

## ***Competence and Capability: Rethinking the Subject English***

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As is now widely recognised, the role and status of the English language have changed radically over recent years: as both a cause and consequence of globalization it has become appropriated world-wide as an international lingua franca. There is, however, little corresponding recognition that this state of affairs might have implications for how the language is customarily taught. On the contrary, ways of thinking about English as a subject hardly seem to have changed at all. In this article, I want to suggest that we need to enquire critically into taken-for-granted pedagogic assumptions about the English subject—into how far the established ways we think about the E of TEFL or TESOL are still valid. In the course of this enquiry, I shall reconsider familiar ideas about communication and competence and argue the essential relevance of the concept of capability in our understanding of how English is used, and how the language might be taught so that it most effectively activates the process of learning how to use it.

**Keywords: globalization, English as a lingua franca, English as a subject, communication, competence, capability**

What do teachers of English do? They teach English, of course. Other teachers teach history, or geography or physics and they teach English. That is their subject. How they teach it may differ in all kinds of ways, and there is plenty of diverse opinion about the best way, but what they teach seems to be straightforward enough, and not a matter of dispute. In this paper, I want to

suggest that, on the contrary, there is a problem about what English is taught, and that his problem is at the very heart of TEFL—in Asia and everywhere else.

The English teacher's subject is English, and, in another sense of the word, English is also the subject of this article. To begin with a simple question: what do we mean by English? The question is simple, but the answer is not. Because English can obviously mean different things for different people. For people in native speaking communities in Britain, in the United States, in Australia, English is what they use quite naturally for communication in the continuity of daily life. It is an insider language, a familiar and essential part of their everyday social reality. For learners of English in classrooms it is an outsider language. It is not familiar, it is foreign. It is not at all a part of everyday social life. It does not occur naturally but has to be made to occur by teaching. It is divided into discontinuous events called lessons that are fitted into the school curriculum between other subject lessons according to administrative convenience—once on Monday afternoon, perhaps, between history and physics, once on Wednesday twice on Thursday.

On the face of it, it is obvious that what English means for its native speaker users is quite different from what it means for its non-native speaking learners. There are two realities here, and the central pedagogic problem that teachers have to contend with, and have always had to contend with, is how these two realities can be related to and reconciled with each other.

This is the problem I want to explore. I make no claim that I can resolve it. My purpose is to raise awareness of the issues that I think crucially need to be taken into account in dealing with it. It is often said that teachers need to be reflective practitioners. All I want to do is to raise questions about the subject they teach that they might reflect on, or, as some people might say, reflect about.

The first thing I think it is worth reflecting about is the orthodox taken for granted assumption that it is English as a first or native language (ENL) that should be the objective for learners to achieve. The E of ENL is essentially the same as the E of the subject: English as a foreign language (EFL) or

English to speakers of other languages (ESOL). It is ENL that is recommended as the E to be taught and tested as a subject.

So what is this ENL? We can identify three ways of describing it:

1) ENL = encoded forms

ENL is the English that has been codified as the standard language. Standard English—the English that has been described in authorized works of reference: The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, and so on. These provide norms of correctness for learners to conform to.

Note that therefore learners are required to do what most native speakers do not do. Standard English is what grammarians and dictionary makers describe not what most NSs actually use—it is an idealization, an abstraction. But according to orthodox pedagogic thinking, if learners are to be linguistically competent, their English has to be accurate, they have to conform to the Standard, their English has to be correct: competence = conformity = correctness.

2) ENL = communicative functions

With the so-called structural approach, the E of the subject is the encoded language, the forms of the standard language, and their encoded semantic meaning. With the communicative approach comes a change of subject. Now the focus is on how these forms are put to communicative use: their pragmatic function. The objective now is *communicative competence*.

But again this is assumed to be the native speaker's communicative competence. Learners are induced to learn how native speaker communities use their language as appropriate to *their* social contexts—*their* acts of communication—how *they*, the native speakers, express greetings, apologies, agreements, disagreements, promises, and so on. Learners are taught how to communicate, but only how to communicate like native speakers, and their communication is required not only to be appropriate in reference to pragmatic convention but also to correct in reference to the linguistic rules of

the standard language. They have to communicate *on* NS terms and *in* NS terms. It is not enough for them to use their English resources to get their meaning across in pragmatically effective ways: they have to use their English accurately as well. Communicative function has to correspond with correct linguistic form.

In the currently favoured version of this approach, task-based language teaching, the activities that learners are taught to engage in are said to focus primarily on meaning rather than form but the meanings that they express still have to conform to norms of correctness and conventional native speaker usage. It is not enough for learners to achieve a communicatively successful outcome on their own terms, the outcome has to match up to native speaker standards. So there is not really a primary focus on meaning as such but on form—the approved native speaker form that the meaning takes.

### 3) ENL = authentic usage

In recent years there has appeared a third way of thinking of ENL which represents it in terms not of native speaker competence but of native speaker performance. With the advent of the computer, corpus linguistics is now able to reveal in detail patterns of NS usage—idiomatic patterns of linguistic forms that NSs have actually produced. This, it is said, represents real or authentic English usage. So since the objective of learning is to acquire the actual linguistic behavior of NSs, then learners should, it is argued, be required to conform to the norm of these patterns of usage as well. The teaching objective now is to get learners to acquire not only the correct linguistic forms of standard English, and not only the conventional communicative functions that these forms can be used to express, but also the actual idiomatic wordings that native speakers produce as revealed by a corpus. And so we get the corpus based *Collins COBUILD dictionary* which claims to help learners with “real” English, and corpus based *Cambridge Grammar of English* which carries on its cover a “real English guarantee”.

So what is usually recommended as the English that teachers should teach as a subject is the English that is represented by standard encoded forms, by

its communicative functions and its authentic performance in native speaker contexts of use. It is the English that native speakers know and use—their competence, their performance, their conventions of usage (i.e., EFL = ENL).

This is the English to be taught and the English that learners are required to conform to. If they do not conform they are wrong. And there are plenty of books around that will tell them so. To take one example, at the beginning of Michael Swan's authoritative reference book *Practical English Usage* (Swan, 2005), there are a number of pages with the heading printed in red—red for danger—Don't say it! 130 common mistakes. Mistakes like:

It's often raining here  
It can rain this evening  
I gave to her my address  
Please explain me what you want  
I object to tell them my age  
No doubt the world is getting warmer  
The number of the unemployed is going up  
I have much money

Don't say it! But learners do say it—and keep on saying it in spite of being told not to.

Although it is these norms of native speaker English that are taught, it is not the English that is learned. As every teacher knows, learners stubbornly refuse to do what they are told and persistently fail to conform to these norms of correctness and conventional usage. English taught as a foreign language ETFL is not the same as English learned as a foreign language ELFL (i.e., ETFL ≠ ELFL).

Teachers set up ENL as the target language and try to help learners to hit the target but most of them miss it. All kinds of new methods and approaches have been proposed over the years to improve the learners' aim—the structural approach, the natural approach, communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, content and language integrated learning, all trying,

and trying in vain, to get learners to conform to ENL norms and achieve NS competence.

So if learners do not learn ENL, why do we keep on trying to teach it? One answer is that only if you conform to these norms can you use the language effectively as communication.

But none of these things that learners are told they must not say actually poses any problem of communication. And millions of people using English as an international means of communication, as a global lingua franca, produce “mistakes” of this kind and yet achieve communication appropriate to their purposes. We find such non-conformities in English usage all over the world—face to face exchanges, interactions over the internet, in business transactions, diplomatic negotiations, and international conferences. When, for example, you listen to presentations in international conferences, you will hear plenty of these non-conformities, these so-called ‘mistakes’. So teachers themselves will be making the same kind of ‘mistakes’ that they keep on telling their students not to make. This is not a criticism—on the contrary, it is simply a recognition that this is what English users quite naturally do in the real world. The use of English as a lingua franca—ELF—often, indeed usually, does not at all correspond with the norms of ENL. The globalized use of English as a lingua franca represents a different reality—a reality very different from that of the native speaker.

Let me give you one example. Here is Ban Ki-Moon, the Secretary General of the United Nations replying to a question in an interview about globalization

...the world is *going through* global communication and globalizations. The China is number 2 economic power in the world...Combined economic power I think they can play greater role than they have been doing *now*. While economic situation in Europe and other places are *going down* there is again expectation that the countries in this region can play better and greater role in the global *situation*...

Ban Ki-Moon obviously has not acquired NS competence—or at least if he has, he does not act upon it. What he says is full of the kind of mistakes that teachers are told they must correct. *Globalization* is a non-countable noun that cannot be made into a plural. Don't say *globalizations*. Don't leave articles out of noun phrases: don't say *The China is number 2*, say *China is the number 2*. Don't say *play greater role*, say *play a greater role*. And so on.

And it is not only that what Ban Ki-Moon says is ungrammatical and so does not conform to the norm of correctness. It does not conform to the norm of NS idiomatic usage either. To an NS ear, for example, there are oddities of phrase here. The world is *going through global communication*? The world is *experiencing, or, going through a process* of global communication would be more idiomatically usual. The economic situation in Europe is *going down*—no that does not sound right. It should be something like the economic situation is *deteriorating*. And so we could correct Ban Ki-Moon's ELF and make it like ENL. This, we might say, is what he should have said:

...the world is going through a process of globalization and global communication. China is the number 2 economic power in the world...I think that combined economic power can play a greater role than it has been doing up to now. While the economic situation in Europe and other places is deteriorating there is again an expectation that the countries in this region can play a better and greater role in global affairs.

We might suggest that the Director General of the United Nations might take English lessons to make him more competent, or at least to improve his performance, and while we are at it we might do some remedial work on his pronunciation as well, which also falls well short of NS standards. In this way we might hope to make his English more like that of a native speaker from Britain, the United States, or Australia.

But why should he be required to use English like an Englishman, or American or Australian. He is a Korean, so why should he not be a Korean in

English. Why should he deny his identity and assume the identity of somebody else? Ban Ki-Moon's English can be said to be incompetent in that it does not conform to NS norms, but this does not make him incapable of communicating. On the contrary, the interviewer has no problem understanding what he has to say—she does not say, *excuse me Secretary General, I think what you want to say is Countries in this region can play a better and greater role...the economic situation is not are, deteriorating, not going down.*

It is obvious that though Ban Ki-Moon's performance does not measure up to NS competence, it nevertheless shows him to have acquired considerable communicative capability. He would not otherwise be able to do his job, and there is no other job I can think of that makes such challenging demands on the use of English as a communicative resource. You may call his English defective in form, but it is nevertheless effective in function.

So where does his communicative capability come from? Like most other users of ELF, Ban Ki-Moon has been taught English at school. According to Wikipedia, he was “a star student, particularly in the English language”, and furthermore he has a Master's degree from Harvard. But the English that he puts to use so effectively is not ENL—the native speaker English he has presumably been taught, it is not ETFL. What he puts to use is English as a lingua franca, ELF, which corresponds more closely to the English he has learned, ELFL. So ELFL can be said to contain ELF within it, *ELFL*.

What Ban Ki-Moon has done is what countless numbers of other users of English as a lingua franca have done, namely to subvert what they have been taught as competence so as to convert it into capability (for further discussion on the concept of capability see Widdowson, 2003). Of course, some learners succeed in subverting and converting better than others. After all, to do so means to resist all the institutional pressures on them to conform, and there are penalties for not conforming. Non-conformity is associated with failure. So the development of ELF capability is inhibited by the teaching of ENL competence.

So why is it, we need to ask, that in spite of all these pressures, in spite of



all the coursebooks and reference books of the kind that you will find on display in the publishers exhibits at conferences, in spite of all the different approaches and techniques that teachers are recommended to follow, learners still do not learn what they are taught? The answer I suggest is not that we have not yet found the way to get them to hit the target but that we getting them to aim at the wrong target and this is because these norms of correctness and NS usage represent a reality that learners cannot engage with because it is radically different from their own.

To go back to the norm of authentic usage as revealed by corpora, for example, that learners are recommended to conform to. As one of its advocates puts it:

The language of the corpus is, above all, real, and what is it that all language learners want, other than ‘real’ contact with the target language? (McCarthy, 2001, p. 128)

But how “real” can the learners’ contact with actually performed “target language” really be? How, for example, would they make contact with the following sample taken from a corpus that McCarthy himself has been involved in assembling: a transcript of an authentic NS conversation.

S1. Now I think you’d better start the rice  
S2. Yeah...what you got there?  
*(4 seconds pause)*  
S2. Will it all fit in the one?  
S1. No you’ll have to do two separate ones  
S3. Right...what next?  
*(17 seconds pause)*  
S3. Foreign body in there  
S2. It’s the raisins

(Carter & McCarthy, 1997)

So what kind of contact would learners of English make with this text? In the first place, there are some things that would make it difficult for any reader, let alone learners, to connect with the text at all. “Will it all fit in the one? Will all *what* fit in the one *what*?” What are these people actually referring to? “Foreign body in there.” In *where*? And what’s all this about a foreign body.

These difficulties arise because what we have here is a text without the context that would make it real for the participants in this interaction. The insider participants in this conversation are in the know about the context and can connect up with it. Outsiders like us are not in the know and cannot make the connection.

So contact with “real” language does not make it real for you unless you can replicate the context which gave it reality in the first place. If, as a learner, you are not in the know about what is going on, if you cannot *realize* what these people are referring to with these fragments of language, and how they are using them to relate to each other and to achieve their communicative purposes, then the fragments simply become a collection of linguistic forms—an interrogative sentence here, a noun phrase there. All you can do is focus on the forms isolated from their communicative function. What is real for these NS users is not at all real for NNS learners (for further discussion see Widdowson, 2003, 2012).

And it is how learners engage with English to make it real for themselves that is crucial. So how would they do this? They can only do it, I suggest, by relating the language to their own reality rather than trying to relate it to somebody else’s.

Now a key part of that reality is the learners’ experience of their own language. This is generally suppressed in ETFL but is active in ELFL because learners will quite naturally draw on this experience in their processing of this other language. They know how their own language works and will be naturally inclined to suppose that English works in the same kind of way—that what matters about linguistic form is how it gets adapted to serve a communicative function, that some parts of language carry more

communicative weight than others, that many features of correctness are communicatively redundant and only serve as conventional markers of social identity in a particular community and have no real significance elsewhere. So something tells them—their own experience of language tells them—that correctness is not always needed for effective communication: that they can get by without it. Most of the so-called mistakes that are so persistent and which teachers spend so much time trying to eradicate have little if any communicative value—this is why learners keep on making them. They see no point in correction.

And we need to note that some of these so-called mistakes show that learners are capable of making creative use of the unused potential of English, and so are evidence of learning beyond conformity. The *Cambridge Grammar of English* claims to be a comprehensive guide to contemporary English: as I mentioned earlier, it carries on its cover a “Real English guarantee”. It tells us, for example, that the expression ‘discuss about’ is wrong.

*About* is not used with the verb *discuss*. (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 23)

But learners do say “discuss about” as do many users of English as a lingua franca. So why do they do it? If you can quite “correctly” have a *discussion about* something and you can *think about* something, and *talk about* something, so *discuss about* would seem entirely regular. And this is not an isolated example: if, for example, you can, correctly, *complain about* something, why should *explain about* something be wrong? The same applies to *reflect about*. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary will tell you that that you can reflect *on* something and reflect *upon* something but there is no mention of reflect about, so learners, deferring to this authority, will assume it is incorrect. Don’t say it! But learners keep on saying it. And not just learners—I have said reflect about myself in this article. And the expression ‘discuss about’ is of frequent occurrence in the use of English as a lingua franca (see Seidlhofer 2011). The point is that it is entirely natural to exploit the regularity within

English in this way. What both learners and users are doing when they produce these forms is making strategic use of an existing encoding convention. And there is no negative effect on communication.

ELF users like Ban Ki-Moon, even if they know what the NS norms are, do not act upon their knowledge because in their contexts of use and for their purposes they are quite capable of making effective use of their linguistic resources without conforming to these norms. And this exploitation of the potential of the language is a continuing process. If and when contexts and purposes arise which do require a closer conformity to NS norms, then this capability for use will enable ELF users quite naturally to adjust their language accordingly. A capability for language use is also a capability for further language learning. Linguistic forms serve communicative functions. As Michael Halliday puts it:

The particular form taken by the grammatical systems of language is closely related to the social and personal needs that language is required to serve. (Halliday, 1970, p. 142)

It follows from this that as the social and personal needs of users of English worldwide change, so the form of the language will naturally change accordingly. NS competence is necessarily tied in with the contexts of use and the communicative purposes of NS communities, so it must also follow that if English is used by other people in different contexts and for different purposes, this competence no longer corresponds with their social and personal needs.

I began this article by raising the question of *what* teachers of English teach, and this, I have argued, leads us to think about *who* they are teaching it to. They are inter-dependently related, and how the subject “English” is conceived crucially depends on how this relationship is defined. The established way of thinking about the subject has been to give primacy to the *what* as the dominant factor in the relationship, with the *who* in a subordinate dependent role. What I have suggested is that this dependency should be

reversed. One way of putting this is by reference to the meaning of the verb “to teach.” Grammatically it can take two objects, separately or combined. Separately we can either have:

Teachers teach something: Physics, History, English.

Or

Teachers teach somebody: Students/pupils.

And these sentences can be grammatically combined in two different ways. One way:

Teachers teach English to students.

Here English is the direct object and is, one might say, given primacy. This I suggest is how the teaching of English is generally conceived with the primary focus on what is to be taught, what, defined in NS terms, is to be unilaterally transmitted to students: take it or leave it. But another combination is possible:

Teachers teach students English.

Here the focus is on the students. The dependencies, one might say, are reversed: instead of thinking first of the language to be taught and making students adapt to it, you think of the students first and make the language adapt to them. Another way of putting this is by reference to the acronym *TESOL*. This, as the name of a well known association, stands for Teachers of English *to* Speakers of Other Languages. This little preposition, *to*, implies the very order of priority that I am arguing should be reversed: it is English *for* Speakers of Other Languages that needs to be taught: not an established and approved native speaker language which is unilaterally imposed but language they can naturally engage with as a communicative resource and that they can associate with their “other” languages, and so relates to their

reality and to their requirements. Even such a small and seemingly trivial change of preposition might, by exploring its possible implications, lead to the kind of rethinking about the subject I have been arguing for.

To summarize, the orthodox assumption, or received wisdom of TEFL—in Asia and everywhere else—is that the English to be taught is English as a native language: ENL. The objective is to get learners to conform to norms of correctness and usage and so achieve NS competence.

But this English that is *taught* as a foreign language ETFL is not what is actually *learned* as a foreign language ELFL. In spite of all kinds of expert recommendations about how to get learners to conform and achieve this competence in the so-called target language, most learners do not do so. Where ELFL does not match up with ETFL it is considered a failure. Little if any credit is given to ELFL since most assessment is based on what is taught not on what is learned.

The reason why learners do not conform, I suggested, is because ENL represents a reality that they cannot engage with because it is radically different from theirs. They will naturally seek to relate English the foreign language to the familiar experience of their own language and that this leads them instinctively to focus on those aspects of English that have most value as a communicative resource.

Consequently, what is learned can be put to effective use when learners become users of English as a lingua franca. Their incompetence does not make them incapable as communicators. They have clearly learned a strategic capability for using the linguistic resources of English adapting them as appropriate to the various contexts and for the various purposes of global communication.

Earlier, I referred to two realities. The reality of ENL as an insider language and the reality of EFL as an outsider language and that the essential problem of TEFL as a subject was how these two realities could be related. My general point is that if we continue to base the subject TEFL on ENL then the realities will always be unrelated and cannot be reconciled. ELFL will always be at odds with ETFL and the result will always be, in varying

degrees, a pedagogy of failure.

But we can rethink the subject as it has been traditionally defined. And we can do this by taking account of a third reality that I talked about. This is the reality of English as a lingua franca, English as used across Asian and all other contexts in our globalized world, and which reveals quite clearly how users of the language are capable of effective communication without conforming to the norms of ENL. This capability, I have argued, has its origins in the learning of English as a foreign language—that ELF and ELFL are closely related. English now becomes more like an insider language—its features made less foreign and more familiar, related more closely to the learners’ own reality. There has been much talk about learner autonomy, about teachers allowing learners to take the initiative. This way of thinking of the subject, which gives primacy to *who* rather than *what* is to be taught, would be a way of putting such ideas into practice.

So one way of rethinking our subject is to take our bearings not from ENL but from ELF, and to abandon the objective of NS competence in favour of encouraging and supporting the natural development in learners of communicative capability. TEFL would then not be a matter of teaching learners how to correctly accumulate quantities of language but essentially how to engage in the process of what has been called languaging (e.g., Swain, 2006)—the strategic use of the resources of English to express themselves and communicate with others (for further discussion see Seidlhofer, 2011).

Such rethinking of course poses considerable challenges. But it also offers opportunities to make TEFL in Asia, and elsewhere, more effective and realistic as a subject, more real for learners, and more attuned to the changed role of English in a world which “is going through global communication and globalizations,” to quote the words of a user of English as a lingua franca, and surely a role-model for any learner of English, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon.

I cannot claim to speak with anything like the same authority. But I hope I have said something in this article that teachers of English will feel challenges not only to *think about* but also to *reflect about*, not only to *talk*

*about*, but also to *discuss about* among themselves as professional practitioners critically concerned with the subject they teach.

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