

**EXPOSING YOUNG CHILDREN TO ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: THE
EMERGING ROLE OF WORLD ENGLISH**

**A EXPOSIÇÃO DE CRIANÇAS AO INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA: O
PAPEL EMERGENTE DO *WORLD ENGLISH***

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RESUMO: O foco deste artigo recai na aquisição da linguagem por crianças em contextos sociais multilíngues e em suas implicações para a aprendizagem de línguas de um modo geral. Toma-se aqui como pressuposto que a pesquisa na área em questão sofre restrições pelo fato de embasar-se, quase em sua totalidade, em experiências de falantes monolíngües frente à aquisição da única língua que lhes é colocada à sua disposição. Por conseqüência, o repertório lingüístico de um falante multilíngüe é então visto como um caso especial ou um desvio frente ao repertório do falante monolíngüe. Aponta-se aqui para a necessidade de que se o multilinguismo seja abordado sob outra perspectiva levando-se em conta o fenômeno do “World English”. Acredita-se que este, por sua vez, possa somente ser compreendido a partir de sua concepção como uma língua em constante transformação, que se nutre do contato contínuo e da influência recíproca entre línguas diferentes.

Palavras-chave: aquisição/aprendizagem de línguas; multilinguismo; *World English*; globalização.

ABSTRACT: The focus of this paper is on language acquisition by young children in contexts of societal multilingualism and what lessons can be learned from it for language learning in general. It is argued that research in this area is hampered by the fact that it is almost exclusively based on a monolingual's experience of acquiring the only language they have at their disposal. By implication, then, a multilingual person's linguistic repertoire is seen as a special case of, or a departure from, the monolingual's. The case for taking a fresh look at societal multilingualism is made by considering the phenomenon of 'World English' which, it is argued, can only be understood by approaching it as a language in the making that draws its sustenance from situations where different languages are in constant contact, influencing one another.

Keywords: language acquisition/learning – societal multilingualism – World English - globalization

**1. CHILDREN'S EDUCATION: SOME NAGGING WORRIES AND PERSISTENT
DOUBTS**

When it comes to the topic of the education of young children, there is no dearth of unresolved questions. When is a toddler old enough to learn and be subjected to some form of formal teaching? Is there a minimum age before which any teaching, if undertaken full steam, is likely to be counter-productive and stunt rather than aid the child's otherwise

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natural growth to a healthy adolescent and, subsequently, to a normal adult? By subjecting it to the rigors of methodic pedagogy, no matter how flexible and custom-made the methodology employed may be claimed to be for the specific needs, are we not depriving the child of the many more pleasurable things in life—play and pastime, for instance—that a normal human being at such a tender age is entitled to? These are but a handful of questions that crop up, dividing the scholarly community and landing its members in seemingly endless debates.

Those who passionately believe that children are ready and fully equipped with the basic wherewithal (i. e. never too immature) to learn anything we want them to learn often cite as irrefutable evidence for their claim the discovery that, as a matter of fact, learning starts, albeit on an informal basis, right from the days when, as still a tiny fetus in its mother's womb, an infant is attentive to everything happening around it and, in a way, is already *learning* from it. Yes, that's indeed true as far as it goes and fresh evidence from scientific research only keeps accruing. But, what about *formal* teaching? On this issue, the research findings are far from as clear-cut and scholars have plenty of empirical studies and anecdotal evidence to back their disparate and conflicting claims and be at daggers drawn with one another.

2. ZEROING IN ON LANGUAGE

Problems get only compounded as we turn the focus of our attention on language learning in early childhood. Thanks to the influential work of Chomsky, it is today part of our received 'common sense' that learning one's own first language is no problem. Rather, many of us believe today that it is as natural for an infant to learn its first language as it is for it to start breathing as soon as it is born and, later on, in due course, to start walking (provided, it is added, the right "triggering" experiences are not denied to it). Following in the footsteps of Krashen (*passim*, but especially 1981), many also make a distinction between 'language acquisition' and 'language learning', the former being a subconscious process while the later is fully conscious. Accordingly, children do not learn their first language; they acquire it. Adults usually learn their second language; but may also acquire it the way children do. In his own words, Krashen's brain-child called the Monitor Theory "hypothesizes that adults have two independent systems for developing ability in second languages, subconscious language *acquisition* and conscious language *learning*, and that these systems are interrelated in a definite way: subconscious acquisition appears to be far more important." (p. 1)

In his turn, Chomsky himself went on to claim categorically that there is no such thing as *teaching* a first language properly speaking because in point of fact children do not so much as *learn* their first language as such. "Instead languages [as it were] manifest themselves as part of an individual's natural growth from infancy to adulthood" (Rajagopalan, 2003). The idea itself is not new and may be traced back to as early as Plato who claimed: "what we call learning is really just recollection" (*Phaedo* 72e). Chomsky's offhand and unguarded confession to being "rather sceptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology"

(CHOMSKY, 1966, p.43) only made things worse by confounding an entire generation of his die-hard acolytes. Many found themselves scrambling for explanations and making amends for the confusion already created (COOK, 1985; NEWMAYER, 1982).

When all was said and done, the final message that got percolated through to the common sense perception of things was that the teaching of a second language must be reserved for the adults, if at all. Children should, under no circumstance, be subjected to the teaching of a second language, for it would amount to an act of violence, may interfere with the process of their linguistic maturation and may end up jeopardizing their natural growth into linguistic maturity. Things have begun to show welcome signs of change, but suspicions still lurk in many quarters and it is not difficult to come across concerned parents who ask themselves if it is prudent to send their children to language schools at an early age.

3. SOME MYTHS ABOUT LANGUAGES AND HOW THEY ARE ACQUIRED/LEARNED

With regard to language, expert and lay opinions are frequently poles apart (RAJAGOPALAN, 2004a and b), but what is often not perceived or fully appreciated is that the so-called lay opinion of today is very often nothing but the expert opinion of yesteryears (RAJAGOPALAN, 2005, p. 101). In its turn, the so-called expert opinion also draws on the lay opinion or folklore or what has been come to be referred to, often pejoratively, as 'folk linguistics'. Bloomfield noticed this as early as 1944, when he observed:

Traditional lore [...] is occasionally put into literary form and developed in detail, as in the well known treatise of Richard Grant White, *Words and Their Uses, Past and Present: a Study of the English Language* (NEW YORK, 1870), (BLOOMFIELD, 1944).

It is not surprising at all therefore that many popular views concerning language and the best way to learn it are of a piece with the expert opinion. For instance, an abiding and deeply-entrenched popular view of language learning is that children are ideally raised in monolingual environments. In a recent paper, Nigel Love called it "the discourse of monoglot normality" (LOVE, 2009, p. 31). This discourse blissfully turns a blind eye to the undeniable fact that, as of today, there are many more bi(multi-)linguals in the world than there are monolinguals and so, if for nothing else, on statistical grounds alone such a claim must be suspect. And with the large-scale movement of entire chunks of populations on the move across the world (due to the ongoing process of globalization and its attendant problems such as economic migration), those numbers are currently growing exponentially.

In her book *Bilingualism*, Romaine (1995[1989], p. 1) stated right at the very outset:

It would certainly be odd to encounter a book with the title *Monolingualism*. However, it is precisely a monolingual perspective which modern linguistic theory takes as its starting point in dealing with basic analytic problems such as the construction of grammars and the nature of competence.

As proof for her claim, she goes on to cite the most famous and, by all means, the most-quoted of Chomsky's claims "Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-hearer" And so forth.

4. THE WIDESPREAD PREVALENCE OF SOCIETAL BI-(MULTI-)LINGUALISM

The fact of the matter is that, no matter what the theoretically oriented (or theoretically obsessed?) linguists might claim from the air-conditioned comfort of their office spaces, the majority of language learning environments worldwide are multilingual. Furthermore, the environments in which the people involved grow up are *societally* multilingual.

Edwards (2004) observes that in a metropolitan city such as London there are today upwards of 200 languages spoken. This may strike many of us as indeed intriguing, because we have got used to regarding countries like Great Britain as rigorously monolingual—a myth long exploded by Stubbs (1986) who insisted that the country is in reality functionally multilingual. As I wrote in Rajagopalan (2007a, p. 347),

Multilingualism has long been a topic of mixed reactions and varied and often conflicting appraisals. At the individual level it is typically seen as an asset, a mark of superior intelligence and of cultural finesse. Societal multilingualism, i.e. a society as a whole conducting its day-to-day routine with the help of two or three languages, is nevertheless often viewed as a social problem and a stumbling block in the way of economic progress and stability.

Societal multilingualism differs from individual cases of multilingualism in that the use of the several languages that make up the multilingual mix is neither haphazard nor arbitrary, but has its roots deep in history and code-switching, which is an integral part of the linguistic compartment of the society as a whole is, to a considerable extent, rule-governed. But the fact remains that, as of today, even many of the so-called sociolinguists have failed to grasp the inherent complexities of societal multilingualism in their entirety.

5. THE STATUS OF INDIVIDUAL LANGUAGES IN SOCIETAL MULTILINGUALISM

To the outsiders, especially those who regard societally multilingual realities from the ‘etic’ perspective of non-participant observers and armed with concepts and categories forged from a monolingual standpoint, the picture presented by these societies is somewhat chaotic and unmanageably cumbersome. Many would even regard them as bordering on the dysfunctional. Many others would regard the linguistic demands made by the society on the individual in such environments as unduly taxing and burdensome. The underlying logic would seem to be: if a single language is already unevenly distributed among the members of a given society, imagine the presence of two or more languages that are operative in one and the same society! There are others who see the presence of multilingualism as a curse upon societies, impeding their progress and economic development.

As already pointed out, such impressions are created only to the extent that we insist on taking a rigorously monolingual perspective as our point of departure. Once we take an ‘emic’ point of view, a completely different picture begins to emerge. In a societally multilingual society the languages that take part in the overall mix form a neat mosaic, with each of those languages having a more or less preordained and fairly predictable role. Functionally, they dovetail into one another to form a composite whole. An important part of being communicatively competent in such a society is being reasonably proficient in

each of those languages but, even more importantly, knowing when to use one language rather than another. In this respect, a speaker's capacity to code-switch from one language to another is analogous to that of the typical speaker in any monolingual community to move from one register to another in an orderly fashion. He or she does it naturally and effortlessly most of the time, but a miscalculation at any moment can land the speaker in a veritable *faux pas*.

6. THE EMERGENCE OF 'WORLD ENGLISH' IN A COMMUNICATIVELY ENTANGLED WORLD

Over the past several years, I have been looking into the emergence worldwide of a most curious linguistic phenomenon called 'World English' (RAJAGOPALAN, 1999, 2004c, 2005b and c, 2006, 2007b and c, 2008, 2009a and b, forthcoming-1). It is as yet a language very much in the making and practically everything about it is right now up for the grabs. But what one can say with a reasonable amount of certainty is that its defining trait is hybridity at an unprecedented level. Originally, of course, it started off as English, just plain English, as it was spoken in good old Albion. It embarked on its journey worldwide with the rise of the British empire, dating back to the early 17th century and reaching its apex towards the end of the 19th. But then the price its speakers had to pay was to witness it slowly but steadily slipping out of their control.

Here it is important to bear in mind the crucial difference between settler colonialism and exploitation colonialism. In its first great expansion to the four corners of the earth, English was largely confined to its so-called settler colonies like America, Australia, and New Zealand. Settler colonies are the result of organized emigration of large populations *en masse* from the mother country. These settlers carry with them their native customs and habits, including language, and endeavor to preserve them intact and, if that becomes difficult, adapt them to their new habitats. They either exterminate the local populations already there or decimate them to numbers that no longer represent a threat to their existence or ways of living. This is what characterizes them as belonging to Kachru's 'internal circle' (KACHRU, 1985)

But this is a far cry from the colonies which were established purely for the purpose of daylight robbery and unabashed plundering of alien wealth. In the colonies of Africa and Asia where Britain managed to spread its tentacles, English inevitably came into close contact with local languages, many of which had millions of speakers and literatures dating back to pre-Christian era. The inevitable outcome of this cultural encounter was hybridity. Though it must be noted that hybridity was by no means exclusive to the new 'Englishes' of Asia and Africa (cf. BIESWANGER, 2004; DUSZAK and OKULSKA, 2004). As I argue elsewhere (RAJAGOPALAN, forthcoming -2), it was always already there, right from the days when Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) developed into Modern English.

But colonial contact also caused hundreds of pidgin languages to spring up and mushroom in different parts of the world. By the middle of the 19th century, these languages—hybrid *par excellence*—were too numerous to be ignored. Kaye and Tosco (2001) observe that, initially at least, many scholars preferred to brush them aside as 'linguistic monstrosities'

or accidental aberrations, rather than holding a key to a proper understanding of the very idea of language.

It is unfortunate that many early writers on pidgins and creoles considered them “tropicisms” or amusing sources of cock-tail party jokes or tidbit-type humorous, anecdotal information. One can only imagine, e.g., the frivolous hilarity which must have been present during a luncheon or dinner party somewhere in the Pacific when one was informed that the word for ‘piano’ in Pacific Pidgin English (according to a 1969 dictionary) was *bigpela bokis bilong krait aim yu paitim na kikim em* (big fellow box belong cry time you fight him and kick him) or that a ‘helicopter’ is *mixmaster bilong Jesus Christ* (KAYE and TOSCO, 2001, p. 12).

7. WHAT ‘WORLD ENGLISH’ CAN TEACH US ABOUT EFL

McKay (2006: 114) has recently made a forceful case for her thesis that “current changes in the nature of English and English language learners warrant a re-evaluation of two widely accepted notions of ELT curriculum development: namely, that the goal of English learning is native-speaker competence and that the native-speaker culture should inform instructional materials and teaching methods” (RAJAGOPALAN, 2005e, p. 17). Although the putatively unassailable authority of the figure of the native speaker has been questioned by many researchers (cf. PAIKEDAY, 1985; RAJAGOPALAN, 1997; RAMPTON, 1990; CANAGARAJAH, 1999; COOK, 1999; GRADDOL, 1999), the fact remains that there are many scholars (for example, DAVIES, 2003; WATERS, 2007) still trying to resurrect the now defunct, or at the very least moribund, native speaker and restore him/her to their former glory, with such last-ditch efforts meeting with equally vehement ripostes (cf. RAJAGOPALAN, 2007c; KABEL, 2009). As Hayes (2009) points out, however, much still needs to be done by way of debunking the mystique around the figure of the native speaker and also empowering non-native teachers of English all over the world (see also RAJAGOPALAN, 2005b).

But there are some welcome changes already in the air. The commodity fetishism around the figure of the native-speaker is mostly a thing of the past and, as McKay rightly points out, very few people think today that a native competence is what they should aspire to or set up as a desirable goal in learning a foreign language. But the second part of her claim seems to be far more resistant. Many are still reluctant to give up the idea that the native culture is what should inform language teaching materials. Now, this is a matter of fundamental importance. In fact, as recent research by Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) shows, learning contents and materials ranked top among what have been referred to as factors of ‘demotivation’ for EFL students. Their research primarily took into account reactions from a group of Japanese students, but it is fairly likely that similar results could be expected from surveys in other parts of the world.

8. ‘WORLD ENGLISH’ IN A MULTILINGUAL MIX AND ITS DEFINING FLUIDITY

The fundamental difference between the English language spoken in monoglot households and World English as it is spoken around the world is that the latter is spoken

and nurtured, as we have seen, as part of a multilingual mix. On the issue of growing multilingualism in the world, particularly in the context of globalization, here is what Kramsch and Whiteside (2008, p. 643) have to say:

[...] the increasingly multilingual and multicultural nature of global exchanges is raising questions about the traditionally monolingual and monocultural nature of language education, and its modernist orientation.

This has the inevitable consequence that it is constantly being affected by the other languages that participate in the speakers' overall linguistic repertoires. As only to be expected, it takes on different hues and shades, depending on the specific characteristics of each of these circumstances.

However, as soon as one spells out these properties of this really weird phenomenon called 'World English', a typical reaction from those who are incredulous by nature and doomsday pundits by habit is this: doesn't it make the language somewhat amorphous and hence bereft of a uniform code, rendering it unfit to take on the role of a world language? For instance, Bamgbose (1998), an enthusiast for the legitimation of postcolonial new Englishes, came up with this rather surprising remark:

[...] as long as non-native English norms remain uncoded, they cannot become a point of reference for usage and acceptance (BAMGBOSE, 1998, p. 5).

And he goes on hammering home what he sees as "a prerequisite for acceptance" (SEIDLHOFER, 2006, p. 43) as a world language. Here is what he has to say by way of shoring up his earlier remark:

Crucial to the entrenchment of innovations and non-native norms is codification. Without it users will be uncertain about what is and what is not correct and, by default, such doubts are bound to be resolved on the basis of existing codified norms, which are derived from an exonormative standard (BAMGBOSE, 1998, p. 12).

Several comments are in order here. To say that codification is what guarantees the success of a language as a means of wider communication is like putting the cart before the horse. Historians of language have long known that codification and standardization are excrescences that are introduced long after people have gone about their day-to-day business of interacting with one another. Wright (2004) has meticulously traced the history of Europe's major 'codified' languages and stated that up until as late as the 15th century, there were no clear-cut boundaries among the languages spoken over vast swathes of land. These boundaries were only demarcated with the rise of nationalism and the birth of modern nation-states. Differences among distinct languages began to emerge (or, rather, be highlighted) as a result and be accentuated with the help of normative grammars, giving rise to the long tradition of 'grammar grind' in Europe and elsewhere—the constant nightmare of generations of school boys and girls. The moral of the story is that codification was the result of the political exigencies of the moment, not a precondition for people to interact with one another—which they did and continue to do irrespective of whether or not the languages available to them have been codified.

In other words, the readiness to communicate to one another is what matters in the end. Language is consequent upon the readiness and disposition to talk to one another, and not the precondition thereof (RAJAGOPALAN, 2001). Perhaps no one else realizes this early on in life more vividly than the young child who is making its linguistic *debut* on the world stage. Its only interest is in getting on with those in its immediate contact, the ones with whom it must establish some kind of rapport if it is to survive the harsh realities of life. For the young child, it is of least concern whether or not a language is codified, or even whether there is such a thing as a language available to it. It makes no distinction between a language and its dialects, between a language and others similar to it or distinct from it, or for that matter, between a language and a collection of mutually distinct languages forming a composite whole from a communicative point of view.

And, most importantly, if there is no language already available for the purpose of communicating with those it is interested in establishing a working rapport with, the child has no problem whatsoever in *inventing* one—as anyone who has had to leave a toddler at a crèche for kids from different linguistic backgrounds must know from first hand experience.

What has all this to do with teaching English as a foreign language and the phenomenon of World English, one might begin to wonder at this stage. My answer to that query would be: just about everything. The famous line from the English poet William Wordsworth “The Child is father of the Man” may be seen as applying with great propriety to the case of World English, for the way the young child goes about the business of managing its way amidst the cacophony of noises that greets it as it comes into the world does provide us with some insight into the workings of World English among adults across the world, belonging to different linguistic backgrounds.

9. LETTING THE TODDLER FIND IN ITS OWN WAY IN WORLD ENGLISH

Rather than worry about how we should stage-manage our children’s foreign language learning and what method we should employ in order to best achieve our goals, we should be concentrating on *letting the child grow up naturally in the languages* in which we would like them to achieve a reasonable mastery. For, after all, it is they who have to master the foreign language and make it their own, not the other way around—as it often happens in the case of many adult learners, over-zealous about learning it at any cost (RAJAGOPALAN, 2005d).

World English is driven primarily by the desire to communicate. No one is bothered about the split infinitive or dangling modifiers or nominative absolutes or whatever it is that self-styled guardians of linguistic purity are used to brandishing as deserving of total prohibition. Very often, World English is a nonce language in the true sense of the word. It happens, for instance, every time a telephone is dialed in Brazil’s cattle-farming state of Mato Grosso and the call is answered by someone in a remote, godforsaken corner of mainland China. Both parties are eager to close a business transaction and will leave no stone unturned in their joint, cooperative effort to make sense of one another, against all odds. And the beauty of it all is that they do succeed in their efforts, as do millions of others around the world. They do this by getting across to each other in World English, a language

being fashioned even as it is being spoken. There are no fixed rules of the game; the rules, if there are any, are being negotiated even as the game is in progress. Mind you, this does not make it any the less of a language; though it does reflect the making of a language or of a language as it is being fashioned.

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

If anyone wants to see for themselves World English at work, they should take some time off their busy schedule to watch what goes on at a busy international airport like London's Heathrow airport or Sheremetyevo 2 international airport in Moscow. People from different nationalities and ethnicities interact with one another with the help of a language that sounds very much like English but is anything but. It is World English. No doubt, there are many who ridicule it with a dismissive shrug. "It happens all the time," says a report published in the *International Herald Tribune* on April 22, 2005, "during an airport delay the man to the left, a Korean perhaps, starts talking to the man opposite, who might be Colombian, and soon they are chatting away in what seems to be English. But the native English speaker sitting between them cannot understand a word."

Yes, that's precisely it. World English is a new language, or rather a linguistic phenomenon, where no one has any privileged status. It belongs to everyone who speaks it in whatever way, shape or form. Only the most incorrigible purists in matters linguistic will cock a snook at it or, as is more commonly the case, play the ostrich before its growing presence world-wide.

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