Roadblocks to Teaching English as a Foreign Language in a Climate of Accelerated Curricular Change

Margaret McKenzie
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This paper examines the global "English craze," in which non-English-speaking countries, especially in Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East, are engaged in a concerted push to get the language taught more widely and at increasingly lower grade levels. The goal of this paper is to document how this phenomenon has impacted teachers of English as a Foreign Language and how they can try to alleviate these problems.

To get ahead in fields such as banking, technology, or diplomacy, English is now considered the sine qua non (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Chang, Wu, & Ku, 2005). English is also the language of choice among young people drawn to the Internet and Western popular culture (Albirini, 2004; Sjoholm, 2006) as well as the lingua franca of academia in such countries as Turkey, Brunei, and Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2003; Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe, 2005; Pieronek, 2001). For these and other reasons, many countries, especially in Asia and the Middle East, are engaged in a concerted push to get English taught more widely and at ever-lower grade levels. Taiwan’s plan, called Challenge 2008, requires English to be taught starting in Grade 5 (Chang et al., 2005). In Turkey, public-school pupils start studying a foreign language, generally English, in the fourth grade (Atay & Kurt, 2006). South Korea has a plan to place a native-speaking teacher in every junior high school by 2010 (Jeon & Lee, 2006); and, in preparation for this year’s Olympics, China’s English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education has gone from a few university-based programs in the 1970s to hundreds today (Hu, 2005).

Accompanying the explosive growth of English language teaching (ELT) comes the question: What challenges does this present to the EFL teacher? Although the ELT expansion may be viewed as a welcome development that will create more jobs, those charged with carrying out the mandate will undoubtedly be affected by increased demands.

This researcher set out to identify countries with accelerated EFL programs and to document EFL teachers’ responses to their various challenges. Emphasis was placed on finding literature that included teachers’ perspectives on their success rates vis à vis students’ ability to absorb the ELT material. The purpose of this structured literature review was to serve as a point of discussion for EFL teachers and those considering entering the profession, as well as to add to the literature by providing a snapshot of trends from the past five or so years.

Method

Using ERIC (the online Education Resources Information Center), studies were retrieved from electronic and print journals. The search criteria were EFL teachers, problems, and curricula. Articles were further narrowed to issues of salary, technology, national initiatives, and the relationships between local and native-speaking teachers. Although dozens of studies were harvested, 17 were ultimately cited in this review, which was not designed to be quantitative but qualitative in identifying EFL teaching challenges.

Upon analysis, a number of themes emerged that cut across geographic and cultural categories and among subgroups that included countries with a “competitive imperative” (a more dictatorial style of government, with a presumed motivation of being better able to compete with...
Western, English-speaking nations) and those with a “cooperative” imperative (politically more democratic, with a motivation of establishing better commercial and other ties with the English-speaking world).

Findings

Immaterial of the groups’ imperatives, five broad categories of EFL job-related challenges were identified: 1) technology issues, 2) inter-group difficulties between native and local English teachers, 3) overly ambitious curricula, 4) cultural impediments, and 5) the need for proper resources.

Technology Issues

While the assumption was that so-called “developing” countries would be lacking in computer access for teachers, the literature seemed to contradict this. In fact, emerging regions often exhibited a more acute awareness of technology as a prerequisite mode of language teaching. Although a positive development, it brings with it, of course, the danger of viewing computers as a panacea at the expense of more established ELT methods.

In a Turkish study, Computer Assisted Language Learning was used to test accent reduction software in a multimedia language laboratory (Seferoglu, 2005). The experimental use of Pronunciation Power software on 20 EFL teachers-in-training at the Middle East Technical University used a pretest and posttest and concluded that technology has a lot to offer this field. The resultant question arises: Will such technology be available? Owing to the great disparity in resources and curricular standards in Turkey, where private institutions teach content areas primarily in English and state-run schools teach primarily in Turkish (Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe, 2005), the use of computers and pronunciation software seems, unfortunately, destined for only the elite.

A study of teachers’ attitudes toward information and communication technologies in Syria likewise affirms that “governments in most developing countries have (initiated) national programs to introduce computers into education” (Albirini, 2004, p. 374). The researcher administered a questionnaire on computer competence and attitudes to a random sample of 326 subjects selected from a pool of 827 EFL teachers in Hims (the largest Syrian province). He concluded that simply making computers available was not sufficient; teachers need to be equipped to use them. Respondents complained that computers were rushed into classrooms, with a dearth of instruction. Most of the respondents agreed that computers were proliferating too quickly. They also reported having little or no competence in handling most of the computer functions needed by educators.

The use of computers in the form of electronic portfolios to teach English to junior high-school students was documented in a Taiwanese study (Chang et al., 2005). Ironically, although Taiwan has been manufacturing computers for decades, only recently has its populace been able to afford to buy them. Language students there often lacked “a real environment to support speaking opportunities in English” (p. 31). To assess their English-speaking skills, teachers helped 37 students to build personal Web sites. A successful outcome, however, was hampered by the fact that only three computer classrooms were available for 93 classes at the school. The students were only able to work on their portfolios for about 45 minutes a week. Although students’ overall response to the exercise was enthusiastic, they reported problems in setting up home pages and recording their voices. Researchers placed the responsibility for these errors on the teachers. The EFL faculty “should learn more about computers and increase their computer skills,” and “make sure that the computers are set up properly” (p. 34). Going unsaid was whether teachers would be given the additional time and training to effect these changes.
Need for Proper Resources

Along with a deficit in technological training, many EFL teachers also lack the most basic of instructional tools. With a worldwide recession threatening, resources in many countries seem pushed to the limit. In Oaxaca, one of the poorest states in Mexico, the majority of students reach only the fifth grade in elementary school, but formal instruction of English starts in secondary school, thus greatly lessening the need for materials at all (Clemente, 2007). Among English classes, there is a great disparity between resources for middle-class schools and those for the working-class poor.

In the sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, where a bilingual policy was introduced in 1984, children are expected to switch from their native Malay to using English as the medium of instruction in mathematics, geography, and science. Books were not plentiful in the homes, and, not surprisingly, children had difficulty learning to read. As one teacher remarked, “If the children can’t read, they can’t learn” and expressed concern that many were failing their examinations (Pieronek, 2001, p. 524). Although an in-service project to train a group of approximately 20 teachers to utilize such first language reading strategies as guided listening-thinking activities, questioning, and read-aloud, were found to be effective in teaching the second language, making English books available for the children to use should obviously be a priority.

Inter-Group Difficulties: NETs vs. LETs

Whether we call them NESTs (for native English-speaking teachers, as they are referred to in France), NESes (native English speakers, as in Korea), or NETs (native-speaking English teachers, as in Hong Kong, and the term we shall use here), language specialists recruited from America or the rest of the “English Five” (Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada) have reported various problems between them and their local counterparts (referred to here as local English teachers, or LETs).

Jealousy and envy among local peers directed toward the NETs, reported in several locales, apparently stemmed from the elevated status that comes with being, or even hiring, a native speaker (Clapson & Hyatt, 2007). In South Korea, where English is now the paramount language in the job market (Jeon & Lee, 2006), Koreans want to learn about “English ways of thinking and negotiating” from NETs because of their knowledge of vocabulary and “authentic pronunciation” (Han, 2005, p. 200).

Han (2005) examined the views of 12 Korean adult learners toward NETs and documented a perceptual gap between the qualities ascribed to the LETs (good role models, warm and humanistic but having an inferior command of English) and the NETs (authentic pronunciation, native command of the language, but cold and calculating personalities). The conclusion was that both learners and teachers need to remain culturally sensitive in order to navigate this divide.

Discrepancies in salaries and job assignments also often strain relations between the NETs and the LETs. In Hong Kong, an exercise in team-teaching ran into a roadblock of animosity because the two groups’ pedagogical styles were so different. One NET said: “They (LETs) really like to stick with the drilling and testing regimes and don’t welcome more creative influences . . . You will get frustrated if you think you are going to change things too much” (Carless, 2006, p. 333). At the same time, the local teachers complained that it took too much of their time to “communicate and co-plan” with the NETs (p. 334).

In France, NETs are accorded a certain deference due to their “natural authority,” wherein students value their “Anglophone accent” (Clapson & Hyatt, 2007, p. 629). However, it is the LETs there who have the upper hand. Whether because of the “protected status” of the
French language or that country’s ambiguous relationship with all things English, the educational system appears skewed in favor of local teachers (Clapson & Hyatt, 2007, p. 626). To receive a full-time secondary level-or-above teaching post, for example, NETs must be fluent in French.

In many places, pay levels were unequal between the two groups. As a 2006 survey of ELT salaries in East Asia reports, in China, wages for NETs ($365 to $629 U.S. per month) were triple those of the Chinese teachers ($101 to $284) working the same number of hours, while in Hong Kong, the local teachers actually earned more -- $2,077-$5,700 U.S. a month for the NETs vs. $2,300-$5,700 for the LETs (Jeon & Lee, 2006). In Japan, the salary depended on the type of school or program one was affiliated with: The Japan Exchange and Teaching program paid NETs the highest rate, at $2,600 U.S. a month, approximately equivalent to that of locals. Such discrepancies, as well as perpetuated stereotypes, further set the stage for difficulties between the groups.

**Cultural Impediments**

Students’ biases toward the inherent properties of the language itself represent another prevailing problem. Unlike France, where the hegemony of English is regarded with suspicion, or Finland, where teenagers are drawn in by the Western world’s pop culture, in Russia, a nation that reportedly has an educational ethos highly resistant to change (Sudo, 2007), there seems to be a political correctness problem. Julia Sudo, a doctoral candidate at Novosibirsk State University, undertook a survey of 56 Russian students’ attitudes toward gender usage and inclusive language. She noted that many Russian students “hold to traditional mentality, patriarchal stereotypes and sexist attitudes” (Sudo, 2007, p. 15). Therefore, she was not surprised to learn that usage of gender-inclusive language, referred to by some teachers there as “the new tendencies,” was seldom taught in Russian universities, “and even more rarely in secondary schools” (p. 16).

Resistant to another type of change, that of communicative language teaching (CLT), Bangladeshi university students in a comprehensive foundation course in English skills actively presented instructors with a distaste for the new techniques and a preference for the “lockstep, teacher-centered” audio-lingual approach they had become used to during 12 years of compulsory English classes (Chowdhury, 2003, p. 284). Many of the EFL teachers at the University of Dhaka had received training overseas. Chowdhury conducted interviews with and administered questionnaires to six of these, trained both internationally and locally, regarding the perceptions of teachers and students of CLT. Despite their Western training, teachers reported that they, as well as the students, were “culturally bound” (p. 296). The teachers felt they were attempting to transmit alien cultures and techniques, and the students, one said, “feel tempted to discard the new style and complain that the teacher is not ‘teaching’” (p. 285).

In Korea, ancient Confucianism, a religious doctrine that plays an important cultural role in that Asian nation, is particularly entrenched (Han, 2005). Confucianism stresses the qualities of propriety, etiquette, knowledge, and trust. As such, teachers are seen as all-powerful figures that must not be questioned or contradicted. Students are expected to be obedient, humble, and respectful. They, thus, prefer to learn through memorization and rote repetition, and Westerners’ attempts to teach communicatively frequently end in frustrated failure.

Han (2005) surveyed 12 adults about their attitudes toward learning English. Because Western teachers do not follow the Korean protocol of first establishing the students’ trust (called uye-ri), students felt they came across as cold and calculating. They said they liked learning from Korean-born teachers, despite the latter’s preference for rote memorization. Students nevertheless admitted their communication skills were lacking and wanted activities
where they actively use English. This contradiction seemed to place both student and teacher in a bind.

Overly Ambitious Curricula

In Finland, where (British) English is prized as the lingua franca of the scientific community, a large implementation gap was remarked upon between the curriculum envisioned by the country’s educational planners and the one that was actually experienced by learners (Sjoholm, 2004). Sjoholm examined the English proficiency and attitudes toward language learning among secondary-school students in both Swedish-language and Finnish-language settings (Finland has two official languages). Positive language attitudes stemmed mainly from English usage outside rather than inside the classroom. The “British English” that was prescribed by the curricular reform of 1994 was spurned by many students in favor of the “American English” they heard on television, computers, and music recordings.

In Argentina, where an ambitious new federal education law was enacted following financial and political upheaval, EFL teachers have complained that the reformed curriculum has made their jobs “extremely challenging” and that their training “didn’t take into account Argentina’s (harsh socio-economic) reality and context” (Zappa-Hollman, 2007, p. 624). According to a survey conducted among 32 EFL teachers (K-12) from six provinces and the autonomous Capital Federal district of Argentina, participants “identified a clear mismatch between their preservice preparation and their subsequent experience in school” (p. 622) and also expressed deep concern over violence in the classroom and lack of such basic resources as textbooks.

In China, where large educational reforms have been taking place over the past 20 years, “increased demands” in the form of new curricula, syllabuses, methodologies, and other teaching materials have brought the need for a formal in-service training program, carried out by teaching colleges overseen by a vast Ministry of Education (Hu, 2005, p. 686). The new curriculum “seems too ambitious to be feasible,” the 2005 study reported (p. 693). “There are 25 separate courses and one major research project to be completed within a single academic year” (p. 693). Despite all of that academic study (or perhaps because of it), the teacher-in-training had less than 11 contact hours with students, leaving a researcher to conclude, “The curriculum is a product of external experts’ work, and it is not clear how closely it matches the participants’ needs” (Hu, 2005, p. 693).

Conclusion

While a results-oriented environment seems to be a worldwide constant, the literature ultimately presented two sets of protagonists: the NET, negotiating an alien culture, and the LET, negotiating an alien tongue. Challenges for the NET seem to be cultural biases, salary and hiring discrepancies, and limited resources. For the LET, egregious governmental benchmarks combined with a lack of updated training and materials hinder success rates. Both groups, however, have one thing in common: their chosen field of bringing mastery of the English language and literacy to students across the globe.

The teachers should be prepared for the challenges that the literature has described. NETs should research the cultural characteristics they will be immersed in and learn to negotiate them. LETs should work with (and perhaps learn from) the native-speaking teachers in their midst. They should also be proactive in pushing for change. A worldwide standard of teaching practices and pay scales will help to solve many of these problems. But in order for governments and universities to coordinate and implement such reforms, it will no doubt be necessary for the teachers themselves to agitate for them.


References


