

Considering New Perspectives in ELT in Colombia: From EFL to ELF

Consideración de nuevas perspectivas en la enseñanza del inglés en Colombia: del inglés como lengua extranjera al inglés como lengua franca

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This article aims to explore the characteristics of English as a lingua franca (ELF) as an alternative to English Language Teaching (ELT) in Colombia. It focuses initially on the role played by English in the country and on what the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) model has offered the teaching of English. This is followed by considerations regarding aspects such as teachers, methodologies, teaching materials and culture from the viewpoint of ELF. In short, the author suggests a more international dimension to the teaching of English in Colombia in an attempt to reduce the role played by hegemonic dominant Inner Circle (Kachru, 1992) varieties in ELT in Colombia.

Key words: Culture, English, foreign language, lingua franca, native speaker, teaching, varieties

Este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar las características del modelo de inglés como Lengua Franca (ILF) como una alternativa para su enseñanza en Colombia. Inicialmente se hace referencia a la importancia del inglés en el país al igual que a algunas consideraciones con respecto a la enseñanza del modelo de inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE). Lo anterior seguido de varias consideraciones que se relacionan con los profesores, las metodologías, los materiales para la enseñanza y la cultura desde la perspectiva de ILF. En síntesis, el autor sugiere una dimensión más internacional en la enseñanza de inglés en Colombia en un intento por reducir la tradición hegemónica y dominante de las variedades del círculo interior (Kachru, 1992) presentes en la enseñanza del inglés en Colombia.

Palabras claves: enseñanza, enseñanza de cultura, hablantes nativos, inglés como lengua extranjera, inglés como lengua franca, variedades de inglés

Introduction

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been institutionalized in Colombia on the basis of the nation's development and insertion into the globalized world. English has been constantly associated with a requirement to experience progress and as an instrument for further professional development and economic growth. This is supported by Mejía (2004, p. 392), who claims that “career advancement in Colombia is dependent to a large degree on English language proficiency.” In a similar way, Vélez-Rendón (2003, p. 187) says that “consensus that the English language has a role to play in Colombia's advancement in the international arena seems to be growing.” This assertion, adds Vélez-Rendón (2003), has generated a trend in many Colombians to perceive those individuals without the English language and basic computer skills as illiterate today. Furthermore, the growing number of language schools and the popularity of English courses in the country further support this trend.

Likewise, English in Colombia is still broadly connected to countries such as the United States and Great Britain, probably due to the historical tradition of these nations as English-speaking countries along with the ideological power of Inner Circle countries. Here it is necessary to point out that Kachru (1992) proposes three concentric circles to illustrate the status of English in different cultural settings around the world: the Inner Circle represents the traditional linguistic and cultural bases for English (e.g. the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada); the Outer Circle includes mostly the varieties of English in former British colonies (e.g. Nigeria, India, the Philippines); and the Expanding Circle refers to countries where English is used mainly as a foreign language (e.g. China, Russia, Colombia).

Other reasons, according to Graddol, McArthur, Flack and Amey (1999), for the existing connection between English in developing countries and Inner Circle countries like the United States might include the high status of American English, the great economic power of the United States and the highly demographic vitality of American English speakers. Consequently, learning English in Colombia may be coupled with an attempt by its people to become more ‘North American’; a phenomenon commonly referred to as McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1995) or Americanization (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999). This attempt appears to have provoked an ideological reaction from some people in Colombia who fear the idea of English linguistic imperialism, defined by Phillipson (1992, p. 47) as “the

dominance of English asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.”

This linguistic imperialism, as claimed by Qiang and Wolff (2005, p. 55), “can take place when English becomes a gatekeeper to education, employment, business opportunities and popular culture and where indigenous languages are marginalized.” In the views of many Colombians, some of these actions are seemingly taking place in the present while others might soon begin to occur in the country. Evidence to support this can be seen in how college students are now required to achieve at least an upper-intermediate level of competence in a foreign language (usually English) before they graduate, and major corporations’ demand of their prospective employees to have an excellent command of English. In this respect, Vélez-Rendón (2003) argues that the classifieds of major Colombian newspapers regularly run ads for a variety of jobs in which knowledge of English is either a must or a desire.

Due to this observation, people who often see themselves as ‘anti-imperialists’ think that the country’s linguistic and cultural identity might be at stake as English Language Teaching (ELT) spreads across the Colombian educational system and as the Ministry of Education seeks to implement a National Bilingual (English-Spanish) Program (Colombian Ministry of Education, 2005). According to González (2007, p. 317), this National Bilingual Program “clearly favors the presence of British English, probably the most prestigious variety of English in the Inner Circle, over any other variety of the Outer Circle.” The same author argues that in the context of such program, the possibility of using materials and academic resources written in ‘Colombian English’, an Expanding Circle variety, has been rejected. As stated by Ladegaard and Sachdev (2006), the two varieties that have received the highest attention across many EFL countries worldwide are British English and American English. Thus, it is a big challenge to disassociate the long-established relationship between ELT in Colombia and the dominant Inner Circle varieties of English. It seems to me that outside academic circles most people may be unaware that English does not belong exclusively to the United States or Great Britain any longer; that it has taken a new and broader dimension; that there are millions of people whose first language is not English but who use English to communicate successfully for a great variety of purposes with native and other non-native speakers of English across cultures.

Because of that presumption, I would like to put forward a new perspective in ELT in Colombia in light of reducing the role played by hegemonic dominant Inner Circle varieties. Such a perspective might surely suggest a more international dimension to the teaching of English in this South American country. It is my aim therefore to present the characteristics of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in order to raise awareness of the pedagogical potential it may have for the teaching of English in Colombia. Initially, I will introduce the concept of ELF and then briefly elaborate on fundamental factors such as the role of native/non-native teachers, methodologies, teaching materials and culture in terms of how these factors are conceived at present in Colombia and then analyze what they would offer to the ELT process from an ELF perspective. Finally, I will draw conclusions concerning the role that ELF might play in Colombia and offer some suggestions to further explore this model in traditional EFL settings.

Defining English as a Lingua Franca

With the growing expansion of English across the world, a proliferation of varieties of English, varying in aspects like grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation, has come into existence (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2003; Graddol, 2006). This proliferation appears to have brought along terms such as English as an International Language (EIL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which have been widely used and disseminated by different authors and researchers. However, no matter how EIL and ELF are defined, they appear to be used interchangeably across most of the literature in ELT. Seidlhofer (2005, p. 339) establishes that “the traditional meaning of EIL comprises uses of English within and across Kachru’s concentric circles, for intra-national as well as international communication.” Meanwhile, House (1999) contends that when English is used as the means of communication among speakers with different first languages across linguistic boundaries, the term ELF is usually preferred. A similar definition of ELF has also been given by Firth (1996, p. 240), who argues that ELF is “a ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen *foreign* language of communication”. Theoretically, observes Hsuan-Yau (2008), the concept of ELF promotes the idea that English is no longer a “possession” of any particular English-speaking country and that there are many different varieties of English. This view of ELF seems distant from the traditional EFL model possibly dominant in

contexts like Colombia; that is, learning English as a foreign language for the purpose of communicating with native speakers of English.

Thus, Gilmore (2007) argues that ELF has several potential advantages for the language learners as follows:

Firstly, it maximizes their chances of learning a variety of English which can be understood and used by a wide range of nationalities, including the most likely scenario: one non-native speaker talking to another non-native speaker. Secondly, it avoids culturally loaded language, which is often difficult to understand once removed from its context of use. Thirdly, by avoiding ‘inner circle’ varieties of English in textbooks, the balance of power shifts from native speaker to non-native speaker teachers (Seidlhofer, 1999), something many are keen to see after the accusations of linguistic imperialism put forward in many EFL contexts. (p. 104)

Despite those advantages, the development of ELF has found opposing points of view. Mainly from those who see it as a weak model due to the fact that it has not been codified; that is, it lacks a linguistic corpus to support it. Another opposing view is seemingly connected to the idea that many native speakers of English still see themselves as guardians over what is acceptable or not in the English language. As a reaction to these views, research on the area of pronunciation in ELF has been conducted by authors like Jenkins (2000), who suggests that phonology classes should include extensive exposure to different varieties of English. Similarly, Firth (1996), in the area of pragmatics and conversational analysis and Seidlhofer (2004) in her ongoing research on ELF lexicogrammar, have both made significant contributions to consolidate ELF as a serious and feasible model in ELT.

Interestingly, Seidlhofer’s study has so far identified some distinctive features of ELF, namely,

- 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

- use of an all-purpose tag question such as *isn't it?* or *no?* as in “They should arrive soon, *isn't it?*” instead of *shouldn't they?*
- pluralisation of nouns which are considered uncountable in native speaker English (“informations,” “staffs,” “advices”) (cited in Jenkins, 2006, p. 170)

Perhaps, most importantly, the same research has revealed that these features do not appear to get in the way of intelligibility among speakers of ELF or between these and native speakers of English. Similarly, the above studies reveal that the area of phonology may be the one that poses the biggest challenge whereas the areas of pragmatics and lexicogrammar do not seem to hinder successful communication even though some effort might be required by the ELF speakers (Burt, 2005). It may be said that ELF presupposes that anyone willing to participate in international communication should be familiarized with a variety of linguistic forms that are broadly used across different communities of speakers of English from various language backgrounds.

The emergence of ELF has made concepts such as ‘standard English’ and ‘native speaker’ significantly more complex and more difficult to define. Regarding the first of these concepts, Kachru and Smith (2009, p. 5) argue that “the idea of one standard English needs to change since now there are multiple standard Englishes (Canadian, Nigerian, Indian, Singaporean, Caribbean, etc.). Some of these have grammars and dictionaries; others are developing them.” As for the second concept, the native speaker, I shall now proceed to briefly examine the traditional views of the native/non-native English teacher as I simultaneously consider some of the characteristics of the English teacher from an ELF viewpoint.

Native English Speaking Teachers and Non-Native ELF Teachers

EFL is currently introduced in 1st grade in Colombia with an average of three hours per week for state schools and with the majority of teachers being non-native English speakers. The reality, however, seems to reveal that most English language learners and even teachers across all levels of education still consider the native English speaker as the perfect model or norm to emulate. It looks as if English learners and perhaps teachers in Colombia are unaware of what Graddol (2006) has observed in terms of native English speakers being broadly outnumbered by non-native English speakers around the world. As a matter of fact, ELF has focused

on exploring the trend that most communication in English may not currently involve L1 speakers of English, which has raised the issue of the ownership of English (Jenkins, 2003). As claimed by Kachru (1992, cited in Gonzales, 2007, p. 317), “the ownership of English is not a privilege of the native speakers of the inner circle. It is a collective construction of speakers of the outer circle and the expanding circle.” It is important to realize that English has developed into many other varieties and this trend seems unstoppable to the point that, as Davidson (2007, p. 49) claims, “it is the monolingual ‘native’ speaker of a single variety of a standard global language who is the most linguistically disadvantaged of all – socially, culturally, emotionally and intellectually.”

The concept of the native speaker has been widely debated in EFL/ESL literature and somehow demystified by several authors. Rampton (1990, p. 98) asserts that “being born into a social group does not mean that you automatically speak its language well – many native speakers of English can’t write or tell stories, while many non-native speakers can.” Additionally, Davies (2003) contends that the native speaker should be considered not as a measure, but as a model, a goal, almost an inspiration. The latter view by Davies probably coincides more with the argument presented by Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994), who claim that instead of seeing the native speaker accent as the norm to imitate, it should be approached as a model to guide learners in acquiring the language.

Interestingly, Rampton (1990) proposed that people should think of accomplished users of the language as experts instead of as native speakers. In the same line of thought, Aston (1993) suggested that not having native-like competence may be a means of establishing and maintaining friendly relationships between individuals of different cultural backgrounds. At around this time, Medgyes (1992) similarly argued that non-native English speaking teachers have some advantages over native English speaking teachers. For example, they can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English, can teach learning strategies more effectively, are able to anticipate language learning difficulties and can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their students.

So, if it is taken into consideration that teachers have been traditionally seen as models for students, the ELF teacher should be not only a proficient user of the language but also a consistent model for language learners. Additionally, if the ELF teacher is to occupy the place of the ‘omnipotent’ native speaker or L1 user, then

s/he has to be, according to Prodromou (2007, p. 52), “[a] successful bilingual with intercultural competence.” It follows then, to the surprise of many EFL teachers and learners who have historically worshipped the native English speaking teacher, that “being a native speaker does not seem to be as important as being fluent in English and familiar with several different national varieties” (Kachru & Smith, 2009, p. 6).

Towards an ELF Methodology in ELT

As an English learner and more recently as an EFL teacher and teacher educator, I have noticed a continuous tradition of various methods and approaches in EFL teaching in Colombia. Methods such as grammar translation, audio-lingualism, natural approach, total physical response, and communicative language teaching have come and gone in this country and others. However, it is perhaps the so-called communicative language teaching method, one of the most widely acclaimed methods in the different levels of FL education at present that is most prevalent in Colombia (González, 2007; Sánchez & Obando, 2008). Equally important, after reading about the history of those methods, it is not hard to realize that most of them come from Inner Circle countries and apparently have proved to be effective in a great variety of teaching settings around the world. It seems as if initiatives to design local or national methodologies in Colombia have been kept to a minimum or have been quickly absorbed by the international ELT market established in the country. As a result of the impact of communicative language teaching, it may be said that the idea of developing native-like competence in English is still deeply rooted in EFL contexts like Colombia.

The problem takes greater importance when imported methodologies gain more and more acceptance not only by a Ministry of Education and educational authorities but by the teachers themselves who tend to see these imports as the correct way to teach the target language. Consequently, as may be the case in Colombia, teachers see no need or are just not encouraged to design their own methodologies, even if those they currently use do not seem to offer the desired results after a long period of implementation. In this respect, McKay (2002, p. 107) stresses that “in the teaching of ELF or EIL, bilingual users should be allowed to take ownership not only of the language but also of the methods used to teach it.”

Therefore, a new ELF perspective would imply that Colombian English teachers and ELT researchers should commit themselves to developing their own local methodologies inspired by their students’ interests and needs and the characteristics

of their teaching settings. These methodologies have to take into account English as used for the learners' specific purposes and communication across cultures (McKay, 2002). Similarly, these methodologies would have to promote the lack of necessity for students to have native-like competence as long as intelligibility in communication with other English speakers is achieved. In short, a local methodology should offer students the possibility "to be themselves with their own identity or to strive for intelligibility rather than the perfect English accent" (Berns, 2005, p. 86). In this respect, McKay (2002, p. 119) insists that in the teaching of ELF or EIL, "local educators should have control over how English is taught, implementing a methodology that is appropriate to the local context rather than looking to Inner Circle countries for models."

Teaching Materials and Culture in an ELF Context

Other aspects related to my goal of raising awareness of the pedagogical potential that ELF might have in Colombia are teaching materials and culture teaching in ELT. Most EFL teachers in Colombia seem to rely on a course book usually produced by a North American or British publisher and sold as a global course book in many parts of the world (Oviedo, 2002). That is, presumably a universal course book that can fit all teaching settings and learners in the world. Ironically, there might be teachers in Colombia who tend to see locally produced course books as being disadvantageous in comparison to those produced by the large North American or British publishing houses, simply based on the fact that the latter ones are produced abroad and by native speakers of English.

These course books have been historically loaded with aspects related to either British or North American culture. Prodromou (1988) emphasizes that globally designed textbooks have continued to be stubbornly Anglo-centric. Not having enough with being bombarded with elements of these dominant Inner Circle cultures through mass media, English learners in Colombia have to cope with such elements in their ELT course books as well. It is not difficult to see the teaching of English related to either North American or British culture since, in many cases, it is only a matter of viewing a page of any course book to find representative icons of these dominant cultures.

Much has been said about the role of culture in the teaching of foreign languages. In considering culture as defined by Richards et al. (1999, p. 4), that is, "the total set of

beliefs, attitudes, customs, behavior, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society”, it may be said that in one way or another we as teachers have to deal with culture when teaching another language. In this sense, Valdes (1986, p. 121) also argues that “it is virtually impossible to teach a language without teaching cultural content.” The concept of culture then is an inherent aspect of language learning since it is always attached to a group or a community of people. Despite these arguments, McKay (2002) claims that there is no need to obtain target language culture knowledge when teaching and learning English since English has been given local traditions and cultural values, which are far more important to learners.

Nevertheless, British and North American cultures continue to be widely disseminated through ELT course books which simultaneously act as cultural artifacts across most EFL contexts worldwide. As a reaction to this, ELF seeks to break through the old paradigm that learning English has to involve learning about British and North American cultures. In this respect, Berns (2005, p. 87) claims that another possible result of the propagation of ELF is “the de-anglicizing of the cultural bases and the acceptability of such labels as Hungarian, Argentine, Korean, or Dutch or [Colombian] English.” These labels might also help to challenge the rooted idea in many Expanding Circle countries that English different from the North American or British models is wrong and defective.

Consequently, if it is not the North American or British cultural models, then which culture might English teachers in Colombia teach? (bearing in mind that English today is spoken by people of so many different cultural backgrounds). A response to this can be observed in how recent ELT course books are beginning to include representative icons and cultural elements of various countries and regions in addition to those of the traditional Inner Circle varieties. In this sense, Basabe (2006, p. 60) asserts that “the idea that the culture of English-speaking countries has abandoned its central role is gaining more acceptance among ELT publishers and researchers and is giving way to a fairer inclusion of local and international cultures in recent ELT materials.”

For the most part, teaching materials in an ELF context, argues McKay (2002), should be used in such a way as to help students reflect on their own culture in relation to others; to realize the diversity that exists within all cultures; and to critically examine the cultural content of the text and consider various ways to approach it. In short, from an ELF view, culture in language teaching should acknowledge the

existence of a great variety of cultures. Thus, it follows that a reasonable pedagogical attitude in ELT in Colombia should advocate the knowledge of many different cultures including Inner Circle ones without pushing for the acceptance or assimilation of any particular one of them.

Conclusions

In this essay, my goal has been to raise awareness over the pedagogical potential that ELF might bring to ELT in Colombia, given the level of resistance in EFL contexts towards historical dominant Inner Circle varieties and the growing transformations of English around the world. Therefore, I have initially offered an overview of some characteristics of EFL teaching in Colombia and then gradually focused on the concept and features of the ELF model. An analysis of traditional ELT aspects such as teachers, methodologies, and teaching materials and culture from the perspective of EFL to what they would offer from an ELF view has also been provided.

Graddol (2006, p. 108) predicts that “the traditional EFL model will never completely die out but will account for a much smaller proportion of learners.” Alternatively, ELF is gaining more and more attention despite their relatively recent origins. It seems appropriate that students of English, in settings like Colombia, learn not just a variety of English but of Englishes if successful communication with users of English from different corners of the world is expected.

It could also be the case that the ELF model inadvertently contributes to promote international understanding. In this respect, Matsuda (2002) argues the following:

An incomplete presentation of the English language may also lead to confusion or resistance when students are confronted with different types of English users or uses. Students may be shocked by varieties of English that deviate from Inner Circle English, view them as deficient (rather than different), or grow disrespectful to such varieties and users, which seems counter-productive to facilitating international understanding. (p. 438)

Although several studies advocate the construction of pedagogies of ELF (Jenkins, 2006; Berns, 2005), more consideration and interest need to be given to the potential benefits of this model in the Colombian context. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any initiative from English language teachers or

researchers in Colombia to incorporate characteristics of the ELF model into the courses they teach. Authors like González (2009, p. 189) insist on “the lack of analysis of the Colombian linguistic situation as a country placed in the expanding circle of world Englishes.”

Many other ELT aspects such as teacher education, assessment, syllabi and curriculum design remain to be discussed from an ELF perspective along with the area of accommodation skills which seems to be of the utmost importance for ELF teachers and learners. As Jenkins (2006) argues, although the study of world Englishes is growing in undergraduate and master’s university programs in many countries (possibly less so in Colombia), the paradigm shift has not yet started to filter into language teaching itself and into teacher training programs.

Unfortunately, despite the arguments in favor of ELF and the evident skills of many non-native speaking English teachers in Expanding Circle countries, “the belief in native speaker ownership persists among both native and nonnative speaker - teachers, teacher educators and alike, although it is often expressed with more subtlety than it was in the past” (Jenkins 2006, p. 171). It is therefore important to raise learners’ and teachers’ awareness of the great diversity and vitality of English today and its growing pluricentric reality. Finally, Burt (2005) reminds us that no matter what direction ELF takes, the growing numbers of ELF speakers might inevitably push native speakers of English to make different linguistic accommodations in order to survive in this age of global communication. The nature of these accommodations, adds Burt, remains to be seen.

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