ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. WHAT CHALLENGES DO TEACHERS OF ENGLISH FACE?

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ABSTRACT. – English as a Foreign Language. What Challenges Do Teachers of English Face? The article undertakes to suggest ways in which English as a foreign language should be taught as a consequence of English becoming a global language and its being spoken in different parts of the world. The article goes out from three prerequisites: David Crystal's statement that the 'the greatest challenge for the teachers' is that 'they must keep pace with the language change, given that languages change so fast'(2013), it is studied and used everywhere in the world, and the need to eliminate the mismatch between the language taught in the classroom and the language spoken by natives or in professional environments. The present study is focused on the discussion of textbooks, the variety of English to be taught, cultural background, and pronunciation issues.

Keywords: global English, language varieties, textbooks, cultural background, pronunciation.

1. INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language is nowadays more a commodity than an advantage. As a global language it develops very fast and it is both studied and used everywhere in the world as an official language, a second or a foreign language. What people or children study in the classroom or at home can hardly be qualified as the language spoken by natives. It is our aim to hereby demonstrate that classroom English fails to provide learners with every day, informal speech practice and to suggest ways of combating this phenomenon.

This is the experience faced by Romanian students who learn a foreign language, mainly by books and have few or no interactions, when they are thrown into real life situations in which they must interact with natives. The

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difficulties students encounter range from pronunciation differences, vocabulary differences, through grammar and communication issues to cultural ones. The variation learners experience is as broad as the spread of English and continues to change day by day. In this respect, David Crystal recognized that 'even the best teaching materials provide learners with texts which are far from the real, informal kind of English, which is used very much more than any other during a normal speaking lifetime' (Crystal, 1978).

First, the listening exercises learners hear in the classroom are different from what they hear in real life situations. The recorded voice does not speak spontaneously, using an ordinary, casual vocabulary, with an acceptable language and it does not present the real life situations of normal people. The recordings often use a standard language, underline some grammar or vocabulary features and their purpose is mainly to help the learner solve an exercise or do some tasks. It does not familiarize the student with real, spontaneous conversations. For example, the learner will not hear an utterance which contains mistakes or people who swear, loose their temper, get angry, judge in a wrong way a situation or a person, use jargon and slang and many other non-formal or less formal language varieties.

Second, learners of English who get employed and work for multinational companies in their own countries or overseas need further in-company communication and culture-bound training or more practice in order to be able to cope with professional non-formal interactions. This happens when a customer support representative or a sales assistant who works for a multinational call center talks to a customer whose native language is English and the latter switches on to an informal register or greets him with 'Hi'. One such employee, a former student of English (27 years old), admitted that 'I had some problems in my first days at work'. The same former student noted that 'What I did not appreciate was that we were asked to have at least a standard intro and ending for the call, but this depended on the style of the team specialist'.

Tourism students need more hands-on practice in order to function efficiently in the professional environment where the conversations are both formal and casual. Imagine a young executive who wishes to get closer to the employees and approaches them in an informal manner and the adaptation process the employees go through to fit into the exchange. At the same time, imagine a waiter interacting with the customers, can he switch on to a slang language variety without being awfully inappropriate? Such questions arise from the need to prepare the future employees for every day professional interactions, where activities are based on both formal or more casual, friendlier human interactions, which can be verbal or written.

Textbooks, even the most recommended language proficiency books, prepare learners mostly for formal encounters. They offer the students the opportunity to carry out language and profession-related tasks that are less encountered in casual professional interactions.

Textbooks have come a long way and have developed well in consonance with several teaching and linguistic principles. However, textbooks cannot cover the broad array of teaching issues required by different target groups for which yet solutions must be found.

Finally, what variety of English should learners be taught to help them come to grips with the kind of English they need, help them cope with different verbal encounters and use the language efficiently for communication and professional purposes?

What the learners are prepared to understand and use is a formal, rather academic language, and not an ordinary conversation, which is the language that changes permanently and very fast. This is the greatest challenge faced by teachers as they must 'keep pace with it and expose the learners to it'. According to Crystal (2013), the fast language change is the result of two reasons: the first reason is represented by the internet, which is fostering new varieties of language and experiences, thus exposing the learners to language varieties which are more frequently used or which the learners prefer. These varieties are not controlled by any grammatical correctness filter and thus generate new word forms or uses which may not necessarily conform to accepted grammar rules.

The second reason which accounts for the fast language change is the globalization of English (Crystal, 2013). This phenomenon has also had many effects on language teaching. Thus, amid this phenomenon the teachers may be confused and overwhelmed and the question they may ask themselves is 'What is the language variety that should be taught?' The answer to the question was given by Crystal in his speech on 'English as a global language' delivered for the British Council in Serbia 2013.

First of all, if we refer to Romania, the English taught is the RP (Received Pronunciation) or 'Queen's English'. Today RP is spoken by 2% of the population of Britain (Crystal, 2013), while it is replaced in many parts of the world by other geographical varieties such as American English, Indian English, and so on. David Crystal (2013) asserts that even on Oxford Street in London, which should be a Mecca of Englishness, many different accents and dialects are heard, spoken and used.

Given these premises, it is the purpose of this study to ask how should English be taught to bring it closer to the variety spoken by natives, or the learner's own preferred variety and thus to eliminate the mismatch between what is taught by books and real-life interactions' needs. At the same time, we shall focus on the

changes that affect the teaching of English, as a consequence of its becoming a global language. In order to find a suitable and expert answer, we turned to David Crystal's (2013) views on the issues. To serve this purpose, the present study is focused on the discussion of textbooks, the variety of English to be taught, cultural background and pronunciation issues.

2. CLASSROOM ENGLISH

The purpose people learn a foreign language for will influence the choice of variety they will be taught. Since the boost of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) approach, the learners can get the teaching materials, including textbooks, that help both learners and teachers focus not only on the kind of English the learners need but also on the professional issues that characterize the field in question. For example, English for Tourism materials provided by a wealth of publishing houses and written by several excellent authors are tailored to meet the professional and linguistic needs of those who undertake to work in the tourism industry. The materials, and here reference is made mainly to textbooks, can be successfully used by tourism employees, tourists and learners who wish to become acquainted with tourism issues and the appropriate, specialized language. Besides, almost all published English for Tourism books prepare the tourism learners for international English language examinations or professional work environments. However, the same question arises: to what extent do they teach the professionals or other interested target groups the issues and the language used in professional interactions that are likely to occur in real, every day conversations, and what can teachers do to alleviate this gap?

A language is learned in many ways and sometimes it takes even an experienced teacher a while to find the right teaching approach and the means that would help him teach the learners the kind of language they need in the most efficient way and in the shortest period of time. A means that teaching a foreign language is based on is the *textbook*.

Textbooks have developed as a consequence of the advancement of English for Specific Purposes (Hutchinson, T & A. Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans, Tony, 1998), a branch of applied linguistics which has flourished in the 1980s and has had a considerable contribution on language teaching throughout the next decades (Robinson, P., 1991; Trimble, L., 1985). ESP and the development of ESP textbooks received a great impetus from the contribution of the teachers of English and were greatly assisted by the British Council, its local mentors and libraries, which have spread the teaching of ESP all over the world. This phenomenon swept over Romania in the 1990s.

Indeed, textbooks rarely present real life situations in a common, spoken language, which expresses normal feelings and contains mistakes. This gap can be compared with what children face upon their growing up: the perfect life described by cartoons, and stimulated or simulated by toys, a pink-coloured, blissful life with happy-endings which later on, upon adulthood, turns into a more colorful life, with difficult situations, deceptions, mistakes, and all the bad things that one cannot understand as a young, immature individual. Henceforth, reality must be felt and experienced, it can neither be captured in textbook texts, nor studied or learned. Theoretically, this assumption can be applied to any foreign language, but if the language becomes a global one, learning a language from texts may have different effects on learning. In order to combat the undesirable effects, the teachers must know all the risks that this process might involve.

Another factor which accounts for the learners' lack of preparation for verbal interactions with native speakers is their own *cultural and linguistic background*, which is most often different from that of the host people, and for which they may not have been prepared adequately. According to Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997, p. 231), 'In different societies people not only speak different languages and dialects, they use them in radically different ways.' The authors agree that 'In some societies, normal conversations bristle with disagreement, voices are raised, emotions are conspicuously vented. In others, people studiously avoid contention, speak in mild and even tones, and guard against any exposure of their inner selves. In some parts of the world it is considered very bad to speak when another person is talking, while in others, this is an expected part of a conversationalist's work. In some cultures it is *de rigueur* to joke and banter obscenely with some people but to go through life not saying a word to others' (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1997).

Non-verbal communication is also very important for communication. For example, represented by facial expressions and gestures it can alter the intended message in different ways and with different effects on the receiver. These misuses of non-verbal communication techniques may endanger the partnership or even damage it. For example, the Europeans consider that it is rude to talk at the same time or interrupt someone when she/he is speaking, but other people consider that doing the opposite is rude, and not intervening in conversation would indicate boredom or lack of interest. The same applies to laughing, smiling, or frowning when the listener concentrates on the speaker and he/she may understand that he is not understood, or that the listener does not agree with him. Politeness is something that can very easily be interpreted and this happens in many different ways. A pause in a wrong place, a falling or rising tone, a different intonation can easily change the meaning of what has been said and also the impression made on the other person.

Learners groups, especially groups of international students, are heterogeneous and so are the levels of their mastering or speaking a foreign language. Such a situation will set up several teaching problems to the teacher, who will be guided by the training needs of the group, given that the group was formed according to a common reason or purpose, such as, for example, learning to socialize or to acquire a specialized language.

In addition, learners come from different educational backgrounds and have enjoyed a different way of learning the English language. The teacher of English must understand the situation and deal with it in the most efficient and adequate way. In this respect, there are several aspects that must be tackled. First of all, the difference between what a learner should study and what he will experience is a difference that cannot be ignored. The English teaching books include recorded conversations and listening exercises, which have proven to be rather formal. This difference was reported on by the students who went abroad to an English-speaking country and who experienced difficulties or needed a while to get used to the native-speakers' speech variety and pronunciation. However, once they noticed the difference and became aware of the unfamiliar language features, they could improve their speaking skills and performance. After they have overcome this barrier, they had no problems acquiring those features of the foreign language which brought their speaking performance closer to that of the native speakers.

All these examples suggest that spoken English has to be practiced a lot in circumstances that come as close as possible to conversational situations and verbal reactions practiced by natives. In addition, language must be taught in relation to the cultural context to which it belongs. Intensive and guided tuition whereby the teacher raises awareness of the native language environment and the speakers' linguistic behavior helps learners cope easily with the verbal interactions with native speakers and become fluent speakers without jeopardizing the relationship.

From the mentioned aspects it should not be understood thatnowadays teaching English as a foreign language is not managed adequately, because it does not prepare the learners for informal conversations in an English-speaking country. The conversations that are not presented in a book, are not scripted or previously prepared, are not controlled, are not grammatically correct and are not censured. These real conversations are human, with pros and cons, with mistakes and so on.

3. SOLUTIONS TO CHALLENGES

People learn English for various reasons and the language they learn should be exactly the language they need. However, any variety is subject to great variations which range from pronunciation to vocabulary and grammar. Some people need a language for travel purposes, others to study, work, socialize or entertain. This needs analysis will tell the teacher what 'special' language he must teach the learner. It also tells the teacher how he should teach the particular variety of language, since the teacher's mission is to satisfy his customer, to provide him with the variety of English that will satisfy his general and specific learning needs.

To begin with, the teachers' challenges are multiple. David Crystal (2013) agrees that the most demanding and difficult jobs are those of translators-interpreters and of teachers. Amid the confusion that has been created by so many challenges and pressures, the teachers must find the right method and teaching materials, and create a relaxing teaching environment in which the learners get what they need and want. These are the major assets that the teaching of English must be based on.

The first puzzling question for teachers is what *variety* of English should they teach from among the varieties spoken in the world. Would RP satisfy the post-modern world needs or should the teacher turn his attention to other dialects and varieties? David Crystal (2013) argues that the RP accent is, what 'you hear and respect', 'it is a respectable dialect, but it is not the only one'. If teachers think it is the only one and correct language variety that should be taught they are 'so wrong'. He also agrees that 'the old notion that there is only one correct English is a philosophy that must be abandoned' (Crystal, 2013). So if the teachers teach RP or American English it is 'fine', he admits, but if the teachers 'let the students go away thinking that there is only one accent and dialect in the world you do them a disservice' he agrees (Crystal, 2013).

The teachers of English have always taught RP English as a standard variety. As a foreign language RP has been taught in Romania for several decades as the only English variety, particularly in the communist years. It used to be the only variety learned by teachers and transmitted to their students. It was mainly acquired from very good teachers, who may have had more experience in verbal interactions with native speakers and from textbooks. It was the only used variety for a long time and had no rival variety to compete with since the mass media, represented only by the national television channel, used to broadcast and promote British English through English language learning programs. During the communist period, all economic, cultural or social interactions were carried out mainly with Europeans and only rarely with Americans.

Consequently, British English, as RP was broadly taught and used by the people in tourism and by most south-eastern European nations.

After the fall of communism in Romania, the teachers of English have been widely trained by the British Council methodological advisors and regional councilors for the use of 'specialized languages' and for 'communicative language teaching' in line with the advancement of ESP studies and Dell Hyme's (1972a, 1972b) 'communicative competence' approach to applied linguistics (Stern, 1983).

In the period following the fall of communism, the mass media, the internet and the movies in particular, exposed the Romanian teenagers to American English, which acquired a privileged status beside British English. At the same time more and more teachers of English taught American English during the English classes, given the general interest in American English and also their exposure to it. Economic and business culture was also more and more influenced by the prevailing American model. Many areas of professional concern were taken over gradually and dominated by the American boost.

In the years to follow, the teachers of English enjoyed a wide exposure to the use of English language, its culture, linguistics, applied linguistics, and benefited from scholarships abroad, formal and private visits to UK, and from other options that language teachers could benefit from.

Even though nowadays the RP variety has started its acknowledged decline (Crystal, 2013), the world-wide learners of English need a guiding or standard language to tune to. It is our firm belief that a model accent and pronunciation, a grammar and rules of the use of English should be retained in a standard form. Otherwise the off-springing varieties or dialects would develop in an uncontrolled manner, very much like distinct languages adapted to the local needs and uses and that would jeopardize the future of English. If the example of Spanglish would soon be followed by many other linguistic adaptations, we must admit that the future of English as a global language is in danger, and what people shall get, would be dialects of English which would be difficult to understand and impossible to learn, let alone to teach.

'For the teachers it is important to show respect to RP' argues David Crystal (2013). It is 'one accent you hear and respect', but what the learners should be taught, though, is that 'this is not the only variety of English that is spoken'. To follow the same thread of thought, David Crystal (2013) recommends that 'teachers should tune the ears of their students to the variety the students need', and 'get the ear ready for change'.

In response to this challenge, Crystal suggests that teachers should train their learners for the diversity of dialects and use of English, that they should expose them to listening and reading comprehension exercises from the very beginning and to as much variations as possible. What variety the teacher will

choose will depend on the 'view as to where the students are going to go or do with the English', or on 'how likely they are to encounter such a variety' (Crystal, 2013).

Fluency is associated with another aspect which must be understood and practiced: pronunciation. Pronunciation is more significant than it seems, because, if ignored at an earlier learning stage it might be more difficult to be improved at a later stage.

The second issue faced by the teacher is how to eliminate the mismatch between the formal English, taught by books, and the everyday, casual talk of the native speakers. On the one hand, the world we live in is different from that of our parents'. Business, technology or science, and any other field, are conducted in a looser way, in a way in which the most effective approach that guarantees the success will be used. On the other hand, in order to be promoted and receive a salary raise, an employee must certify his competences and skills, which are always reflected in certificates and obtained through examinations. The standards used by examination boards are, depending on the geographical region, British English, American English or any other variety. Crystal (2013) asserts that examination boards are 'notoriously conservative' in respect of following the rigours of RP English and grammar.

An informal English material can be easily criticized by the students, but the idea is to understand it, not to correct it and make it formal. More debates and discussions, some spontaneous conversations between the students on many ordinary situations are *useful* exercises. The reason would be that the written language is different from the spoken one. The difference between conventional and real has to be very well presented and understood by the teacher and the student, because then its importance is easier taken into consideration. However, this is not the only aspect that the students have to understand and use. This is just a bonus, a second part that helps them to prepare for life, and the sooner the better. This does not mean that the teachers have to change their teaching methods and materials. They only have to take care of all the situations that an English speaker who is not a native speaker should know.

It is not necessary for an individual who speaks a grammatically correct English language to permanently control himself, because such a control would result in long pauses or incoherence. On the other hand, this does not mean that observing grammar rules is not important or that learners do not have to control their language, as spontaneous and free talk can sometimes go in the wrong direction.

Given the difference between the learner's culture and the target culture, one of the teacher's major concerns must be to raise awareness of the native speakers' culture-specific ways of expressing themselves. Teachers should turn their attention to the research on culture-specific discourse and linguistic behaviour.

Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997, p. 231) suggest that 'describing and explaining such culture-specific ways of speaking is the task of 'discourse and culture' studies. The authors admit that it is a rather difficult task to fulfill, a task that can be approached through different methods that focus both on linguistic or speech patterns and behavioural attitudes. Further, the authors claim that 'the greater challenge is to show the links between particular ways of speaking and the culture of the people involved', and continue that to do this the teachers 'have to be able to establish the relevant cultural values and priorities independently of the speech patterns themselves' (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1997).

Cultural variation is rendered in discourse styles, some of which are visible and can be noticed both by the teacher and the students. Some other features are less obvious and should be treated sensitively. To understand cultural variation, Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997, p. 245) say that 'it is necessary to go below the surface of the speech patterns themselves and uncover the values and norms which explain them', but then this might also be a research that the teacher might not be able to undertake. Perhaps, a friendlier and more hands-on solution both for the teacher and student is to have access to such information, to have the speech and culture-specific styles integrated in a friendly manner in the textbooks.

The major challenge for English teaching and teachers is that it varies a lot at a fast pace. According to Crystal (2013, *The Biggest Challenges for Teachers*, *https://www.youtube.com*, retrieved 5 July 2016), the teachers must 'keep pace with the language change', in particular as it 'changes so fast' and the learners are always one step ahead of their teacher. Consequently, internet language, slang, the other varieties of English must be pointed out to the learners.

Textbooks play an important part and have a decisive contribution to the learners' learning English. They must be the learner's support when the teacher is not with him and provide him with the necessary language practice. No textbook can bring to the classroom the diversity of formal and informal spoken and written English. In general, textbooks offer a raw model of professional issues and formal language that should be used in diverse circumstances and encounters. However, given the mentioned limitations of the textbooks, it is then the teacher who must decide what textbook he can use, how to use it and how to combine different sources in order to provide the learner with the kind of language he needs and he has paid for.

Indeed, if only one or two decades ago the teacher relied entirely on the use of textbooks, nowadays he can use many on- and off-line sources in the classroom. In spite of the apparent advantage they bring to the leaner, such as a spoken or written internet language shared by the specific community, updated, hot professional issues, comments and exciting interaction, they rarely keep up the RP standards of English.

In the end, it is most important for teachers to foster a good background knowledge and deal with all the potential situations, since the learners need to use the appropriate language for each situation, at school, at work, at the supermarket, with a stranger in the street. Any situation requires a different language and behavior, which is not similar to the speaker's native language and specific interactions.

Psychology plays a very important role in teaching. Most of the time, students do not feel so comfortable in being honest in front of the others and say all they do not understand. But, when the atmosphere is less conventional, when they play or learn a language without being constantly aware or reminded of their stringent need to study, the students' involvement changes. To create a friendlier classroom atmosphere, the teachers can use games that involve a winner or an award. By promising a reward, the teacher creates a competitive environment in which the student will forget that he is studying the verbs, the nouns or some vocabulary items. A second option would be to make students feel lucky by introducing some lucky guess games or some lottery type games. Such games may excite them, but, at the same time, they could make them think unimportant and unlucky. In order to compromise and maintain a learning-friendly, participatory environment, the teacher should offer a participation award to every participant.

Theatre or role-play is a method that develops the speaking, interpreting skills and students' imagination. A spontaneous role play with a written script and lines for each character would really be both entertaining and useful. Through such exercises the student will learn how to think and use all his experience in order to react and adapt to different circumstances. In addition, imagination has to be tested and practiced it order to enhance the student's more spontaneous and fast reaction to different formal or informal professional situations. These role-plays will prepare students to cope with different situations that may occur. Teaching is important and can make the difference in students' life and can prepare them to face reality.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The article went out from three assumptions: (1) English as a global language develops very fast, (2) it is studied and used everywhere in the world as an official language, a second or a foreign language, and (3) what people or children study in the classroom or at home is different from the language spoken by natives. David Crystal in his 2013 speeches in Serbia referred to the *fast change*

of languages and the teachers' need to keep pace with the changes. English, for example, is spoken in the whole world and the varieties of English turn into locally adapted hybrid languages. This is why many people or students experience language difficulties when they first come in touch with the language spoken by natives or speakers of a different variety of English.

The difficulties encountered by students range from pronunciation differences, vocabulary differences to grammar and cultural background issues. The existence of so many varieties will pose teaching problems, and influence the way English is taught.

Thus the purpose of the study was to discuss some reasons that would account for the mismatch between classroom English and the everyday, informal, language practice of native speakers, and to suggest ways of combating this.

The first issue discussed was the variety of English to be taught. What variety should the teacher teach his students in a fast changing world in which many English varieties are used? Should they keep teaching RP English or should they approach another variety of English? The answer to this puzzling question was given by David Crystal, who argued that the teachers should 'expose the students to as much variations possible as there exist' and that the variety they will teach would 'depend on their view as to where the students are going to go or do with the English' (2013, *The Biggest Challenges for Teachers*, *https://www.youtube.com/* visited on 6 July 2016).

Another dazzling question for teachers is what and how should they bring to the classroom the spoken language? This question opens up another linguistic area: should they focus their attention on the formal register or on the informal register? What the teachers should do is to expose the learners to as many situations and scenarios as they may encounter in real-life professional interactions and develop their intercultural adaptation and communication strategies.

Textbooks have developed greatly and offer a wealth of teaching materials both for spoken and written interactions, and for practically almost any professional field but they provide the standard form of English which also serves for the preparation of performance tests. However, textbook rarely introduce the language variety spoken by natives in informal or quasi-formal professional encounters. Consequently, the teacher's task will be to choose the materials, texts and exercises he thinks best suit the variety of English needed by the students.

Last but not least, the teacher should create a friendly, relaxed learning environment, capable of enhancing the students' reaction and adaptation capacity to specific professional or other situations.

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