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English reconceived: Raising teachers' awareness of English as a 'plurilithic' resource through an online course

Christopher J Hall, Rachel Wicaksono, Shu Liu, Yuan Qian and Xu Xiaoqing

York St John University

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Abstract

For most English teachers and applied linguists, the nature of the language itself is rarely submitted to interrogation. There is a generalised assumption that 'the English language', and especially 'the grammar of English', exist as monolithic entities, which are learned as a unified subject derived from a native-speaker ideal, rather than constructed in multiple versions as locally-modulated communicative resources. This report describes an online course, *Changing Englishes*, designed to raise awareness of the 'plurilithic' nature of English, enable teachers to value the diversity of individually and locally appropriate learning objectives and outcomes, and promote the development and sharing of pedagogical strategies which respond to the global realities of the language. The course combines insights from the sociocultural perspectives of world Englishes, English as a lingua franca, and critical applied linguistics, with cognitive work on usage-based learning.
We describe qualitative research conducted with teachers in China and Gaza to investigate teachers' conceptions of English, explaining how this motivated course content and design. Following a description of the course, we present data from a study of users of the trial version, seeking to establish how they conceive and reconceive of English in the light of their experiences. Participants were trainee and practising teachers from inner, outer, and expanding circle countries. Findings suggest that users constructively engaged with course content and that, for some, it generated transformative experiences which have the potential to provoke enduring ontological shifts in their conceptions of the language they teach and, consequently, to influence their own approach to professional practice and professional development.

Introduction

The focus of most research in English language teaching has been firmly on the learning/teaching process, with every year seeing new investigations into how English is learned and taught in different social contexts, with different methodologies and resources, different objectives and motivations, and different learner profiles and identities. Seldom is attention devoted to the nature of the subject matter, the English language itself. For example, in an edited review of 'area[s] or issue[s] that had been prominent in ELT' since 1995 (Morrow, 2012), only two of 13 articles deal with the 'EL' in ELT: the first of these concerns English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2012) and the second addresses spoken English – again with particular reference to global Englishes (Timmis, 2012). This is significant, and suggests that detailed re-examination of the relationship between what Widdowson (2003) calls 'object language' and 'language subject' in ELT is long overdue, especially given the increasing global diversity of English.

Admittedly, there are strong research traditions in the areas of teacher and learner beliefs about what is taught (e.g. Borg, 2006), and especially concerning teachers' and learners' awareness of English grammar (cf. Andrews, 2007). But the grammar assumed is exclusively the grammar of native 'standard English' (normally the written variety), and questions about what English actually *is* do not arise. There is also an expanding literature on learners' and teachers' *attitudes* to English, especially in a global context (Jenkins, 2007), and here diversity within Englishes is highlighted. But the focus is on teachers' judgements and beliefs about variation from an already assumed concept of 'the' English language, rather than on how teachers actually conceptualise it, such that 'it' can be taught, learned, and used.

The research described in this report forms part of a larger collaborative project aimed at developing a new understanding of the nature of English (and other languages) and exploring how this new understanding might impact on its global learning, teaching, and testing (cf. Hall [2012b] on the latter). In particular, we describe the development, content, and trialling of an online resource for reflection, *Changing Englishes: An Interactive Course for Teachers* (Hall and Wicaksono, 2013), available at http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org. The course was designed with four essential objectives in mind:

a. to contest monolithic views of English and the deficit model of learning and teaching associated with them
b. to raise awareness of the 'plurilithic' nature of English and of the multiple, locally-modulated outcomes of actual learning and teaching processes
c. to enable teachers to value the diversity of Englishes and become comfortable with the notion of locally-appropriate learning objectives and outcomes
d. to encourage teachers to develop strategies which they can use to change their own pedagogy, and to contribute to a broader transformation of ELT professional practice.

The course design and content is based on empirical research conducted with Chinese, Palestinian and UK teachers in higher education contexts (see below), and on theoretical work to develop an ontology of English (and other 'named languages') which combines cognitive, socio-cultural, and critical perspectives (Hall, 2012a). The course itself follows a project with similar orientation and goals, but designed for native-speaking students and teachers in internationalising higher education institutions (Wicaksono and Zhurauskaya, 2011). The trial version of the course has been piloted by intending and practising teachers and teacher trainers from ten countries:

- China
- Gaza
- Iraq
- Malaysia
- Mexico
- Norway
- South Korea
- Sri Lanka
- UK
- USA

Later we report on their experiences of the course, but first we provide some theoretical background, describe the research which informed the course design and content, and then summarise the course itself.

Theoretical background

Both the content of the course itself, and the research which inspired its development, are based on empirical findings and theoretical insights from a broad spectrum of orientations and fields of enquiry within applied and general linguistics. We review some of the relevant scholarship in the following sections.

Native speakerism

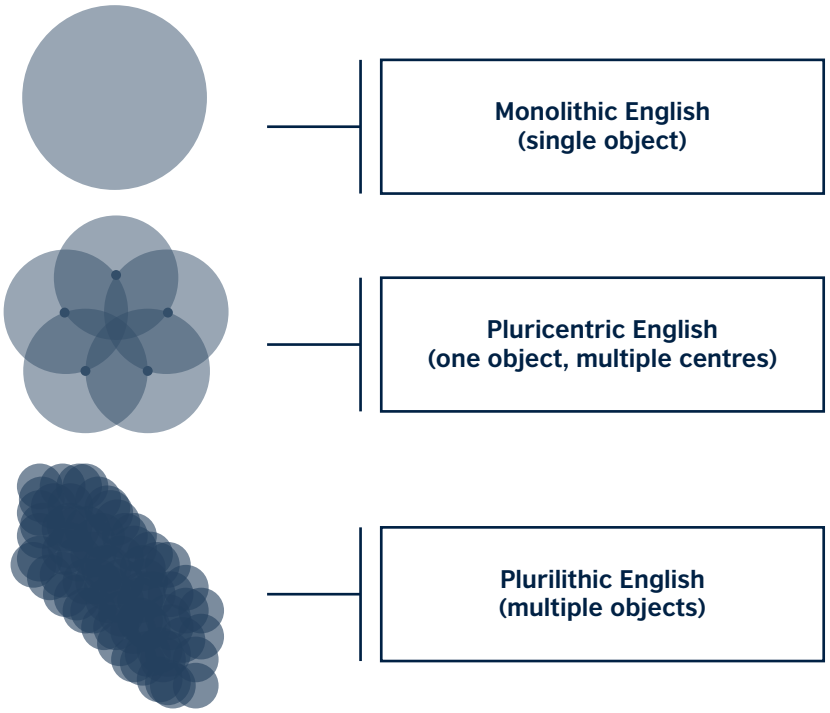
Of central relevance to the project is general and applied linguistic research concerned with the English of non-native users. The concept of 'native speaker' has itself been problematised (e.g. Davies, 2003), especially as it is used to define the only legitimate models and targets for language learning. Our concern is the deficit model of learning that the concept of 'native speaker' inevitably enshrines. In the words of Kramsch (1998: 28), '[t]raditional methodologies based on the native speaker usually define language learners in terms of what they are *not*, or at least *not yet*'. ('Or, one might add, *not ever*' according to Cook, 1999: 189.) Scholars have criticised the content and aims of communicative classrooms for their implicit or explicit idealisations of native-speaker competence (e.g. Leung, 2005) and have pointed out that bilingual 'expert' users (Rampton, 1990) can be better models for language learning (Cook, 1999), despite strong resistance from non-native speaking teachers themselves (Llurda, 2004, 2009).

World Englishes

From the perspective of general linguistics, the concept of English as a diverse, global resource belonging to non-native as well as native speakers has been studied extensively for over three decades within the world Englishes framework, associated particularly with the work of Kachru (1985, 1992, 2005). Kachru highlighted the misrepresentation of English structure and use contained in descriptive accounts which disregarded the sociolinguistic realities of millions of users of English beyond what he called the 'inner circle' of native speakers in England and its former settler colonies. He drew attention to the Englishes of users in the 'outer circle' of former administrative colonies of the UK and USA, where the English language was institutionalised and gradually indigenised, as a second language. He also recognised the spread of English as a 'performance variety' to the 'expanding circle' of countries where the language was taught and learned as a foreign language. In applied linguistics, the approach has inspired the English as an international language (EIL) movement, which stresses the practical implications of world Englishes scholarship, especially in ELT (e.g. McKay, 2002; Sharifian, 2009).

Despite the richness of world Englishes research, and its abiding contribution to efforts to reverse what Rajagopalan (1997) has termed the 'apotheosis of the native speaker', the Kachruvian framework has been criticised for its preoccupation with the development of new norms in outer circle varieties.

Figure 1: Monolithic, pluricentric and 'plurilithic' ontologies of English



The criticism has come from researchers studying English as a lingua franca (ELF), on the one hand, and from scholars in critical applied linguistics (CAL), on the other. The former have argued that world Englishes scholarship has downplayed the significance of English use between speakers of different first languages, especially in expanding circle contexts (for example, Jenkins, 2009a). The latter have criticised world Englishes for unwittingly perpetuating the 'monolithic myth' of English in their advocacy of a 'pluricentric' (as opposed to 'plurilithic') vision of English (see Figure 1), in which the availability of standard English targets is extended rather than questioned, resulting in what might be viewed as serial monolithism, rather than plurilithism (Canagarajah, 1999 and 2007; Pennycook, 2009). We critically review each framework in turn.

English as a lingua franca

The ELF paradigm is associated particularly with the work of Barbara Seidlhofer (2001, 2005), who created the VOICE corpus of ELF interaction, and Jennifer Jenkins, who described a 'core' of maximally intelligible ELF features for pronunciation (Jenkins, 2000). In Kachru's concentric circles model, the expanding circle is populated by *learners*, but ELF scholars have rightly pointed out that it is also home to millions of functionally competent and often expert *users*. Early focus on the possibility of codifying ELF as a universal variety of English has given way to useful research on the communicative principles underlying ELF interaction and the dynamic strategies interlocutors employ to successfully negotiate and (co-)construct meaning in multilingual settings (e.g. papers in Mauranen and Ranta, 2009; Archibald et al., 2011 and Seidlhofer, 2011).

Researchers from within the ELF framework have been particularly interested in exploring attitudes towards global diversity in English, especially among teachers (Jenkins, 2007). The reactions observed have been underpinned by substantially monolithic assumptions about what the language is. According to Dewey (2009: 71):

> *'research into language attitudes among language practitioners and non-specialists alike shows that it is commonplace for participants to predominantly express beliefs [...] about language by orienting towards it in reified terms, as if it were an object, something that exists outside of and separate from particular performances.'*

ELF scholarship has challenged such conceptions, especially in recent years, by providing detailed descriptions of the communicative success of much interaction between English users who have different L1s and who do not (always) abide by so-called 'standard' English norms. But despite their explicit refutation of attempts to provide formal descriptions of ELF as a variety, ELF scholars do not appear to have yet fully embraced a 'plurilithic' vision of English, betraying a lingering and often explicit belief that ELF is more than just emergent interactional practice (cf. Sewell, 2012). Seidlhofer, for example, refers to ELF as 'a natural language' (2011: 99 and 125); and Jenkins (2009b: 202) refers to 'learners of ELF'.

Critical applied linguistics

From a critical applied linguistics (CAL) perspective, monolithic thinking about English and other languages has been challenged head-on. Makoni and Pennycook (2007: 27) present a project to 'disinvent and reconstitute' named languages, which they see as 'socially and politically constructed' and therefore illusory. They point out the benefits of this illusion to the Western (and colonial) cultural and political regimes in which these ways of thinking about languages are rooted. Not only is monolithic thinking about language wrong, they argue, it is also potentially disadvantaging, including, to language learners and teachers. In line with this project, Pennycook (2009) coined the term 'plurilithic' to refer to the non-monolithic reality underlying English and other named languages.

But the CAL position risks alienating practising teachers, concerned as they are with the realities of classrooms, examination requirements, parents' expectations, education department policies, etc. This is in large part due to the often uncompromising ideological stance of much CAL work and the highly abstruse nature of much of its discourse. Moreover, our experience of teaching and learning on MA TESOL programmes suggests that teachers struggle to comprehend and engage with a view of language teaching in which language forms are downplayed, disregarded, or denied altogether.

Usage-based grammar

Recent work in usage-based linguistics (Tomasello, 2003; Bybee, 2010; Hall et al., 2006) provide a way of viewing grammar as a 'plurilithic' resource, constructed mentally and developing dynamically on the basis of individual users' experience across multiple speech events. Hall (2012a) argues that the ontology of grammar suggested by such work can complement the socio-political rationale for Makoni and Pennycook's (2007) 'disinvention and reconstitution' project. On this view, monolithic English can be rejected without having to abandon the conception of language as a structured system residing in individual minds, deployed according to grammatical regularities that emerge through exposure and interaction. Thus, 'English' is a portable

resource which individual learners construct internally on the basis of social experience. This results in many more-or-less overlapping mental grammars which are categorised (by learners, users, and by the people with whom they interact) as manifestations of 'English'.

English is not, therefore, an external monolithic system which classroom-based learners of English as an additional language must internally replicate with teachers as their models. But neither is it only an epiphenomenon of interaction, as suggested by many CAL scholars and is reflected in Dewey's (2009: 71) implicit criticism of the view that language is 'something that exists outside of and separate from particular performances'.

Like all other language learners, classroom learners construct, with guidance from teachers, their own unique and constantly evolving mental grammar, which can exhibit varying levels of systematicity and overlap with that of users in other contexts and other learning experiences, both native and non-native speakers. This is consistent with Kohn's (2011) notion of *My English*, the unique condition in which each learner socially constructs their own linguistic competence and capacity for performance, and develops their own identification with, and participation in, speech communities. It also resonates with Canagarajah's perception of the role of teachers '[to facilitate] an alignment of [learners'] language resources to the needs of a situation, rather than reaching a target level of competence' (2007: 928).

Putting it all together

The implications for TESOL of work on native speakerism, world Englishes, English as a lingua franca, critical applied linguistics and usage-based approaches to grammar are profound. Given our commitment, as applied linguists, to sharing these changing ideas about the nature of our subject with English language teachers, we began to discuss how we might develop an awareness-raising resource.

The resource would aim to contest monolithic views about language and raise awareness of the 'plurilithic' nature of English. It would encourage teachers to consider the deficit model of learning and teaching associated with monolithism, and to acknowledge the multiple, locally-modulated outcomes of learning and teaching that actually occur in real classrooms, including their own. The resource would also enable teachers to value the diversity of Englishes and to become comfortable with the notion of locally-appropriate learning objectives and outcomes.

We decided that it would be inconsistent of us to try to *tell* teachers what these locally-appropriate learning objectives and outcomes might be and how they might achieve them, given our commitment to 'bottom-up' applied linguistics (Hall et al., 2011). We therefore reflected on ways to encourage teachers to develop their own suggestions for how a more 'plurilithic' approach to English might change their pedagogy, and how they might want, or be able, to contribute to a broader transformation of ELT professional practice. We decided that, before designing a resource that would achieve these aims, we needed to find out more about the current state of teacher ontologies of English. The next section of this report describes how we went about understanding one group of teachers' beliefs about the nature of English.

Understanding teacher ontologies

Research framework

In order to identify key issues and arguments that might be pivotal in efforts to encourage teachers to reflect critically on monolithic conceptions of English, we conducted research on the beliefs of English teachers in China (a questionnaire followed up by interviews, both conducted face-to-face: see below and Hall et al., in prep.), Gaza (focus groups, conducted online: see below), and the UK (interviews: work in progress).

We organised our initial enquiry with the teachers in China around a framework of four 'dimensions of monolithism' (henceforth 4DM). It is possible to question a monolithic concept of English on many levels, but we isolated four as being particularly significant, as follows:

- *The Ontological Dimension* (ONT), which questions the extent to which named languages can actually be said to exist as coherently-bounded concepts (in the 'reified' sense referred to in the earlier quotation from Dewey, 2009).
- *The Ethical Dimension* (ETH), concerned with the extent to which a belief in English as a monolithic object leads to discrimination against groups or individuals who identify, or are identified with, kinds of English which don't accord with the monolithic concept. (This, of course, includes non-native users and leads to 'native speakerism', as described earlier.)
- *The Political/Economic Dimension* (GLO, in recognition of claims for English as a 'global commodity': Pennycook, 1994), concerned with the political and economic sustainability of an insistence on monolithic norms, in the face of unprecedented global use, demand, and local resistance.
- *The Professional Dimension* (PRO), pertaining to evaluations of pedagogical practice: the extent to which a monolithic concept of English can underpin teachers' efforts to help learners become effective and satisfied communicators in the different contexts they will be using the language.

Questionnaires (China)

As stated earlier, the context for our initial data collection on teachers' beliefs about English was China. We designed a questionnaire that asked respondents to offer an opinion on a series of statements reflecting beliefs which were either consistent or inconsistent with the 4DM. The questionnaire was completed by 57 Chinese teachers of English from the Department of Foreign Languages at Suzhou University of Science and Technology, in Suzhou (Jiangsu Province). The teaching experience of this group ranges from five to 30 years. 79 per cent have a master's degree in English (language or literature) or TESOL, and 11 per cent either already have a doctorate or are currently enrolled in a doctoral programme. At the time of data collection, just over half of the teachers were working in the College English Teaching section of the department, teaching English to non-English majors (a course which focuses primarily on reading and exam preparation). The remaining teachers were teaching courses to English majors, including: intensive reading, extensive reading, listening, grammar, writing, translation, interpreting, English literature, linguistics and cross-cultural communication.

Results for this initial stage of the research (reported fully in Hall et al., in prep.) indicate that many respondents are willing to entertain a 'plurilithic' ontology of English, suggesting that this might be a key component in eventual efforts to raise 'plurilithic' awareness. Many respondents also seem to be aware of the political and economic realities associated with global Englishes, and to value the diversity it entails (despite an overwhelming rejection of the possibility that US and UK dominance of the 'global commodity' of English will be threatened in the foreseeable future).

But there is little evidence that this has translated into an ethical or professional imperative for reform in the way many teachers conceptualise English and ELT, where non-native versions of English are still seen as less valid. Overall, the questionnaire results suggest that most respondents appear to be sensitive to the realities of global diversity in English and to conceptions of English as a 'plurilithic' resource transcending native speaker-bound conceptions, and that some (or many) may therefore be willing to reconceive the subject they teach and what they expect their students to learn.

We now turn to the more substantial data collected through in-depth interviews with a subset of the teachers.

Interviews (China)

To further unpack teacher beliefs about the 4DM, we conducted a series of eight interviews with members of the same team of English teachers. The eight participants were at various stages in their careers, with between five and 31 years of teaching experience. Their voices were prioritised via the use of 'data prompts' to which participants responded, one corresponding to each of the 4DM (see Hall et al.

in prep.). The interviews were conducted in Chinese by two of the authors (Liu and Qian) who were teaching colleagues of the participants. Having interviewers who were known to the participants, spoke the same L1, and shared their professional context, mitigates to some degree the possibility that responses would be shaped by the interview and interviewer context more than the interviewee's own contextualised beliefs (cf. Mann, 2011).

The most striking feature of the participants' talk was the universal tendency to exhibit both monolithic and 'plurilithic' orientations, often depending on the context in which English was being discussed. For example, we found a strong correlation between a monolithic orientation (that is, talk which expressed reified conceptualisations of language that privileged the abstract or ideal) and discussion of language as a 'subject', learned and taught in classroom contexts. Conversely, a 'plurilithic' orientation was regularly observed when English was being talked about as 'object' in the context of real-life usage, as a way to construct and negotiate individual and social meanings and identities.

As an example of the concurrent orientation to both monolithic and 'plurilithic' conceptualisations of English, consider Ms F, a teacher with five years' experience. When reacting to a data prompt showing samples of different non-native Englishes on a blog posting, including usage of plural *softwares*, she is asked whether she thinks each word or structure in English has, or should have, one correct form. She responds:

Ms F: *No, I don't. I guess that's what the so-called standardised tests led people to believe.*

By suggesting that this way of thinking is 'what the so-called standardised tests led people to believe', she appears to be positioning herself as a critic of such tests and therefore of notions of monolithic target varieties. Asked subsequently how a person's competence in English should be judged, she responds:

Ms F: *It should be judged by whether one can express his ideas.*

Further evidence of a 'plurilithic' orientation can be seen in her reaction to another data prompt, a graph portraying increases in the global number of English learners, where she appears to be comfortable with the idea of teaching international varieties of English:

Int: *[…] Do you mean that the more growth of ELT outside the UK and USA there are…*

Ms F: *The more kinds of English we should teach.*

But subsequently, asked about teaching ELF features, she makes clear that students should be taught 'standard' English varieties, commenting:

Ms F: *We shouldn't encourage the use of their language, anyway, that's not standard English.*

She is explicit about her conceptualisation of 'standard' English as an abstract notion, independent even of its native speakers, as the following interaction shows:

Ms F: *I believe in the existence of standard English, perhaps it's some idealistic existence. There should be standards.*

Int: *Ok. So you think there is standard English and there should be standards.*

Ms F: *Yes. Maybe it doesn't really exist in reality. When we speak, the language is never standard.*

Int: *Is that because we are non-native speakers? Can native speakers speak standard English?*

Ms F: *Even native speakers can't speak standard English – the idealistic, perfect, standard English.*

Throughout the transcripts, we noticed that grammar (as opposed to pronunciation and vocabulary) is given a special status in monolithic notions of 'correct' English. In the talk of one participant, Ms D, this was especially clear. She oriented to 'plurilithic' positions at various points throughout the interview, explicitly recognising international variation in accents and the fact that speakers from beyond the inner circle regularly contribute new vocabulary to English, 'without following a [native speaker] model'. But she singles out 'grammar mistakes' as Chinese learners' major problem, ahead of successful expression of ideas. These findings confirm that a major challenge for teachers in their reflections on the nature of English as 'object language' and 'language subject' is the difficulty in reconciling beliefs about the prioritisation of communicative function in contexts of usage with societally-induced beliefs about the nature of grammar as a monolithic system.

Online focus groups (Gaza)

The next stage of our enquiry aimed to explore teachers' receptivity to the notion of 'plurilithic' grammar as conceived within a cognitively-oriented framework consistent with usage-based approaches to learning (Hall, 2012a). We conducted a series of online chats, focus-group style (cf. Turney and Pocknee, 2005), with teachers of English at the Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine. We chose these teachers because they were early-career (recently graduated

with a BA in English), had an interest in world Englishes, and were teaching on courses which used the *Headway* series of textbooks, with its self-avowed 'strong grammar focus'. An additional motivation was the fact that the conversations could be locally facilitated/mediated by Khawla Badwan, a colleague of the participants who had previously conducted research on applied linguistics mediation (Badwan, 2010).

Across three chat sessions involving four teachers, one of us (Hall) introduced the usage-based idea that learners develop their own version of English, often quite a different version from the model supplied by teachers, textbooks and tests (cf. Kohn, 2011). As the conversations progressed, participants' reactions were elicited to the proposition that learners' non-native grammar rules would not necessarily need to be judged incorrect, according to an understanding of *rule* as 'regulation'; but rather could be viewed as 'regularities' which emerged from their interaction with other users of the language for their own purposes and in their own local contexts.

Of the four participants, one (Nida) quickly became comfortable with the proposition, after an initial struggle. Another, Rana, maintained a monolithic orientation throughout. A third, Abeer, was more non-committal. The fourth teacher, Ayah, was the only participant to take part in all three sessions, and her reflective trajectory was one of transformation. In the first session she asserted that English grammar: '*is like a code [that] can't be changed into another system'* and even that between two native speakers, '*their m[i]nds are the same in english*.' By the end of the sequence of chats, her beliefs had shifted dramatically. When asked which version of English they believe to be correct, Ayah answers: 'the english that we understand and others understand, maybe'. Rana, in contrast, answers: '*the English which follow the correct pattern of speaking English[.] [I] mean the English which follow the correct garammatical rules we all know*.'

The following dialogue from the last chat session illustrates how far Ayah moved in her thinking and, in contrast, how intractable the assumption of monolithic grammar remained for Rana:

Ayah: *the problem is that English is not one system but we test it as if it were one system [...]*

Rana: *I should we should teach 'the correct English' though ! [...]*

Ayah: *What is correct English? American or British /// ????? /// Palestinian English can be correct sometimes /// but we dont care about it*

Rana: *i'm not talking about accents here /// there's NO Palestinian English ! [...]*

Ayah: *There is Indian English Rana why don't we have our English /// ??????????*

Rana: *I'm talking about the correct patteren of speech !*

Ayah: *Do you mean if English is not British then it is wrong*

Rana: *[...] i mean the English Grammer is one for all accents*

(Key: [...] = irrelevant words/turns omitted; /// = two successive turns combined)

We conclude that changing beliefs about grammar may indeed be a significant component in heightening teachers' awareness of the 'plurilithic' nature of English. This finding is reflected in the content and structure of the Changing Englishes course, which we now describe.

The course content

Monolithic thinking about English makes the 'language subject' goal manageable for teachers (but not necessarily learnable for learners), whereas 'plurilithic' thinking about Englishes takes seriously the 'object language' that learners necessarily construct, and in so doing challenges many of the certainties that teachers have long believed in. Many teachers clearly appreciate that the 'the language subject' cannot be approached in exactly the same way as other school subjects, despite the expectations of students, parents, and educational authorities.

But like all human beings (most linguists included), they are 'under the spell' of language (Hall, 2005), insensitive to its cognitive realisation and operation, and acculturated into the monolithic myth of a single 'correct' version which is only imperfectly grasped, with various degrees of (in)fidelity, by users and learners. Moreover, as practitioners they have an investment in the 'standard' English that they have had to master (native and non-native speaking teachers alike), and which examinations and textbooks almost uniquely sanction.

Teachers also have legitimate doubts that English can be learned in classrooms in the same way that 'the object language' is acquired by infants who grow up in English-using contexts. So the challenge represented by any attempt to invite teachers to self-reflection and possible ontological transformation is immense. Kachru (1992: 67) talks of the need for 'attitudinal readjustment' in the contemplation of world Englishes, but the 'plurilithic' project we envision requires a colossal ontological shift. The words of Maley (2006: 5, cited in Seidlhofer, 2011: 201) are apt here: '[T]he task of implementing teaching based on EIL would [...] involve turning around the oil tanker of vested interests in international examinations, in textbook publishing, in teacher training provision, in quality-control bodies and so on.'

Accordingly, our starting point was the belief that it is the ontological challenge of 'plurilithic' English which must be addressed if teachers (and the wider public) are to be able to seriously confront the pedagogical, ethical, and socio-political consequences of monolithic thinking. From the outset we decided it would be premature to offer ideas for learner activities and materials, despite many teachers' primary interest in classroom resources for immediate deployment. We recognise that there is a yawning gap between the kind of theoretical reconceptualisations and argumentation discussed here and the kinds of practical activities and pedagogical strategies that can be implemented by practitioners in their classrooms. There are signs of a new impetus in the design and dissemination of resources on global Englishes for teachers (e.g. Alsagoff et al., 2012; Matsuda, 2012). However, their main objective appears to be an immediate impact in the classroom, rather than a long-term impact on teacher cognitions, which we see as the vital prerequisite if lasting and wide-ranging change in ELT is to occur.

Our strategy was to pitch the course at a level which would be accessible to practising teachers from a broad spectrum of contexts, both native and non-native speakers, teaching ESL, EAL and EFL. We were especially thinking of teachers in some of the more traditional classrooms that exist in the outer and expanding circles, where rigid curricula and very fixed notions of English teaching can lead to frustration when they prevent students from fulfilling their potential to become effective communicators in English. The general profile we had in mind for users of the course was:

- early-career teachers not yet fixed in outlook and belief, and mid- or late-career teachers and teacher trainers looking for new ways to approach their professional practice
- teachers and teacher trainers with a pre-existing interest in the global diversity of English, and with some awareness of, and sensitivity to, the phenomenon of global (especially non-native) forms and uses of English.

The body of the course is organised into five units, each of which introduces new concepts and provides reflective activities that invite users to reflect on the material and think about its implications, often for their own local professional context. The activities are an integral part of the course, and the detailed feedback provided normally introduces new concepts and ideas, so that *learning* happens continually through *doing*. The five units are as follows:

1. *Defining English:* this unit introduces the idea of alternative monolithic and 'plurilithic' conceptions of English. A self-assessment tool gives users a personalised profile of their own levels of awareness and belief regarding English. The concept of standard English is then problematised, and users are invited to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of using standard English as the only target for learning/teaching. The unit ends with a description of the 4DM and presents four data prompts (revised in the light of the Chinese interview data). Users are encouraged to first notice relevant features in the prompt, then give their immediate reactions, and finally reflect on the implications for them and their teaching context.

2. *Using English:* here the user is introduced to how English is actually used in its diverse contexts, starting out with its most frequent current use, as a lingua franca between non-native speakers. A core feature of the course is its highlighting of variation *within* native-speaker contexts, in order to demonstrate the vast oversimplification involved in appeals to 'native-speaker English' and to emphasise how monolithic conceptions of English are as deleterious for inner circle users as they are for outer and expanding circle users. Online audio clips from the British Library accents archive are used to illustrate Englishes from Glasgow and the north-west of England. The Kachruvian model of World Englishes is then introduced, and users are invited to reflect on the notion of 'ownership of English' using a video of Gordon Brown 'gifting' English to the world. The unit ends with a discussion of ELF scenarios and issues of intelligibility.
3. *Learning English:* This is the longest unit in the course. Following the rationale explained earlier, we aimed to balance the sociocultural and socio-political argumentation in the previous unit with a strong emphasis on the importance of learners' construction of their own formal competence in English. Accordingly, this unit guides the user from the traditional 'language subject' perspective of the classroom to an ultimate appreciation of the importance of learners' cognitive construction of their own 'object language', through usage. The strategy adopted was to present an example of alternative grammar in inner circle Englishes, through the use of a real example of child language acquisition from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000). Using samples from the speech of Barbara, a child acquiring Belfast English, the notion of grammatical rule and the processes of rule acquisition are described essentially from a usage-based perspective. Grammatical rules are interpreted as, simultaneously, social conventions, mental representations, and automatised procedures for use. Because psycholinguistic concepts are quite unintuitive (the 'language spell' again), the material is presented through user-friendly metaphors, and an audiovisual presentation. The unit ends with a critique of traditional SLA perspectives on interlanguage and fossilisation, which assume the deficit perspective of external models and targets, and questions the uncritical assumption that learning precedes, rather than co-constitutes, use.
4. *Teaching English:* This unit invites the user to focus on the teaching and testing implications of the 'plurilithic' view of English presented in earlier units. Consistent with our 'bottom up' approach, the unit (like those that precede it) aims to challenge, to sensitise, to raise awareness, to provoke discussion, rather than to tell teachers what the implications for teaching and testing are. To this end, the unit encourages reflection on the difference between English as 'object language' and 'language subject' (introduced in Unit 3), using examples of teachers' opinions expressed on an online discussion board (www.mappling.com). Teachers who view their job as helping learners to become efficient and effective users of English in the contexts in which they will need it (stressing English as 'object language') face challenges that are very different from those presented by other areas of the school curriculum like maths or geography (contexts where English is a 'subject'). Activities in the unit facilitate reflection on the implications of 'plurilithic' views for the materials, activities, and tests they use in their own teaching and learning context.
5. *Changing English:* In this last unit we make some practical suggestions about how the ideas presented so far might be shared with learners, teaching colleagues, policy makers and the general public. The challenge of changing other people's ideas about English is acknowledged but the importance of attempting to do so is stressed.

The course also features a glossary of technical terms, references, a list of further online and print resources, and a discussion forum, for interaction with other users to discuss course content and individual experiences, and to share resources for learning/teaching, teacher development, and general awareness-raising.

In the rest of this report, we discuss users' experiences on the trial version of the course, collected as part of a study conducted with teachers from different parts of the world and with different professional profiles.

Trialling the course

Method

The trial version of the course was initially piloted by 17 intending and practising teachers, and a teacher trainer. The group included four English users from Kachru's inner circle, seven from the outer circle, and six from the expanding. Four are native speakers and 13 are non-native speakers. They were recruited from three sources:

- at an IATEFL conference talk about the course
- from current and former students of the first two authors
- via requests to the authors' network of colleagues.

Table 1 (see Appendix) provides further information on the composition of the trial group, substituting real names with pseudonyms.

Each of the trial participants was asked to work through the course unit by unit, noting down their reactions as they went along. We asked users to share with us anything notable that came to mind as they engaged with the material, but we also provided a set of questions which they could use as guidance. The questions had two purposes:

- to find out how successfully the course objectives were being met (i.e. the effect on teacher beliefs)
- to collect feedback on the user experience which might improve it for future users.

Within the first category, there were questions about immediate reactions to content, the perceived relevance and usefulness of the material, and possible longer-term effects on beliefs and professional practice. Within the second category, questions addressed users' engagement with activities and time spent; the length, clarity and complexity of the material; the use of images and graphics; and ease of navigation.

Trial participants worked through the material at their own pace, and submitted their responses online. Through follow-up interviews conducted via email, we gained further insights into the reactions of Liz in Germany and Tom in Mexico (suppliers of the most extensive feedback). In total, we received over 33,000 words of feedback. There were many very useful comments, both positive and negative, concerning course design and user experience. The first release of the course (v.01) incorporates many improvements drawn from this feedback, and more issues raised by trial participants will be addressed in v.02. We see the course as a continually evolving resource, responding to user feedback as it is collected. In the remainder of this report, however, we focus on the initial batch of responses, specifically those which address our goal of evaluating the extent to which the trial version of the course met its objectives.

Findings

To briefly restate our main objectives, we were intending the course to:

a. contest monolithic views

b. raise users' awareness of alternative 'plurilithic' views

c. enable them to value and accept global and local diversity

d. encourage them to effect change themselves.

The majority of participants showed recognition of the problems associated with a monolithic ontology of English. For some, the course confirmed already existing beliefs, but clarified and extended their position. For others the course appears to have stimulated new thinking and possible changes in belief toward a more 'plurilithic' orientation. A minority were unconvinced by the argument that a single monolithic native-speaker model was not appropriate for all learning contexts. The responses of many participants suggest that the course has the potential to trigger change in their own beliefs and practices, and in some cases also to encourage them to seek to promote change in others. On the following pages we provide some extracts from feedback that illustrate these general findings.

For Myung, the course appears to have been something of a revelation:

> *Frankly, until now I did not notice myself having monolithic concepts of language. Having monolithic concepts [...] shaped me to pursue 'standard English' and 'being native like' aims. Moreover I have been agonizing myself in pursuit of absurd goals. By breaking from the convention and correcting distorted concept of language, I can release from the trap not only me but also learners.*

The implications of 'plurilithic' thinking for English testing (addressed in Unit 4) made an impact on Tom:

> *I can definitely relate to the quandary presented in the chat session with the Gazan English teachers. And, I think that this is incredibl[e] point to make: that a one-sized fits all assessment of English is not only 'unfair', but also an 'invalid' and 'unreliable' form*

of assessment. What is more, if we are to subscribe to the idea that assessment drives instruction (and I most definitely do), then a plurilithic view of English would have us construct assessments that are more performance/task based with communicate effectiveness as a primary goal.

Some users found their existing conceptions of English and approach to teaching confirmed by the course, heightening their awareness. In Tom's follow-up interview, he told us:

I found the course to be extremely informative. I would not say that [...] i was familiar with the concepts, but rather that the course 'gave names' (and credence?) to previously conceived beliefs.

Similarly, Hansi reported that:

When I started to work in these units[,] I felt that I was repeating my mind because the information and activities in these units are very familiar to my views and concepts.

And for Liz:

the course confirms very convincingly what I firmly believed anyway, but with loads of data and excellent arguments as well as different viewpoints.

Many participants reported that the course prompted reflection on their own experiences and beliefs. In his follow-up interview, a month after finishing the course, Tom reported that:

[t]he greatest benefit of working through the course was that it sparked reflection (on my own practice, on my own experiences) and i have, in fact, been thinking quite a bit about the course [...].

An example he gave was a discussion with students in a public speaking course, about culturally-associated discourse patterns. This prompted him to ask:

If we are to accept a plurilithic view of English, does that mean that we should embrace a plurilithic view of the discourse patterns that are 'native' to all speakers?

For Ishara, the course prompted her to reflect on the questionable efficacy of simply replacing Inner Circle norms with a local 'standard' variety in her own context of Sri Lanka:

I still doubt if the teachers in either contexts delivered their lessons adhering to the dimensions of Englishes they claim to promote. I reflect now, when the education system and the teachers themselves are linguistically misinformed/ignorant, it is quite inevitable that the students would be left confused or misled.

Some of the Chinese participants struggled with the course's problematisation of 'standard' English and monolithic rule systems. Jia recognises her monolithically-oriented ontology of grammar, but also acknowledges how her thinking continues to evolve:

As I am reading the monolithic view of English, I can see elements of it in my beliefs and teaching practice. For instance, I do see grammar as a self-sufficient system of rules or logic. After years' of learning English as a learner, I am now looking back, It was initially taught to me explicitly as a set of rules and some sort of formulae. It later becomes some sort of checklist and framework for me to analyze sample sentence structures and to produce structured speech and written words. I then build everything on these basic rules, questioning them, feeling confused, trying to make sense of the logic behind them, adapting them, and eventually internalizing these rules during years of learning.

For Ying, the issue appears more straightforward, at least in her response to Unit 1:

If there do not have standard English for teachers and learners, the education could be chaos. Owing to this, I strongly agreed with codified standard language [...].

But even for her, there is evidence of a new awareness of the dynamic nature of English:

In my secondary school when I [w]as an English learner, I always think that [...] the teachers' words are always correct, and have never thought of English is always changing. On the other hand, teachers have never told us. So when I [...] read the chapter of changing English about changing learners' beliefs about English[,] I think I take a tumble.

But there is no evidence of tumbling for another Chinese participant, Hua. With regard to the suggestion that students might bring examples of their own English usage into the classroom (following discussion of Thorne and Reinhardt's [2008] *bridging activities* in Unit 4), she asserts that:

it is an unrealistic expectation to achieve the goal of different people can use their own English teaching and learning material. As a medium, it will have a direct impact on learners' beliefs, what are teachers' taught will be challenged. If we use our own learning materials and have no united belief for the uniform English test, what standards for success in English?

We were particularly interested in whether the attempt to marry socioculturally-oriented with cognitively-oriented plurilithism had achieved any purchase on ontological transformation, by helping teachers to bridge the gap we had identified between the ethical concerns of Makoni and Pennycook (2007) and teachers' professional concerns with the need for learners to acquire a set of formal resources. For some trial participants, the relevant discussion in Unit 3 struck a chord. Tom reported that he:

> *found this unit to be particularly interesting/useful; especially, in terms of fostering awareness of what might be going through a student's mind as he or she constructs their knowledge of the t[ar]get language […].*

For Liz:

> *[t]he information on the meaning of 'rule' is great! Really something for language teachers who insist on the application of so-called 'rules'.*

A significant minority of respondents reported, however, that some of the concepts in this unit were over-complex or the intention obscure.

Overall, the data from trial feedback is that the course successfully contests monolithic thinking about English and raises or sharpens users' awareness of more 'plurilithic' ontologies of English. The data also constitute compelling evidence that users value, or come to value, the diversity of Englishes and that they are persuaded by the need to make learning objectives appropriate for local contexts. What is less clear is the extent to which course content can actually change users' own pedagogy or influence them to engage in activities aimed at achieving a broader transformation of professional practice. But the trial feedback does yield some suggestive data in this regard. The impact appears likely to be greatest for early-career or student teachers. For example Liz (herself a highly experienced teacher and teacher trainer) states that:

> *even though a fair amount of the material is not new to me, the combination of all the different aspects is quite stunning and I am sure many will gain a vast number of new insights from it. It should be particularly useful for teacher trainees and students.*

In the follow-up interview, Liz suggests that the material could benefit teachers in in-service training, although she does point out that this might be hard to achieve and that the process should include opportunity for group discussion:

> *What I could imagine with my teachers is asking them to complete the C[hanging] E[nglishes] course and then having a meeting to find out their views and discuss them. I would very much like to do that and might even be pleasantly surprised! The difficulty will be getting them to do the course at all. It is a relatively small group of teachers (between 12 and 15) and many of them are rather training-resistant.*

We recognise that taking the whole course requires considerable motivation and personal investment, so may be counter-productive if mandated or treated itself as monolithic. But because it is released under a Creative Commons licence, any of the course material can be copied or modified to be used in training sessions. (Liz states, however, that 'I don't think the material needs to be adapted at all, I can imagine it being very effective the way it is.')

Anne, as a native speaker about to embark on a career in teaching, is particularly persuaded of the need to address issues raised in the course in her own teaching practice. Two excerpts from her feedback on Units 4 and 5 illustrate this:

> *I will have to work a little harder than a teacher who comes from a similar background as the students to understand their needs and situations. I want to avoid being seen as a purveyor of 'Standard English,' so I want to be careful to affirm the existence and place of multiple Englishes and to be aware of the contexts of my students.*
>
> *I found the advice for changing teaching colleagues' and policy makers' beliefs about English empowering, since I will probably be the youngest and/or least experienced teacher in my first place of employment; it is good to have some guidance for addressing these issues.*

Elena, another new teacher, is unequivocal in her acceptance of the relevance of 'plurilithic' positions for her own practice:

> *When I plan the syllabus in the future, I will integrate one that addresses the plurilithic nature of English.*

Similarly, Beyar states that:

> *[a]lthough the idea of Standard English has a profound root in the Iraqi learners and teachers mind, […] as a future English teacher I will try to introduce the learners to a broader concept of World Englishes which can be used by the majority of the English speakers around the world and none of the Englishes are identical.*

Practising teacher Birgitte, who teaches a course called International English as well as general English, asserts that:

> *large parts of this online course could actually be used with my students in the classroom.*

Many of these respondents, although demonstrating an acceptance of 'plurilithic' thinking, questioned the applicability of the ideas in the course to particular teaching contexts. For example, Myung states:

> *I am worrying that both learners and teachers may be reluctant to alter their way of learning/teaching English due to the current educational system, which consecutively requires learners to take 'exams' that evaluate how the learner's English is close to 'Standard English'. This circumstance makes learners and teachers harder to be free from the 'spell' of monolithic English.*

And Elena observes:

> *Although this course has done a wonderful job in outlining and showing why we need to adapt to a view of 'Changing Englishes,' there might still be teachers who will not be convinced of the worth to put in efforts to change the opinions of those around them, whether it is the students or the public, because they might not have the motivations to overcome the challenges of swimming against the social current if they do not see the real results of a plurilithic view of English in the lives of their students or others.*

But Birgitte points out that the material should be seen as relevant for all teachers, in terms of its potential to change attitudes:

> *I believe that the issues and topics which are addressed in this course are very relevant to all ([in]tending) English language teachers [...]. [I]t is not just the students who have a negative attitude towards 'non-standard accents', teachers sometimes do as well, and that is why I feel this course is relevant to all teachers.*

Significantly, it is changing teachers' attitudes, rather than practices, which we set as course objectives. We remain convinced by the trial feedback that it is still premature to expect major changes in professional practice until a fundamental change in teachers' ontologies of English eventually leads to a broader transformation of public views of the nature and role of languages in society. This will no doubt take generations to achieve, but we believe that teachers' beliefs play a fundamental role in the construction and perpetuation of public language ontologies. This position is supported by Harris (2009: 25), who claims that what he calls 'implicit language teaching' always accompanies the more explicit language instruction goals of the classroom: '[W]hether you realize it or not, you are teaching not just English or French or Japanese, but a certain view of what *that* language is, and also a certain view of what a language is [...]'.

In sum, there is clear evidence that users of the trial version of the course have constructively engaged with the material and that it has generated transformative experiences which have the potential to provoke enduring ontological shifts in their conceptions of the language they teach and, consequently, to influence their own approach to professional practice and professional development. Ultimately, of course, the extent to which the course can contribute to the 'plurilithic' project of changing Englishes will be determined by post-trial users, which we hope to measure via feedback accumulating from the interactive forums activated once the course is in the public domain.

Conclusion

The research reported here is motivated by a conviction that in a world of multiple Englishes, ELT needs to readdress the subject matter of its pedagogical mission. We suggest that the ways in which English is traditionally conceived, and is currently being reconceived, have fundamental implications for the theory and practice of language learning and teaching. Informed by research on world Englishes, English as an international language, English as a lingua franca, critical applied linguistics, and usage-based linguistics, we have proposed a 'plurilithic' interpretation of English which is attuned to its learning and use, and embraces both social and cognitive dimensions. From this novel perspective, we have explored the ways that teachers of English from various contexts conceive, and reconceive, of the language.

The interactive online resource which derives from the research is a small but tangible contribution to the massive ontological shift that will be required if we are to move beyond the deficit views of learning that currently dominate ELT. Its design is based on the conviction that beliefs must change within the profession before meaningful change can occur in society at large (including in learners). But we understand that the course may only result in significant change for a limited number of users, given many teachers' inheritance of, and investment in, a monolithic ontology of English and other languages. Adopting a 'bottom-up' approach to applied linguistic research (Hall et al. 2011), we have taken very seriously the need to listen to and interact with teachers, and to discover how their educational and professional experiences help to mould and perpetuate their beliefs (especially concerning the key role of grammar).

The trial feedback on the course, though by its nature of only limited value, is encouraging. As expected, it reveals the magnitude of the challenge. But we judge it to be more than sufficient to motivate continued work on the course. We invite readers to examine the course for themselves and help us to improve it by using the feedback link and discussion forum available there. We recognise that the calibre of teacher who reads to the end of a report of this length and complexity is likely to be one of whom we might expect robust opinions, freely offered. We very much look forward to receiving and reacting to them.

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Appendix

Table 1: Trial participants

	Gender, age range, and nationality		Experience			Location at trial time	Principal professional role
			Teaching		Training		
Anne	F	18–29	USA	1-year ESL internship	MA TESOL*	UK	Student
Beyar	M	18–29	Iraq	5–6 months	MA TESOL*	UK	Student
Birgitte	F	18–29	Norway	3 years	1 year training; MA TESOL*	UK	Teacher
Dinusha	F	18–29	Sri Lanka	5–7 years	5–7 years; MA TESOL*	UK	Teacher
Elena	F	18–29	Malaysia	Some	Not much; MA TESOL*	UK	Student
Farah	F	30–49	Pakistan	> 5 years	BA Ed.; MA TESOL*	UK	Teacher
Hansi	F	18–29	Sri Lanka	4 years	5 years training; MA TESOL*	UK	Teacher
Hua	F	18–29	China	TA for NS teacher	BA Eng. Ed.; MA TESOL*	UK	Student
Ishara	F	30–49	Sri Lanka	5 years	3–yr Nat. Dipl. in Eng Tchg; MA TESOL*	UK	Teacher
Jia	F	18–29	China	2 years	MA TESOL; HE Tchg Cert.	China	Teacher
Lin	F	18–29	China	None	MA TESOL*	UK	Student
Liz	F	50–69	UK	36 years	MA Appl. Ling; fairly extensive in-service	Germany	Dept Head, Trainer
Myung	F	30–49	S Korea	5 years	6-mth TESOL Cert.; MA TESOL*	UK	Teacher
Paul	M	50–69	UK	28 years	Cambridge ESOL DELTA; MA TESOL*	UK	Teacher
Sharif	M	18–29	Gaza	5 years	MA TESOL	UK	Teacher
Tom	M	30–49	USA	> 10 years	MA Multicult. & Biling. Ed.	Mexico	Teacher
Ying	F	18–29	China	None	MA TESOL*	UK	Student

* = currently enrolled

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