
ESL in the 21st Century

David Eskey

University of Southern California

Abstract

The author makes two predictions for the teaching of English in the next century which have implications for ESL in Thailand. (1) The spread of English as a *world* language will continue unabated, and by the year 2000 the number of speakers with some functional command of the language will run into the billions. At the same time, the current belief in teaching a native-speaker variety of English (usually British or American) will gradually be replaced by a belief in teaching the local variety of the language for communicative (not imitative) purposes. (2) The current movement toward more communicative *methods* of teaching English will continue to develop at the expense of more traditional approaches. Thus ESL professionals in Thailand, as elsewhere, must become increasingly proficient in these methods to insure that their students will be as well prepared to communicate with other speakers of the language as those of the many other countries in which ESL is taught.

In making predictions about complex events, one always runs the risk of failing to consider the old Chinese proverb: it is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt. But since I cannot be held responsible for these particular remarks for another 10 years or so, by which time no one will remember them anyway, I would like to make two general predictions about the learning and teaching of ESL which I believe will hold true well into the 21st century. I should add that I think that both of these predictions have important implications for the future of language *education* in Thailand, as in many other parts of the world.

The first of my predictions is that, barring unforeseen political upheavals, the spread of English as a *world* language will continue unabated, and that by the year 2000 the number of speakers with some functional command of this language will run into the billions. British specialist David Crystal has already suggested (1985) that current estimates of 700 million or so speakers are far too conservative, and that the real number is closer to two billion. In any case, there is no doubt that English is already the most widely spoken language in the history of the world and the closest thing that we have ever had to a genuine *lingua franca* for the world. I should hasten to add that this phenomenal spread is largely

the result of political and economic history, coupled with the rapid development of the new communications technologies which have transformed our world into a so-called "global village," and not to any virtues of the language itself. Nevertheless, as more and more of the world's information comes to be stored in English (more than half of all the books being printed are being printed in the language), and as more and more of the world's business and technical and educational exchange come to be conducted in it, the value of acquiring some control of this language can only continue to increase.

It is, however, interesting to note that the increasingly successful expansion of English throughout larger and larger areas of the world may, in the long run, produce new kinds of problems for speakers of the language, native and non-native alike. For, in the normal course of events, as the language becomes more solidly established, especially among such populous societies as, for example, those of India and China, new, local varieties of English will inevitably develop, and these may in turn develop into mutually unintelligible dialects of the language--in other words, into new languages. In a sense, then, English as a world language might collapse under the weight of its own success.

Thus the question becomes: Will these new varieties of English, some of which--Indian English, for example--arguably exist already, develop into whole new languages, much as the various dialects for Latin (also once a *lingua franca*, but now spoken by no one as a native language) have developed into the modern Romance language, or as the various dialects of Chinese have de-

veloped into Mandarin, Cantonese, Fukien, and so on? Or will these new varieties of English--because they will function as languages of wider communication and will therefore be used for more universal and less culture-bound functions, and because an increasingly sophisticated communications technology will bring speakers of the language more closely together than has ever before been possible--maintain a high degree of mutual intelligibility, much as British and American English have remained one language despite some 200 years of geographical separation? My guess is that the latter is the much more likely outcome, but the question is a real one and scholars have already begun to debate it, sometimes quite hotly (see, for example, Kachru, 1976, 1988).

One practical result of this debate is that it has begun to shed some light--I am tempted to say the cold light of day--on the question of what kind of English should be taught to students who are studying the language, not in an English-speaking country but at home. The choices are usually identified as either British or American English, but, as many of us in the field have always known, students learning English in their home countries, even in countries where English is only a foreign and not an official second language, don't really learn either of these native-speaker dialects, but a kind of local variety--a Brazilian or a Japanese or a Thai English--which is quite distant from any native variety of the language. By listening carefully to a Thai speaker of English who has learned the language in Thailand, one can *sometimes* tell whether his teachers have been British or American, but that is clearly

a far cry from saying that such a speaker speaks a variety of British or American English. What he or she really speaks is Thai English, and the only question of importance that arises is whether he or she knows it well enough to understand other speakers and speaks it well enough to be understood by them. Thus the major concern of teachers, whether native or non-native speakers themselves, in countries where English has no *official* status is not to find ways of converting their students into native speakers of either British or American English or any other native variety, but to help them become more proficient users (better listeners, speakers, readers and writers of the local variety of English which they and their immediate peers control.

My second prediction for the teaching of ESL in the 21st century is not related to the question of what kind of English will be taught, but rather to the question of *how* it will be taught. This prediction follows from what I believe should be considered a kind of revolution in second-language teaching methodology (see, for some fairly early introductions to this approach, Krashen, 1982; Widdowson, 1978). More specifically, I believe that the current movement toward more *communicative* methods of teaching will continue to develop, at the expense of more traditional approaches which focus on grammar and vocabulary or on mechanical drilling. As more learners approach the study of a foreign language seriously--that is, with some expectation of actually becoming proficient in real-world *uses* of that language--both they and their instructors will increasingly find that learning a new language in this functional sense

means learning to communicate in that language. The days of memorizing words or grammatical rules or simply responding to mechanical cues with correct but largely meaningless forms may rapidly become a thing of the past in most countries with a clearly defined second, or even first foreign, language, and the better results that language teachers are obtaining with more communicative methods may lead to a wider distribution of these methods into a much greater range of teaching contexts.

Thus the question here becomes: Will this movement toward teaching languages for communicative use lead to major changes in foreign language education everywhere--to new ways of teaching, new ways of testing, and new kinds of programs for preparing language teachers?

I believe that the answer to this question is yes, and that those countries which hope to develop partially or fully multilingual populations would do well to review current policies and practices in their second or foreign language programs of study, and in their courses for preparing teachers for these programs. Countries with well established "traditional" approaches which mainly depend on rote memory or drill are, I think, especially at risk. From what I have seen as a U.S. educator, serving the needs of ESL students from many parts of the world, both these students themselves and the parents and government who sponsor them have begun to demand better English-language teaching at home--the sponsors because of the enormous expense of educating young men and women abroad, the students because of the large part language plays in how well they do and how much they enjoy the experience. There is plenty of

hard evidence to suggest that these students as a group are, in fact, arriving in the U.S., the U.K. and other English-speaking countries with better English skills and therefore better potential for taking full advantage of their educational opportunities, both in the narrow sense of their chosen fields of study and in the broader sense of interacting with people of many nationalities and cultures who nevertheless share one common language.

Taken together, my two predictions, that English will more completely become what it almost is today--the world's second language--and that programs for the teach-

ing of second language will increasingly adopt communicative approaches, sound suspiciously like a personal wish list for a specialist in the teaching of ESL with a strong commitment to communicative teaching methods, and it is certainly the case that people like me will, if my predictions come true, find themselves in great demand in the coming century. Thus my comments may be partly a rationalization of what is really just a couple of things I hope will happen. But I would like to conclude with a favorite observation of an old friend of mine: Just because what I'm saying is a rationalization doesn't mean it isn't true.

The Author

David E. Eskey is Associate Professor of Education and a former Director of the American Language Institute at the University of Southern California. His major research interests include the teaching of second-language literacy, syllabus design, and the administration of ESL programs. He has published in the *TESOL Quarterly* and *Language Learning*, and is both a co-editor and co-author of *Teaching Second Language Reading for Academic Purposes* (1986), *Research in Reading in English as a Second Language* (1987), and *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* (1988).

References

- Crystal, D. (1985). How many millions? The statistics of English today. *English Today*, 1, 1, 7-9.
- Kachru, B. (1976). Models of English for the third World : White man's linguistic burden or language pragmatics?" *TESOL Quarterly* 10, 221-239.
- Kachru, B. (1988). The sacred cows of English. *English Today*, 4, 4, 3-8.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford : Pergamon.
- Widdowson, H. (1978). *Teaching language as communication*. London : Oxford University Press.