Editorial

Labels and Realities: The Relevance of Terms like ESL and EFL in a Linguistically Complex World

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For a long time, ELT ('English language teaching') scholars and practitioners have used terms like 'ESL' ('English as a second language') and 'EFL' ('English as a foreign language') unquestioningly to describe the English used by people outside the so-called ENL ('English as a native language') circle. For example, ELT practitioners may conveniently refer to students from places like China, Vietnam and Thailand as EFL students. Interestingly, we find counterparts of such terms in 'World Englishes' studies; Braj Kachru's 'Inner Circle English', 'Outer Circle English' and 'Expanding Circle English' essentially refer to ENL ESL and EFL respectively. Despite the popularity of such terms in scholarly circles, the problems associated with their use have not often been explored in depth. Nevertheless, some authors have described such problems. For example, commenting on the distinction between ESL and EFL, Nayar (1997, p. 10) states, "a great deal of referential fuzziness within the two and denotative overlap between the two are making the terminological distinctions unclear, impractical, and ineffective or, worse still, in some cases inauspicious and irrelevant." This special issue aims to further examine the use and relevance of these terms.

Even without the benefit of an in-depth study, it is not difficult to see that such terms are potentially problematic. The term 'ENL' or 'native speakers of English' seems straightforward. In Gupta's words, the term 'native speakers of English' is "usually reserved for a white person from a traditionally English-speaking country" (Gupta, 1994, pp. 14-15). It refers to white people from countries like US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, provided they are not white immigrants from non-English speaking countries. However, the fact seems to be that some non-ENL have become nativized. An example might be Singlish, which some authors call 'Singapore colloquial English' ('SCE'). For example, Gupta notes that "SCE is used as a native language, informally, in the home, and to children" (Gupta, 1992, p. 32). One way to avoid the problems associated with the term 'ENL' might be to avoid the word 'native' and use the term 'Anglo English' to refer to the so called 'native English'. 'Anglo' is a term ('Anglo English', 'Anglo culture') that I have used before (Wong, 2008; 2019). Obviously, English in Singapore is not Anglo English.

The term 'ESL' is similarly problematic. Firstly, it does not refer to one's second language literally (Nayar, 1997). Rather, it refers to the English used by a speaker whose first language is a non-English language in a country where English is used in some official capacity. For immigrants, the term 'second language' refers to "the language of the adopted country" (Nayar, 1997, p. 12). Accordingly, English in Singapore, Kachru's Outer Circle, falls into this category of "second language" (Bautista & Gonzalez, 2006, p. 130). However, as we have seen, Singapore English is in fact considered a 'native' variety (Gupta, 1992). A question thus remains: What is the status of English in Singapore, native or second language? Such labels can be confusing.

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The term 'EFL' seems to be the least problematic. It refers to the English in a country in which it has no official status and is not used predominantly in any domain. It is thus not difficult to identify countries which one associates with EFL. In Asia, the countries include China, Japan, Korea, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. In none of these countries is English an official language. However, it does not follow that the term 'EFL' is unproblematic, if only because of the varying degrees of communicative competence in a so-called EFL country. Thailand might be a good example. Many goods and service providers in touristic Thai places like Bangkok and Phuket have some communicative competence in a particular domain and can communicate with English speaking tourists unproblematically to meet transactional needs (e.g., price haggling). By contrast, I have known of Singaporeans who have difficulty understanding some speakers of Indian and Philippine English (which are not considered EFL) because of their strong accents. Further, given that English is so often used on the internet, how could we still say that English is 'foreign' in so-called ESL and EFL countries that have ready access to the internet? In cyberspace, English cannot be considered a 'foreign' language.

Another overlooked factor is culture. The use of the terms 'ENL', 'ESL' and 'EFL' is based on the premise that the 'English' in each of the terms refers to the same thing. However, taking a cultural perspective, one could argue that the 'English' used in different cultures is in each instance a culture-specific entity. For example, studies have shown that Anglo English and Singapore English are culturally distinct and may be seen as two different language systems (Wierzbicka, 2003; Wong, 2014). This means that when we talk about Anglo English being ENL and Singapore English, ESL, we are not talking about the same 'E' ('English') but two different cultural entities. The 'E' in 'ENL' and that in 'ESL' often do not refer to the same entity. This is one reason why such terms are problematic.

Moreover, although there is little literature on it in ELT circles, labels like 'ESL' and 'EFL' may predispose the teacher to view their students with a 'deficit', rather than an 'abundance', mindset. Among other things, this means that teachers may view "students' problems with writing" simplistically as "the teacher's fault for not doing something so simple as having students write five sentences per paragraph or have three reasons" (Brannon, et al., 2008, p. 17). Teachers may also not expect enough from their students, and the students end up chasing an ideal (i.e., 'ENL') that is not attainable. In the worst-case scenario, the low proficiency student's expectation of failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The 'deficit' mindset may also prevent teachers from seeing students as resources, creating "reachable, intermediate acceleration goals" for them and mitigating their "fear of failure" (Lombardi, 2016).

Now that I have presented my views, let us hear from other scholars, and see what their views are. In this special issue, scholars from different Asian regions discuss the 'English' that is used in that region, and whether terms like 'ESL' and 'EFL' are relevant for the purposes of describing it. Implications for ELT are also discussed. The first few papers come from John Wakefield (Hong Kong English), Jovie D. Espino, Dan Henry F. Gonzales and Isabel Pefianco Martin (Philippine English), Azirah Hashim and Gerhard Leitner (Malaysian English) and Joseph Park (Korean English). More papers will be published later in the year.

What will be the fate of such terms? Will they eventually drop out of use as we increasingly recognize the complexity of each cultural setting in which a form of English is used? Or will they remain in use for convenience and the want of more descriptive terms? It would be quite interesting to find out if such terms, which have stood the test of time so far, are still popular in, say, ten years' time. I must confess I am rather curious.

Acknowledgements

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