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Teaching English as an International Language: The Challenge of Implementing Changes in English Teacher Education Programs

Gabriela Kleckova
University of West Bohemia
Plzen, Czech Republic

gabriela_kleckova@yahoo.com

Much has been written about the undeniable change of the role of English in the world nowadays. English has been rightly identified as an international language, that is, belonging to the world. The transformation is in many ways similar to that of the butterfly metamorphosis. There are numerous parallels between these two processes (that would be another article), but one probably stands out to everybody. English as an international language (EIL) is like an adult butterfly that has come out of the chrysalis. It travels the world and presents its beauty.

Many in the field of TESOL recognize this new reality – the internationalization of English in various contexts – and hopefully seek ways to reflect and implement it in their daily practices in teaching, teacher training, and designing curricula. Yet, in many contexts the traditional models of English and its pedagogy may still be in place. For example, in the Czech Republic, the view of English among teachers of English and even students has not metamorphosed. There persist some strongly established beliefs about the “ownership” of English, and the continuing view of the importance of learning about the culture and society of English native speakers with native speaker-like pronunciation serving as a benchmark of achievement.

Just to illustrate this, a survey we carried out among Czech secondary school students and their English teachers to examine attitudes and opinions about varieties of English and different approaches to culture teaching and culture content revealed among other things the favoritism of native speaker norms. Nine out of 13 teachers (69%) claimed that if they could occasionally have foreign visitors in lessons with whom their students could practice their English skills they would like to have a native speaker of English. None of the teachers showed a preference for purely non-native speakers of English. Four teachers (31%) claimed that it didn't matter to them what linguistic background the visitors would have. Unfortunately, students of 15-18 years of age showed similar preferences. Of students surveyed, 195 out of 258 (75%) showed preferences for native speakers. Sixteen students (6%) preferred non-native speakers and 47 students (18%) would like to interact with any speaker of English. The reasons for native speakers were, for example, their better/correct pronunciation or accent (42 students) and their better knowledge and level of English (26 students). Findings like these correspond with observations reported by Modiano (2009) in his discussion of EIL in European English language teaching (ELT). He claims that although we understand the global role of English, we struggle “to devise methods and curricula that can act as a basis for teaching to reflect the reality of English being ‘global’” (p. 59).

McKay (2012) argues that only informed and qualified teachers of English can be the agents of change (p.41). Similarly, Matsuda (2009) writes: “The changes in English language teaching urged by various scholars ... cannot be successfully implemented without changing teachers: teachers must have a good understanding of the historical spread and current use of English in order to implement changes in the curriculum that better reflect the needs of EIL users today” (p.171). It is obvious that pre-service and in-service teacher training is the key to EIL informed pedagogy. Unfortunately, I am

of the opinion that similarly to classroom practices, in many teacher training contexts the traditional models of English and ELT pedagogy may still prevail. Again, using a Czech example, the non-pedagogical part of English teacher preparation programs is built around British and American linguistic, literary, and cultural studies with focus on native speakerism (term used by Modiano, 2009). In other words, as much as there is a big need and call for a metamorphosis of English teacher education programs, the curricula of some of them still evolve, using my butterfly analogy, around English as a caterpillar rather than a butterfly.

I shared these discrepancies between realities of global English and contents of English teacher preparation and actual language classes with my colleagues from other English teacher training programs across the Czech Republic and called for innovations in our programs. Sadly, I've found very little understanding of and support for this call for change. Furthermore, even if there was a desire to make such innovations, they would have to be approved by the National Program Accreditation Committee which, sadly again, shows strong beliefs in established traditions.

I find myself in a situation in the Czech Republic which leads me to more questions than answers about implementing changes in English teacher education programs. Where do we start? What do we start with? How do we metamorphose?

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