Are Newly Immigrated Students Who We Think They Are as English Language Learners?

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Abstract

Immigrant students generally had exposure to English as a foreign language (EFL). Educators know this and more about the backgrounds of their English language learners (ELLs), but those backgrounds are becoming increasingly complicated. From the 15th century until its decline in the 20th, the British Empire brought English to Africa, the Middle East, and India, as well as North America and Australia. However, globalism is spreading English, its lingua franca, further and deeper. Many historically EFL locales are beginning to resemble typical themes in English as a second language (ESL). Thus, current realities of the language’s global presence prompt review of the historical definitions of ESL and EFL. Such an examination leads to questions about the backgrounds and linguistic identities of newly immigrated ELL’s. This paper lists and frames such questions, important to addressing ELL needs, as well as correlative questions pertinent to pedagogy and research.

Introduction

Before English language learners (ELLs) immigrate to English dominant areas like the United States, they first encounter English as a foreign language (EFL). For example, depending on age, such students having had some classes in English grammar in their home countries might be expected. Additionally, perhaps they have seen English television or spoken limited English with foreigners or multi-linguals. Increasingly, however, the level of prior contact with English is far greater than these descriptions. In Singapore, for instance, Vaish (2007) found English predominates nearly all the homes of native speakers of Indian languages, while English is spoken exclusively in almost a quarter. Such EFL locales increasingly resemble those associated with English as a second language (ESL) for multiple reasons that have impacted incoming ELLs: Central to globalization, English penetrates more language communities and produces more pidgins than any other language (Zughoul, 2003). In 2008, David Harrison asserted at least half the world’s 7000 languages were endangered, estimating the average rate of loss at one per two weeks (as cited in Belluz, 2010). Thus, the literature signals the sort of native language attrition and incomplete acquisition taking place among ELLs, as discussed by Montrul (2008), is happening even before arrival in classically English dominant countries (Çubukçu, 2010; Otsuka, 2007; Simpson, Caffrey, & McConvell, 2009). This paper reviews historical concepts of the ESL and EFL contexts, and then provides evidence in support of a revised view of EFL. In doing so, important questions are raised about the identities of newly immigrated ELLs pertinent to ESL pedagogy, future research, and addressing ELL needs in the classroom.

Historical Definitions of ESL and EFL—Polarization

Perhaps the most ubiquitous and agreed characteristic that has been continuously attributed to ESL, especially as it relates to pedagogy, is that it is spoken in an English dominant
area. Historically, that has meant mainly North America, Britain, and Australia (NABA). Due to the dominance of English in the ESL environment and its necessity for full integration in school, work, and general society, it is not unexpected that second language speakers have high motivation to learn the language. A typical pedagogical response is to place a high importance on English and to provide scaffolding to aid the acquisition process. ESL instructors are typically native English speakers and classrooms are either populated predominantly with native speakers or heterogeneously populated specifically with second language speakers (bilingual or pullout). Home or heritage languages are sometimes supported (as with bilingual education), but first language attrition is expected and common (Montrul, 2008).

EFL is historically conceptualized as opposite or contrary to ESL in several key ways. Firstly, EFL is English spoken as a non-native language anywhere other than NABA (or certain former British colonies)—locations where one or more languages other than English are dominant. Thus, teaching EFL neither expects benefit from frequent student use of English outside the classroom, nor views English as a threat relative to first language attrition. Motivation is generally regarded as lower and linked with goals less essential than societal integration, primary and secondary education, and basic employment (as with ESL). Rather, EFL students are commonly understood to study English as a step toward higher education, employment in international job markets, or travel, or they may take English classes as part of their general educations as would, for example, an American student studying French. Instructors are often native English speakers, but non-native speakers teach EFL more commonly than they do ESL. Limited vocabulary, poor literacy, and pidgin-like speech are expected among EFL students. Further assumptions that might be made about EFL students include that they possess stronger proficiency in their native languages than English, prefer their home languages, and remain generally ignorant of Western culture.

Revised View of EFL

Despite polar definitions of ESL and EFL, global realities and evidence presented in the literature suggest traits historically attributed to ESL are emerging in a growing number of EFL locales. Arguably, some EFL environments could even be recategorized as ESL. Further changes to EFL are due to a switch from colonialism to globalism as its vehicle. Altogether, such changes necessitate a refreshed conceptualization of EFL.

Native Language vs. English

First language loss among young immigrants to NABA is relatively uncontroversial. Despite limited success of heritage language maintenance efforts, attrition is typically accepted as a symptom inherent to the relocation process. The reverse expectation, that a person who grew up and remained in his or her non-NABA home country would achieve and sustain full acquisition of a first language other than English, is even more expected and uncontroversial. The line these assumptions draw between ESL and EFL, however, is fading.

Even at the time of Hansen’s (1999) study of Japanese, the obvious cause of attrition has been competition (an imbalance in daily use or an imbalance in status) between multiple languages. Montrul (2008) attributes attrition and incomplete acquisition to the same causes in the ESL context—providing evidence those causes are in effect in EFL as well. While attrition is the loss of ability in one language due to competition from another language, Montrul (2008) defines and contextualizes incomplete acquisition as the case where language competition begins during the initial acquisition process, interrupting or impeding acquisition before a critical period
sometime near adolescence. With study of first language attrition in the ESL environment now well into its third decade (Shmid & ebrary, Inc., 2004), Montrul (2008) is leading a shift in literature toward differentiating incomplete acquisition from attrition proper, whereas Schmid and Kopke (2007) find the two have usually been inappropriately subsumed.

Considering attrition a given, it is not difficult to imagine a young immigrant to the UK or the US never fully acquiring his or her home language. Indeed, in one example Montrul (2008) found the error rate across several studies of German adults under attrition to be less than 2% while a youth represented in the same studies produced 8% errors (evidence of incomplete acquisition) and later produced twice as many errors (evidence of attrition). To clarify, Montrul’s survey of existing studies showed an exceedingly limited potential for post-adolescent (i.e., post-critical period) attrition of a fully acquired language under competition from a second. If adult German immigrants only made less than 2% errors, then the child’s 8% errors cannot be fully attributed to attrition. Montrul’s highly plausible explanation is that the girl had not completely learned all aspects of the German language, her subsequent increase to the 16% error rate further signifying the likelihood that potential for attrition is much greater among pre-adolescents.

The sort of competition in the ESL environment that produces attrition and stunts acquisition of first languages among individuals is the domination or favoring of English over a first language in schools, media, government, business, social settings, and the home. But how different is that competition in EFL? Mysers-Scotton conceptualized communal language loss as early as 1988, finding attrition occurs when communal code switching begins more heavily incorporating the first language into the matrix second language as opposed to the reverse, eventuating the replacement of the first language by the second, stating this happens due to immigration and “takeover . . . by a foreign power” (p. 300). While globalism may not exactly be a “takeover,” from government to media and from school to home, English is encroaching on global first languages. For instance, English media is viewed and often favored globally via the Internet (Çubukçu, 2010; Vaish, 2007). The age at which EFL is a subject in foreign schools is continually decreasing, sometimes to the point of sociopolitical contention (Enever, 2007; Manzo & Zehr, 2006). Meanwhile, in reference to higher education, Barnard (2010) predicts local languages excluded from the science community and curriculum will stagnate while field-dominant languages (e.g., English) will lexically accommodate to academic developments. English is also a language of prestige in the governmental, social, and other arenas (Çubukçu, 2010). While Ghana’s government, for example, sponsors nine of the dozens of languages spoken within its borders, the country’s official language is English. Not entirely without its logic, the Ghanian case also demonstrates a leftover effect of British colonialism on many African countries. The effect, however, carries over into a sociocultural setting where knowing or seeming to know even a few words of English gives a person status not otherwise possible, a situation reflected even in the English-centric Ghanaian hip-hop scene. Even in the home setting, considered in the ESL setting as the last resort of a heritage language, English is placing heavy pressure on first language use in some countries. In Singapore, for example, Vaish (2007) found almost a quarter of native speakers of Indian languages exclusively speak English in the home, while the language predominates among the remainder. English is increasingly present as a competitor with first languages across the linguistic landscapes of dozens of countries.

Though studies have been looking at English attrition outside NABA for some time (e.g. Asgari & Mustapha, 2010; Hansen, 1999), this author finds no present studies that precisely quantify or describe attrition and incomplete acquisition of global first languages due to EFL.
Nonetheless, attrition as defined and studied in ESL-oriented literature situates well with the clearly observed communal loss of global languages and language competition taking place in many EFL locales. Specialist in the area, David Harrison, asserted that at least half the world's 7000 languages were endangered, estimating the average rate of loss at one per two weeks (as cited in Belluz, 2010). Central to globalization, English penetrates more language communities than any other language, also producing more pidgins than any other (Zughoul, 2003). Çubukçu (2010) summarizes the situation as one which puts learners “in danger of losing their first languages” (p. 98). Realizing this is the case, and assuming Montrul’s (2008) distinction between attrition and incomplete acquisition holds true in EFL, the possible language repertoires and acquisition dynamics among ELL’s broadens considerably in contrast to the assumption the first language will be strong and completely acquired.

**Motivation**

Necessities of integration remain consistently strong motivators for immigrants to learn English, but the driving force in many EFL locals is quickly reaching a similar level. For example, accompanying Çubukçu’s (2010) description of the “devaluation of local knowledge and cultures” (p. 98), Otsuka (2007) attributes losses in Tongan to a push to “conform to the Western development model that is associated with English as a socioeconomically privileged language” (p. 446). As mentioned in the previous section of this paper, English is a favored choice in government and education. Fully updated textbooks are not even available in languages other than English for science courses in higher education (Al-Jarf, 2008), so it only follows that Saudi Arabia and Poland are just two examples of dozens of countries moving the age at which English is taught as a subject downward, often beginning now in early primary school (Enever, 2007; Manzo & Zehr, 2006). Meanwhile, support for native languages is decreasing. Australia, for instance, has done away with bilingual education for indigenous languages (Simpson, Caffrey, & McConvell, 2009). Behind the move toward English in education, of course, is the dominance of English in leading job markets. Together with educational and economic viability, the status of English socially and in media is all part of a greater picture before the eyes of the world. Indeed, the “desire to integrate with the host community” Opitz (2004) identified within the ESL community has gained a parallel in EFL: Each nation of the world is hosted within the new paradigm of globalization, the language of which is English.

**World Englishes**

Though not mentioned earlier, another assumption regarding EFL is that the English spoken will be in close accord with British or American English. English as it is spoken in NABA, if that is one English, is not the only English, nor has it been for some time. Most famous among world Englishes, Indian English, has been actively developed and spoken since British colonialism in the country. However, Vaish’s (2007) description of English in Singapore signals the sort of cultural and linguistic infusion indicative of a new English there as well. For the purpose of this paper, the sort of “developmental world Englishes” discussed, for instance, by Bolton, Graddol, and Meierkord (2011) could be the product of any environment outside NABA where English has penetrated deeply enough and long enough to develop as a complete language (as opposed to pidgins) with a number of features consistently distinct from English as it is spoken within NABA.
Who are Newly Immigrated EFL Students? New Possibilities

While the historical definition of EFL is not obsolete in that it may often hold true, the revised view—highlighted above across language competition effects, motivation, and diversity of world Englishes—dictates an expansion of possibilities. In turn, this arising complication in EFL prompts new considerations about the identities of newly immigrated ELL’s:

- May have significant or even high proficiency in one or more dialects of English
- May view English as superior to native or heritage language(s) (culturally, politically, economically)
- May have incomplete or attritted native language
- May have grown up learning English in what resembles more of a typical ESL environment than an EFL environment
- An ELL’s English proficiency may appear as that of a second language speaker, yet the student claims English as a first language
- May speak native language better but have more academic experience in English, or vice versa

Pertinent to general approach in the classroom, the above possibilities and more translate to a complex set of questions about the identity and languages of any given new ELL student, as represented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. The Individual: Who is Your New ELL Student? Permutations to Infinity

Important Pedagogical and Research Questions

Once linguistic identity is considered via an expanded set of questions like the one above, the corresponding trends in EFL raise a myriad of other pedagogical research questions only partially answered in the literature thus far:
• One language is instrumental in learning a second (Cummins, 2007, 2008, 2009; Al-Harbi, 2010). What are the implications of changes in EFL on the value of a student’s first language in acquisition of a second?
• Regarding heritage or native language maintenance, as with bilingual education: If the first language was not learned in the first place, then how can it be maintained?
• What are the differences in advantages between an ELL conceived as a stereotype of the historical definitions of EFL and ESL versus a variously conceived ELL newly immigrated using a revised view of EFL?
• Harken back to error analysis, a speculative determination of why someone made a “mistake” or if it is even a mistake at all. Imagine, as well, English dialects and world Englishes. Could an ELL’s foreign English dialect interfere with his or her host country English?
• Considering the level to which English is used at early ages in many EFL locales, are first or second language strategies best to address language issues?
• What can be done with adolescents who have not fully acquired any language? Or younger ELL’s who have only low proficiency in both their first and second language?
• What does it mean if a child has not fully acquired any first language by adolescence?

**Conclusion**

The historical views of ESL and EFL at least partially describe most newly immigrated ELL’s. However, relying solely on those historical views to understand such students leads to assumptions increasingly narrow compared to the broad and varied EFL landscape these students now come from. The type of language competition present in English dominant NABA is emerging in more EFL locales, such that first language attrition and incomplete acquisition are ever more possible even in EFL settings. Further, the variety of Englishes ELLs learn prior to immigration, as well as greater variance in prior acquisition of and desire to learn English, prompt a wider range of questions about who individual ELLs are relative to pedagogy and appropriate educational choices. Prime considerations revolve around the importance of a first language in learning a second, possible differentials in literacy versus spoken language for English or a first language, and the possibility that apparent errors are correct in an English that differs from that of NABA. While an ESL student is submerged in a NABA host community, so too are EFL students submerged in a globalized community which also broadly favors English. Thus, knowing the EFL context ELLs come from is a primary means to knowing those students and asking the right questions to fulfill their needs.

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