

Corpora in Language Teaching in English as an International Language Contexts: Some Issues

John FLOWERDEW
English Department
City University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong
enjohnf@cityu.edu.hk

This presentation will consider some issues regarding corpus applications in language teaching in English as an International Language (EIL) contexts. The following issues will be considered:

1. The issue of standards

With the use of English internationally, an immediate question is that of which variety to teach. What should be the standard? Should it be American English, British English or another “inner circle” variety? Should it be Indian English, Nigerian English or another “outer circle” variety? Or should it be Korean English, China English, French English or another “expanding circle” variety? Then again, might not English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which can be defined as “a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages” (<http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/faq>), be a valid variety? On the other hand, should learners not be exposed to more than one variety?

2. The “real” English question

One of the core tenets of corpus-based teaching, the lexical approach, has been that such an approach ensures that “real” English is presented to learners and that their English does not sound “artificial” or “non-native-like”. If one takes an EIL perspective, however, then a question arises as to what “real” English actually is. EIL varieties of English would be as equally “real” as centre varieties. Moreover, learners may not want to sound like native-speakers; they may want to preserve their cultural identity as non-native speakers (Harwood, 2002).

3. The issue of application

With large-scale international commercial publications, considerable financial support is inevitable, such enterprises requiring large teams of researchers and writers. As such, they need to be aimed at an international market and as a consequence of this are usually based on inner circle standard varieties (American and/or British English). There are issues of hegemony here, created by the international English Language teaching industry. Local initiatives, on the other hand, open up the possibility of using local corpora consisting of outer and expanding circle varieties for indirect applications such as dictionaries, grammars, course books and teaching materials.

4. English as a Lingua Franca

An alternative model that has been put forward in place of the inner (and outer) circle varieties as a goal for international communication is that of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca). Users of ELF concentrate on communicative efficiency more than linguistic accuracy. The argument for using ELF as a target, as put forward by one of its proponents (Jenkins, 2004: 65), is that “this is the most likely situation for the majority of learners in the 21st century”. A key point about ELF

is that it can be appropriated by speakers of any L1. This is significant because it implies equal communicative rights for all of its users (Hülmbauer *et al.*, 2008). At the same time, L1 speakers of standard varieties may use ELF, so long as they are interacting with speakers from other language and cultural backgrounds.

5. Cultures of learning

An important issue that arises with EIL, where people are interacting across borders, is that of cultural compatibility. Some have claimed that EIL is culturally imperialistic (Phillipson, 1992). EIL carries with it, according to this claim, cultural values associated with the inner circle countries. For corpora, this means consideration of the fact that the choice of corpus may carry with it cultural implications. Inner circle corpora will carry certain cultural assumptions and discourse patterns (such as allusions to Shakespeare and the Bible), while outer circle and expanding circle corpora will carry other such assumptions. This is one of the reasons for advocating ELF, in so far as it is free from L1 cultural influences (although this has been disputed by e.g. Phillipson, 2003: 170).

6. Critical Language Awareness

The issue of cultures of learning leads on to critical language awareness from a corpus-based perspective. In a corpus-based critical EIL awareness programme, students might be encouraged to compare features of different language varieties or differences between spoken and written corpora of a given variety. The example of Singapore is relevant here, where it can be argued that Singaporean users of English need to be made aware about the differences between Standard Singapore English and the more colloquial spoken variety, sometimes referred to as *Singlish*.

The presentation will finish with some general conclusions drawn from the specific issues discussed in the main part of the presentation.

References

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