensitivity and intercultural communicative competence, EIL thrives on its democratic bent, being not only empowering in its nature, but also humanistic. EIL is empowering because it opens up ample opportunity for all L2 learners to “appropriate” English as one of their own languages. Indeed, EIL enables L2 learners to realize their own potential of using English. Further, EIL is humanistic because it is not willing to denigrate L2 learners as poor users of English. Rather, if properly applied, it will make the teacher fully realize that the L2 learner is not empty-headed or has no head for language, but some L2 learners are more able than others in language learning.

To sum up, the aforementioned characteristics of EIL possess the following key tenets:

- Context sensitivity/supremacy
- Democratic emphasis
- Humanistic form of education
- Plurality of communicative competence
- Real Englishes as opposed to idealized English

These key tenets make it imperative for language educators not only to pay attention to the linguistic aspect in teaching English but also to think about what consequences will follow if they are to teach EIL. The next section compares and contrasts EIL with ESL/EFL.

### **EIL vs. ESL/EFL**

Several key features that make EIL different from ESL/EFL are as follows. First, EIL is not a new acronym on a par with ESP (English for specific purposes) As Smith (2004) puts it, “EIL is not a kind of English for special purposes (ESP)... EIL is much broader in range and depth than [any] kinds of ESP” (p. 2). In fact, as a corollary of post-positivism (Jacobs and Farrell, 2001), which emphasizes diversity and contextualization, EIL is absolutely not a

teaching method, nor is it a subcategory of ESL/EFL. In this regard, EIL aligns itself strongly with critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) because it was proposed to *question* the validity and relevancy of the traditional concept of correct English. As Pennycook suggests, critical perspectives on the current practice of ESL/EFL are much needed in SLA given the fact that there has always been a mismatch between what ESL/EFL theorizes and what real users of English encounter on a daily basis. This stands in contrast to implication of ESL/EFL, which is to demand that L2 learners be able to use English as educated English native speakers do, a goal that is not only unrealistic but also prohibitively time consuming.

Second, whereas ESL/EFL appear to have unrealistic goals, EIL strives to make L2 learners' learning experience reflect what they are expected to be able to do when using English in their daily lives. That is, with its realistic goals, EIL encourages L2 learners to realize their own potential of real L2 users with inherent language rights. They are not subject to external criteria about what is right and wrong, but rather they are their own users and evaluators of the English language, the quality of which they themselves judge in relation to others whom they come into contact with. To be more specific, L2 learners are going to be concerned first and foremost with situated correctness of English. They will not be concerned as much about whether their accented English is drastically deviant from the orthodox accents of British or American English as they will about whether they manage to get their messages across. To be sure, L2 learners of English will have to be made aware of different communication patterns and behaviors among a variety of English speakers. For example, Knutson et al., (2003) suggest, based on their empirical study about Thai and American rhetorical sensitivity, that Thais have a strong tendency to be "...rhetorical reflectors [who] exhibit deference in their messages to others and express a profound concern for their receivers' requirements" (p. 64). This communication behavior will be an important area in which to find out if Thais adopt this communication pattern when communicating in English.

Third, in terms of materials development, EIL welcomes materials both from the Inner Circle countries and from elsewhere. Effective teaching materials must be authentic in the sense that they represent diverse social and cultural backgrounds of countries where EIL is used. The notion of authenticity is broadened in EIL. Just as a dinner menu from a London restaurant is appropriate, so is that from a Thai or Indonesian restaurant. A short story by a local writer is of equal importance to that by a typical English native speaker. Indeed, the point is not about which is better but it is about who is going to reap the most benefit of which type of English. And the final say lies with the local, not the outside expert.

Fourth, concerning teaching methods and approaches, whereas ESL/EFL prescribe appropriate teaching methods and approaches e.g. the three traditional methods of Grammar Translation, Direct Method, and Audiolingual Methodology (Omaggio Hadley, 2001), EIL principles comply with van Lier's (2002) ecological-semantic perspective in which language is experiential, contextualized, activity-based, and developmental or emergent. As van Lier puts it, "...but there is no reason for language teaching and language learning to be based on decontextualized or prescriptive grammars" (p. 160). Furthermore, as Bax (2003) suggests, the context approach to teaching will supplant the quest for the best teaching method. Once again, the notion of context reigns supreme among the main tenets of EIL.

Fifth, as far as culture teaching is concerned, EIL puts a high premium on the notion that every culture that comes with every country where English is a means of communication is of equal importance. No one but local people are in a most appropriate position to decide what kind of culture is to be accepted or culled in order for them to use English for their communicative purposes. As Matsuda (2003) argues, "[EIL] is ...a different way of looking at the language, which is more inclusive, pluralistic, and accepting than the traditional, monolithic view of English in which there is one correct standard way of using English that all speakers must strive for" (p. 727). In this sense, L2 learners are not bound by the traditional straightjackets of the cultural dimension of language learning a la

ESL/EFL, which delineates elements of culture to be appreciated that glorify American or British English. Ideally speaking, EIL will make them proud of their accented English as long as they can get their messages across. Indeed, EIL enables L2 learners to see no need to assume a new identity in using English.

To further elaborate on the fifth point above, it should be noted that EIL strives to achieve “global cultural flow” rather than “global culture.” Following Appadurai, 1996, Singh and Doherty (2004) define the term global cultural flow as “...the simultaneous fluid movement and changing meaning of ideas, as well as their location in, and passage through, specific historical, linguistic, and political contexts” (p. 15). Here we can see how a main picture of at least two-way communication of culture, including language correctness or appropriateness superimposes the traditional notion of “global culture,” which “...is legitimated by recourse to notions of universal standards that often mask domination of English language (preferably American or British... .” (p. 16). In short, whereas the term global cultural flow denotes the dynamic relationships among all concerned cultures that use English, the term global culture dictates the monolithic view of English, the very concept espoused by ESL/EFL.

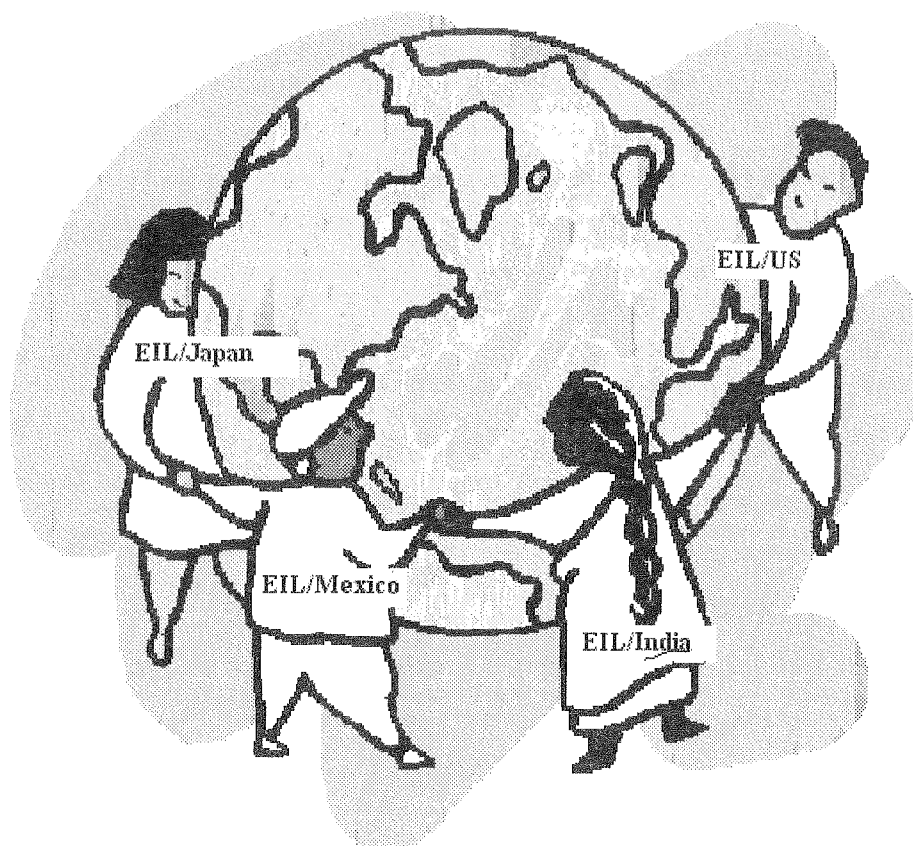
Much as EIL differs in principles from ESL/EFL, the demands placed upon it will be similar to those upon ESL/EFL. That is to say, although theoretically sound, EIL eventually will have to respond to pressing needs of users of English—be they teachers, parents, students or educational authorities. For instance, local English teachers whose language proficiency leaves much to be desired, in particular those teaching in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Nunan, 2003) will need to improve their English and their teaching performances. Will EIL answer this call? Further, anecdotal evidence indicates that many Asian parents may not be pleased in having “non-White” and non-native speakers teaching their children, particularly the speaking skill. How can language educators convince them that “correct” English is not only British or American English? In fact, Bamgbose (2001) points out that, in Thailand, there is “...a so-called ‘Global English School’ [which] boasts on its Internet home page that all of our English teachers *are native speakers, teaching*



*natural English as it is spoken in real conversation* (italics in original)” (p. 360). If this advert is any indicator of how Thais regard the English language and what kind of English they truly want, then there is going to be a great concern whether EIL will be construed as realistic and important. As for students in general, will they pay attention to the increasing importance of EIL, given the fact that their top priority is to pass the university entrance examination? Perhaps, only a few who are highly motivated and who are linguistically inclined may find the notion of EIL appealing. Research needs to be conducted to find out about their attitudes toward EIL. Finally, concerning educational authorities including language policy makers, EIL may not be as convincing to them, for they appear to suggest that Thais should learn *the* proper way of communicating in English, which almost automatically means British, or even more so, American English.

Given the multifaceted characteristics of EIL and because of the changing currents in English language teaching around the world, a model that could reasonably represent EIL is one that may be unorthodox in its configuration as follows.

### A tentative model of EIL



In this model, the globe represents English as an International Language, construed as a global property having four main characters as representatives of those who use English around it. These characters whose names are 1) EIL/Japan; 2) EIL/Mexico; 3) EIL/India; and 4) EIL/US are seen holding hands, thereby reaffirming the cooperation and co-construction of meanings of language use around the globe. With the cooperation and co-construction comes the idea that all users of EIL share, more or less, the responsibility for mutual intelligibility and understanding. Moreover, the non-linear configurations of the background and the maps representing continents and countries indicate that it takes time and effort for EIL to establish itself firmly in the wider area of applied linguistics and SLA. Yet, with

the four main characters as described above, EIL gives us promises rather than perils.

In the following section, I discuss research areas on EIL that Thai teachers of English might be interested in pursuing.

### **Potentially researchable areas on EIL**

To my knowledge, EIL appears to be a new sub-field of applied linguistics and SLA for Thais. Although earlier works on the topic could be found in writings by, for example, Chutisilp (1986), who wrote about a Thai variety of English, more research is needed in the following areas:

- Attitudes of Thai students toward EIL
- Teacher beliefs about the practicality of EIL
- Use of non-native literature in the teaching of EIL
- Forms of grammar in the teaching of EIL
- EIL and language assessment: contexts versus numbers
- The notion of authenticity in the EIL classroom
- Spoken discourse analysis of English in cross-cultural EIL contexts
- Written discourse analysis: cohesion and coherence in EIL writing instruction
- English language policy and EIL
- Pragmatics and EIL
- EIL and listening skills development
- EIL and sociolinguistics
- EIL and second language socialization
- Culture teaching in the EIL classroom

These topics represent a fraction of what could be studied from the EIL perspective. From the interlanguage<sup>2</sup> perspective, EIL will shed more light on current understanding of interlanguage development e.g. whether EIL constitutes an example of interlanguage, or the extent to which EIL could be examined in terms of its syntax and semantics vis-à-vis the Inner Circle English.

### **Final remarks**

I began this paper by pointing out that EIL has a tendency to mean different things to different people. Whether it is a new hope or a passing fad depends on its users and their contexts. But if we are to glean any benefits from this linguistic and educational innovation, we must be cautious in deciding its worth and pitfalls. After all, EIL is not a panacea for all teaching ills, but it provides a kaleidoscopic view of how English education should be undertaken to benefit all concerned—be they policy makers, researchers, teachers, and students. With EIL, we must not fall into the same old trap, one that will become a self-defeating endeavor.

### **The Author**

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<sup>2</sup> Interlanguage, according to Ellis (1997), refers to the kind of language that second language learners produce both in speech and writing, the quality of which falls short of native speaker's standard, but yet has a system of its own.

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