“Être ou ne pas être natif: telle est la question?” Risques et perspectives pour l'enseignement de l'anglais en Italie dans le cadre européen.

“To be or not to be native: is that the question?” Risks and perspectives for English education in Italy within the European framework.

Ludovica Briscese, University of Macerata, Italy

1 E-mail: ludovica.briscese@gmail.com
Résumé

Aujourd’hui, l’Anglais est considéré de moins en moins une langue “étrangère”. L’éducation linguistique se révèle une stratégie déterminante pour redéfinir - à travers une enquête auprès des écoles secondaires italiennes - la notion de locuteur ‘natif’ et des ‘nouveaux Anglais’ auprès du patrimoine linguistico-culturel au-delà de la maîtrise linguistique.

**Mots-clés:** Nouveaux Anglais, modèle de locuteur natif, identité et représentations, éducation plurilingue et pluriculturelle.

Abstract

English is perceived as less ‘foreign’ today. Language education emerges as a crucial strategy in order to reflect on the native speaker’s model, on the re-definition of new Englishes in people’s linguistic and cultural patrimony and on the role of intercultural mediation beyond linguistic proficiency, through a survey in Italian secondary schools.

**Keywords:** New Englishes; native speaker’s model; identity and representations; plurilingual-intercultural education.
1. The English Complexity

English, as a language and culture, is currently at the centre of a heated debate involving language policies, business and education. However, it also creates issues concerning inter-national, inter-and intra-personal identification. In the recent years, this idiom has been declined as a myriad of new varieties and hybridations, particularly English as a Lingua Franca welcomed by some people as the solution to all the incommunicability of Babel. Some others refer it as a killer language. Here are some current definitions describing ‘English-es’ and some essays from the press:

“there is something sinister about those pools of corrupt English lying about the world […]” (Jenkins 2007:12 quoting May, 2000: 4 referring to New Englishes).

“[…] la langue de tout le monde et donc de personne (d’aucune personne) même plus la langue d’autrui” (chini 2010:131 referring to ELF).

“It is precisely the status of English as a lingua franca that creates a myriad of opportunities for […] intercultural communication (Seidlhofer, 2005a, cit. in Jenkins 2007: 19)”.

Whether we like it or not, English is one of the most widespread languages worldwide and more than just a language used by non-natives. The spread of this language has made it, in fact, less and less foreign, so the term ‘EFL’ is being questioned. Some questions lead to my thinking of: –“What is considered as ‘proper English’?” What are the variety-ies of English, language and culture that are mostly promoted in education today and why? What does it mean attaining a competence in this language?

It is not as clear as it would seem to state what ‘English’ actually is. The label ‘British English’ could go under the broader ‘native speakers’ English’ as this variety has long been considered in many countries as the purest form with the best accent and grammar to be taught in class. It retains that perception of prestige, plus it is

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2 in Castellotti, V., ed. Les Cahiers de l’Acedle,7/1: 125-140.
3 See the homonymous journal coordinated by D. Lévy.
supported by a long tradition of linguistic policies and EFL teaching that promotes a certain ‘quality’ of the language. However, in today’s globalised environment it is hard to state who the ‘natives’ are, even in Britain! Moreover, English is already hybridized from within, a multicultural reality of itself. This language has been developed into different varieties. If we consider, beside the so called old Englishes (such as AmE, AusE, CanE), the new varieties referred to as new and New Englishes⁴. Not to mention English used for special purposes and for international exchange. In addition, let us keep in mind that a language is always to be treated as a whole with its culture in relation to its reciprocity, and that it does not exist as a separate entity from speakers, who, in turn, show their personal complexities (Lévy, 2001: 62-73). Being a complex of many linguistic and cultural varieties (Mesthrie, Bhatt, 2008), we could find a large amount of varieties under the label of ‘English’:

[...] It has become customary to use the plural form ‘Englishes’ to stress the diversity to be found in the language today, and to stress that English no longer has one single base of authority, prestige and normativity (ibid.: 3)

As a consequence, stating what ‘proper’ English is, is definitely a matter of choice. With the basis of specific socio-political and economic issues, sometimes more that cultural ones, intertwined to personal views and experiences of its speakers. What worries educators and decision makers is that which kind of English should then be taught at school and what ‘model’ of English, if there is any, should be presented to students. Also, what it is the result by attaining a ‘competence’ in this language? We are facing, again, a complicated matter.

2. Italian students and teachers’ perceptions of English

Between 2009 and 2011, we involved 150 Italian secondary school students (10 of which of other nationalities) and their teachers in their school context, through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of questionnaires. The survey investigated there are certain areas which are lacking in the education system and potentialities for EFL

⁴ See Jenkins’ categorization (2007).
2.1 The questionnaire to students

The questions to learners were about:

- perception of English, language and culture nowadays
- their school curriculum and knowledge of varieties of English
- motivation to study languages in general and of English in particular
- self-reflection on their own mono-plurilingual identities.

Data that is relevant to the topic has been selected to show where students locate English in their linguistic and cultural patrimony and identities. The data also reveals their real or perceived competence if they show ambitions in possessing such competence and for what purposes.

It appears that the majority, at an average age of 13, have studied English since the 3rd year of primary school. They often study English as the only foreign language. To the question “What English speaking countries have you analysed in class so far?” (Q. 11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>none</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>U.S.A.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<td>6%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 “English speaking countries analysed in class”

5 Question number in the questionnaire.
The English speaking countries (where English is an L1) that are being analysed in the survey are mainly from England (43%) or Great Britain (22%), and USA (12%). We consider there is a large amount of English speaking countries in which English is being used as L1 or L2, not to mention those countries which use English in realities. However, we notice that there is a general positive attitude towards studying English. The question regarding the reason for studying English (Q.9) was answered with the following options:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>job</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>travels</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>personal culture</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowing people</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>global communication</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understanding anglophone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>music</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>compulsory subject</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 “Why studying English?”

On one hand, the study of English is often perceived as an investment for a practical use in the future. On the other hand, it is also considered as a way to improve their culture and a useful means of communication, and not as a compulsory school subject. It is interesting to find that if students if they aim at speaking like what English do (Q.21). Over half of them (55%) mentioned that they don’t want to speak like an English. However, there is still 45% agree that they want to speak like an English. At the end, students were asked to list some advantages and disadvantages in case English became the official European monolanguage. They considered the good point of exploiting the lingua franca for communication, travel and job, but they still worried about preserving their personal cultural patrimony and the mosaic of cultures in Europe.

The questionnaire results demonstrated that, English as a language and culture, is often perceived as something ‘close’ to them as students are exposed to the
language at an early age inside and outside of the school environment (see Castellotti, Moore, 2001). They do not feel that it is a ‘foreign’ language and they have developed some competence already. However, students show no knowledge at all, or only at a superficial level, of the reality of English today, with its varieties and implications at an inter-national, inter-personal and intra-personal level.

The competence of using English is often restricted to grammar rules and some knowledge with UK and USA, mainly London and New York. The issue of plurilingualism and interculturality are not discussed in depth or at any level in schools, nor it is reflected in students' linguistic and cultural patrimony. Students in general show interests in languages, but they need to be educated and oriented to a more critical and flexible approach, rather than relying on family finances and the unknown future.

The survey confirms students’ need and right to get a more realistic vision not only on the English speaking countries, but also on the current linguistic scenario of plurilingualism. Teachers' training proves crucial to attain such results. Teachers have been pinpointed as figures invested of a delicate task in the promotion of language education.

2.2 The questionnaire to teachers

Another survey was conducted among teachers of English in Italian secondary schools (especially from the Marche region) to detect possibilities in revising school curricula through their own initial and in-service training. The questionnaire provides the following questions to the teachers:

- didactics of languages and varieties of English
- their motivation to teach languages
- curricular choices (between freedom of teaching and contingent needs)
- their positions in regards to themes like plurilingualism / interculturality
- their knowledge of linguistic policies
- their advice for a possible training course

When the teachers were asked what is the major area of their teaching (Q.8), most teachers answered ‘grammar’.
92% of them choose to present British English as ‘the model’, sometimes as the only one (Q.10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BrE</th>
<th>AmE</th>
<th>Natives’E</th>
<th>Int.E</th>
<th>For foreigners</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>92%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 “What do you mainly teach?”

Table 4 “Varieties of English mainly taught”

They motivate students as a consequence of their initial training, the availability of materials and programs to fulfill. They consider British English as ‘pure, ‘the norm’, and ‘the best accent’. However, when asked if they consider the type of English taught at school mirrors the English actually used in real life (Q.11), 70% admits it does not. Still, teachers’ aims in didactics of English (Q.15) are quite high. On a scale of choice among six items and most of them select the following two:

- 1st choice: Motivate students to be citizens of the world
- 5th choice: Make students’ competence closer and closer to the natives’ one.

The present list sounds quite paradoxical, when compared to the above results from both questionnaires analysed so far. Admitting they rarely succeed with their aims, (with a 72% answering negatively to Q.16), the teachers reveal the reasons of their failure: little motivation on the students’ but also on teachers’ part, few hours available to teach English, crowded classes, little money invested, too much bureaucracy, no didactic continuity and no resources, little consideration of
languages, stereotypes, but also teachers’ difficulties in dealing with plurilingual intercultural competence.

From this survey, some crucial aspects emerged regarding didactics of languages and English in particular. 96% of the teachers feel the need to revise English curriculum. It is still confusing between theory and practice for creating awareness of the value of plurilingualism. It is also doubtful on how to perform such paths in class (see Cognigni, Vecchi, 2011). Moreover, teachers claim they want to reach some goals, but data show in practice they distance somehow from their initial intended objectives. Most of the times, the native speakers’ cultural and linguistic model is taken for granted. We do not intend to demonize or underestimate ‘British English’ as an outdated linguistic variety. We aim at making teachers reflect on their choices, and on students’ right to get a more realistic overview on linguistic varieties. A clear gap in teachers’ initial and in-course training in Italy needs to be filled:

1. Do we REALLY need to show and force to follow JUST ONE model of English? To speak or not to speak as a native: is that the question?"
2. What is the ultimate goal of language teaching and of ELT in particular?

3. The challenge: English within a democratic linguistic education

We should rather talk about Democratic Language Education (De Mauro, 1975, Costanzo, 2003). And the starting point should be from teachers’ training. The new profile of teachers should be that of a “European Language Teacher”, (Kelly et al., 2004: 69-70), who is supposed to be a professional person who is able to move physically and intellectually at an international level, dealing with intercultural situations and offering, through his/her own experience, a real “plurilingual and intercultural competence” (Cavagnoli, Passarella, 2010).

A series of suggestions will be identified. They are the outcome of my PhD research-action, supported by the studies of eminent scholars internationally. We aim to build a path in linguistic education and not a list of ‘I can’ of ‘I cannot do’ (CEFR, 2001; Cognigni, Vecchi, 2011).
Long-term goals:

- highlight the **human side** of teaching
- become **research-actors** (Barbier, 2007)
- become professional figures through **lifelong learning**
- rehabilitate the **school** as a crucial space for learners’ growth

Objectives:

- be aware of the most relevant **recommendations** for linguistic education
- be **critical** with curriculum and extra-curricular choices
- **identify** the discourse on languages in general and on English in particular
- reconsider **testing and evaluation** on the basis of real goals
- do not panic: change needs **time**

Practical outcomes:

- draw and update a personal **portfolio** (see **PEFIL**)
- engage in **transdisciplinary paths**
- work on personal and students’ linguistic-cultural **representations**
- **share good practices** on the net

Didactics:

- stimulate students’ **motivation** to L-C studies
- exploit **stereotypes**
- offer a wide spectrum of examples of linguistic **varieties**
- reflect on **English as a lingua franca besides English** as some specific national variety (Seidlhofer, 2003: 22)
- develop and exalt **partial competences**, but also learning strategies
- alternate moments of **metalinguistic reflection**
- consolidate the sense of citizenship and social action in an enlarged community (Byram, 2008: 69)
- invite learners to criticize and **negotiate** their positions
- help students to become **independent in studying** languages
Vettorel (2010) considers it useful to reflect on ELF as a starting point from which to develop a broader discourse of language awareness, relocating English among the other languages, still, conscious of its role as a Lingua franca and aware of its risks and perspectives, “[...], facendo in questo modo leva sul “multilinguismo all’interno dell’inglese per promuovere il multilinguismo con l’inglese” (Vollmer, 2001).\(^6\)

This tendency of English use must not be exalted nor demonized, rather controlled in a responsible and conscious way, as an identitary EXTENSION and not as an ALTERNATIVE (Byram, 1997: 122).

We need to hydrate again English language/s culture/s, in all its plasticity, especially for its intense and complex relations with the cultures of its native and non-native speakers. Moreover, this complexity must be dealt with the broader framework of languages. A change of perspective must begin within English language, in order to position it in a more enriching discourse ABOUT and WITH languages, beyond linguistic proficiency. National varieties won’t be touched or deprived of their meaning, but they won’t be erected as hard monoliths of identity that cannot be approached.

We think of teaching/learning English as a ‘less and less foreign language’ within linguistic ecology’, (Haugen, 1972\(^7\) in Graddol-Meinhold, 1999:20) without fearing ‘hybridations’.

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\(^{6}\) in Vettorel, 2010: 21

4. References


