

Which Languages to Teach: The Classical-Modern Debate and the Future of English Education

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A major shift seems to be occurring in the teaching of English as a second language. This shift is away from teaching English as it is used by native speakers in Britain or the United States and toward instruction in varieties of English spoken on a more global scale, both within countries such as India, Nigeria, or Singapore and in international interactions among people for whom English is a common language. Because this shift affects the very core of what is taught in the ESL classroom—that is, the forms of the English language itself and the cultural knowledge and pragmatic skills associated with the language—it has the potential to transform profoundly nearly every aspect of English education, from the content of textbooks and the assessment of students to the hiring of teachers.

One factor driving this shift, of course, is the growing role of English worldwide. English is increasingly a lingua franca for business, government, cultural, and personal communication both inside many countries and internationally. In fact, a young person now studying English in a country such as Japan or Brazil is likely, when older, to communicate in English less with native British or American speakers than with people from, say, Korea or Peru. As English thus becomes more widely used on a daily basis among people for whom it is a second language, it is naturally also becoming more varied in its pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics. Many educators therefore feel that their students need to understand, and be understood in, varieties of English other than standard British or American, and some are beginning to adapt their curricula accordingly.

But another factor is also driving the move toward a greater diversity of linguistic models in English education: political and

ideological attitudes. For some scholars in the fields of World Englishes and critical applied linguistics, the history of British colonialism and of American military, economic, and cultural expansionism has associated traditional English teaching with a neoimperialistic agenda. These scholars often frame their research and educational proposals in the contexts of power relations, national and personal identity, and postcolonialism, and they promote the use of ESL curricula that not only teach the comprehension and use of other varieties of English but also encourage students' engagement with the political and cultural issues associated with the dominance of English worldwide.¹

Although some progress has been made in both theoretical and practical approaches to teaching nontraditional versions of English,² it is difficult now to predict how widely those approaches will actually be adopted. One reason is the practical difficulty of implementing polymodels—that is, the exposure of students to multiple varieties of English—in the classroom. For beginning and intermediate learners struggling with the always-difficult task of learning a foreign language, being confronted with several pronunciations of the same word or different words for a single concept seems likely to make the burden only heavier. For teachers as well, it can be very challenging to teach multiple versions of a language, especially if one has had little first-hand contact with some of those dialects. Another potential hindrance to the success of the World Englishes approach in ESL teaching is that the political assumptions behind much current discourse in the field are likely to be shared by only some students, teachers, and administrators. Arguments about learners' "ownership" of English (Seidlhofer, 2009), the need for "decolonization" of English-language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), or the importance of "awareness of the politics of English, including such issues as language and power" (Matsuda and Friedrich, 2011, p. 341) are unlikely to be persuasive to students, teachers, and administrators focused on test scores, university admissions, and the job market, and they might be actively opposed by people who have different political attitudes. Thus, while the traditional model of teaching only standard British or American English to, for example, Japanese children may indeed be inadequate in today's world, it is not clear that approaches that embrace diverse, pluralistic views of the language can over-

come the practical barriers, bureaucratic inertia, and ideological resistance they are bound to face.

To gain some insight into what version or versions of English might come to dominate ESL teaching in future decades, this paper examines a similar controversy from the past about which languages should be taught in schools. Throughout much of the 19th century and into the 20th, there was a vigorous debate in Britain and elsewhere about whether schools and universities should continue to teach primarily the classical languages of Latin and Greek or should put more emphasis on modern languages such as French and German. Although some aspects of that dispute seem far removed from the present day—particularly the debate’s almost exclusive focus on the elite education of boys—the arguments made on both sides cast a revealing light on the current controversies over what types of English should be taught in the classroom.

The Classical Tradition

A book edited by the British theologian and educator Frederic William Farrar and published in London in 1867 under the title *Essays on a Liberal Education* begins with an essay by Charles Stuart Parker, then a fellow of University College, Oxford, on the history of classical education in Western Europe. According to Parker,

[H]istory can give but one account of [classical education’s] origin. It arose from the relations in which the Greek and Latin languages have stood, in the past, to the whole higher life, intellectual and moral, literary and scientific, civil and religious, of Western Europe. Greeks and Romans, as well as Jews, are our spiritual ancestors. They left treasures of recorded thought, word, and deed, by the timely and judicious use of which their heirs have become the leaders of mankind. But they left them in the custody of their native tongues. (pp. 1–2)

As Latin was the tongue of the Church of Rome, it was especially important for religious reasons. As Parker notes:

[I]n the Middle Ages Latin was made the groundwork of education; not for the beauty of its classical literature, nor because the study of a dead language was the best mental gymnastic, or the only means of acquiring a masterly freedom in the use of living tongues, but because it was the language of educated men throughout Western Europe, employed for public business, literature, philosophy, and science, above all, in God's providence, essential to the unity, and therefore enforced by the authority, of the Western Church. (pp. 7–8)

In the 14th century, when the study of classical Greek was revived in Italy, providing access to “the general literature and philosophy of the Greeks [and] their natural history, physics, mathematics, medicine, and other sciences” (p. 14), facility in both classical languages became the key to learning and the professions, not only in Italy but also, later, in Germany, France, and Britain. The Reformation, with Martin Luther's call for direct knowledge and understanding of the Bible, brought even stronger emphasis on the study of Greek (as well as Hebrew) in Northern Europe.

By the 16th century, a large school in Strasburg run by Johannes Sturm was conducting its education entirely in the classical languages:

To gain colloquial readiness, all the boys speak Latin The masters are forbidden to address them in German. The boys are severely chastised if they use their mother tongue. On the way to and from school, and in games, they are to speak only Latin, or Greek. (p. 37)

This school, which taught the children of both the rich and poor, attracted students from throughout Europe and was the model for many similar schools. While education that ignores the students' mother tongue might seem extreme, Latin was “the common language of educated Europe” (p. 41), and thus proficiency in that language would be a valuable practical skill for students of that school.³ A similar trend also occurred in England in the 16th century, when “Grammar and the Classics were established, and for three centuries [ever since] have been accepted in prac-

tice as constituting, with religion, the whole course of liberal school education" (p. 54). Despite the recognition later that instruction in English and other modern languages, as well as in the natural sciences, would be of more practical use, knowledge of the classical languages and literatures continued to be the chief prerequisite for admission to the leading British universities and thus remained the focus of school education as well.

The Modern Uprising

But for nearly as long as the classical languages were the centerpiece of school education in Britain the exclusive focus on them was attacked. In 1693, John Locke wrote in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*:

... Can there be any thing more ridiculous, than that a Father should waste his own Money, and his Son's time, in setting him to learn the *Roman Language*, when at the same time he designs him for a Trade, wherein he having no Use of *Latin*, fails not to forget that little which he brought from School, and which 'tis Ten to One he abhors for the ill Usage it procur'd him? Could it be believ'd, unless we had everywhere amongst us Examples of it, that a Child should be forced to learn the Rudiments of a Language which he is never to use in the Course of Life that he is designed to, and neglect all the while the writing a good Hand, and casting Account, which are of great Advantage in all Conditions of Life, and to most Trades indispensibly necessary? (p. 242; italics in original here and below)

Although Locke did not object to the teaching of Latin itself but rather to how it was taught—he was an advocate of what might now be called a natural, direct, oral, or immersion method of language instruction ("To trouble the Child with no *Grammar* at all, but to have *Latin*, as *English* has been, without the Perplexity of rules, talked into him," p. 243)—his mention of the lack of practical applications for Latin in business anticipates later arguments in favor of the teaching of modern languages. For example, in a book published in New York in 1856 titled *The Relative Importance of Ancient and Modern Languages Considered as Branches*

of *General Education*, the unidentified author writes:

Living languages are indispensable to travellers, merchants, and statesmen, to diplomatic and consular agents, to naval and military men, to the man of fashion, as to the man of science; whereas the usefulness of the ancient languages, viewed either as stores of knowledge, or as means of communication, is at the present day very limited. (p. 57)

In 1887, in a lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge, Charles Colbeck, an assistant master in the Harrow School, made the same point even more succinctly:

Why then do we teach Modern Languages?

Essentially because they are so supremely useful. Let us not be ashamed to say this. The advance in the teaching of them has kept pace and will continue to keep pace with the advance of utilitarianism in education (p. 2).

He went on to enumerate the ways in which those languages had become useful in Britain over the course of the 19th century:

Commerce and industry, travel and geography, the inclusion in the public school system of the middle classes, the increase of population, the reform of the public services, competitive examinations, the Napoleonic wars, the writings of Goethe and Schiller, a German Prince Consort, international exhibitions, international trade, the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest, these and all that they implied combined to raise the study of modern languages from the status of an accomplishment, or a commercial art, on a level let us say with book-keeping, to rank as an integral portion of a liberal education. (p. 3)

These sentiments were widely shared, as documented extensively in an acerbic book, published in 1891, by A. F. Chamberlain of Clark University in Massachusetts. Titled *Modern Languages and Classics in America and Europe Since 1880: Ten Years' Progress of the New Learning*, the book records, largely through quotations, the arguments against classical education and in

favor of the teaching of modern languages not only in Britain and the United States but also in France, Italy, Hungary, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. The emotions evoked by the debate are clear from Chamberlain's choice of quotations, which are full of phrases like "the safe and elegant imbecilities of classical culture" and "the shortcomings and failings of Latin literature when considered esthetically" (p. 15), and from his own remarks, such as his comment about the "nonsense and rhetorical braggadocio . . . uttered by the ultra-classicists" (p. 12) and his derision of Greek as "a collection of philosophic quibbles and dead etymologies" (pp. 24–25).⁴

Despite the general shift toward the teaching of modern languages, defenders of the classical tradition did not give up. In 1916, an elegantly written and well argued book was published in London under the title *A Defence of Classical Education*. The author, Richard Winn Livingstone, was a fellow and assistant tutor at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and a prolific writer on classical topics. Though defending the study of the ancients, he framed his argument in the urgency of the moment: Britain's perilous situation that year in its war with Germany. The present danger, he suggested, was the result of deficiencies in Britain's scientific prowess and of the superiority of Germany's. While this emphasis on science might seem to counter his argument in favor of the classics, he confronted this objection head-on:

. . . it is implied that [the Germans] have become 'scientific' by giving physical science a predominant place in their higher education. Nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary their secondary education is far more classical than ours, and they have far more compulsory Greek and Latin. (pp. 2–3)

Livingstone did not go so far as to assert that classical education was necessary for a nation to become strong in the modern world, but he did claim that the German case proved that "a nation can be 'scientific,' though compulsory classics are the staple of its secondary education, and though the majority of its youth is trained in classical schools" (p. 5).

Having dispensed with the most timely objection to classical education, Livingstone moved on to more general arguments in

its favor. His first concerned the value of the study of literature, history, and philosophy for building a broad perspective, critical thinking skills, artistic sensibility, and personal character—and the political discernment that such qualities provide. The lack of such qualities in the British people, he suggested, was one reason for his country's difficult situation at the time:

The attitude of some sections of our population at the beginning of this war should have convinced the most sceptical that the ignorance of a democracy is a real danger. Now this knowledge [of political and moral problems] cannot be acquired merely by living in the world. It is in books. Physical science cannot give it; for it is the knowledge of man recorded in history, and, more vaguely, in literature. (p. 33)

Having made his argument in favor of an education grounded in the humanities, Livingstone then moved on to arguments for the study of Greek and Latin. His claims had several thrusts: the role of Greece and Rome as the basis for modern European languages, literatures, and civilization; the value of the ideas contained in Greek and Latin literature, both in themselves and as guides for the modern world; the difficulty of grasping the aesthetic and intellectual virtues of the Greek and Latin classics through translations into English; and the benefits to the young mind of learning Greek and, especially, Latin grammar and of translating into and out of those languages. He summed up his arguments as follows:

The case for the classics is cumulative; no single item may turn the scale, and yet all together they may do so. Review the arguments in turn. Against the difficulty of learning Greek and Latin set the fact that without them we cannot have a scientific knowledge of much in our own and other modern tongues, and that Latin is a real help in the learning of these; that Latin and Greek are admirable schoolmasters in the study of human thought as expressed in language, and that they give a mental discipline and gymnastic of thought, absolutely necessary in education, and not to be got so completely and satisfactorily in any other way. Add that if we know nothing of Greece and Rome we are igno-

rant of our origins, and lose the key to much in our own literature and much in the modern world; that we are cutting ourselves off from the two greatest and most influential civilisations on which Europe is built up, and from two literatures, of which one, in completeness and excellence, has never been surpassed; that we are declining intimacy with poets and pioneers of thought, among them some of the greatest masters of the human mind; that we are refusing the educational advantages which come from the simplicity and completeness of Greek history and literature; and that we are neglecting to provide ourselves with the only independent standards there are, with which to compare and test our own ideals and civilisations. These advantages have kept the classics in our higher education, and we must consider very seriously whether we shall become a better or more efficient nation by sacrificing them. (pp. 235–237)

These are powerful arguments. Although rejected by some—H. G. Wells, for one, attacked Livingstone’s arguments fiercely in a 1917 essay titled “The Case against the Classical Languages,” primarily on the grounds that studying the classics was too time-consuming and that the learning they provided was more readily accessible in English—they no doubt were compelling to many others at the time. What Livingstone’s arguments failed to do, however, was to halt the shift of school and university language education away from the classical languages. While Greek and Latin are, of course, still studied by some in Britain and elsewhere, the languages most often taught in schools and colleges there and in most other countries today are modern ones.

The Arguments Then and Now

The debate over the teaching of classical or modern languages in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the current movement to incorporate multiple, global versions of English into the second-language classroom differ in several important aspects. The classical-modern debate was waged most fiercely in countries where secondary education was far from universal and higher education was limited to a privileged few; in contrast, the World Englishes movement exists in an era when school education is com-

pulsory in many countries where English is a second or foreign language and where a high percentage of secondary school graduates go on to higher education. Another difference is that Latin and Greek were—as anticlassicists liked to deride them—dead languages, with practically no fluent speakers, native or otherwise, while English is robustly alive today. A third difference is that the classical-modern debate was over which distinct languages to teach, while the World Englishes movement focuses on variations of a single language; becoming skilled at both Latin and Greek, two very different languages, is presumably more difficult than attaining proficiency in, for example, both British and Singaporean English.

But there are important similarities as well. One is the universality of education in the languages for those who do attend school. For centuries, a boy educated in Britain beyond the elementary level was required to study Latin and Greek; today, schoolchildren in many countries must study English. In both cases, the languages, like all second languages, are difficult to teach and learn effectively, and they are made more so by the very fact that their study is required, thus decreasing student motivation. As a consequence, many, even most students, despite years of effort, ultimately fail to learn them well. Another similarity is that language teaching in both contexts is surrounded by a vast academic and commercial apparatus. “The vested interests of classical study,” the American classicist Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve wrote, “are even from a mercantile point of view enormous. Not only the teachers but book-makers have a heavy stake in the fortunes of the classics” (quoted by Chamberlain, 1891, pp. 14–15). The vested interests, both academic and “mercantile,” of traditional English education today are probably even more enormous.

Perhaps the most interesting similarity, for the purposes of this study, between the classical-modern debate and the proposals to teach global English is the manner in which the arguments in each case divide into practical and idealistic sides. For the classicists, the balance between the two sides shifted over time. For several centuries after the establishment of classical education in Europe, in fact, the practical necessity for knowledge of classical languages, especially Latin, was so obvious that few educators needed to raise those arguments explicitly. It was only

in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the need for an ability in Latin and Greek to acquire useful knowledge or to communicate with others had waned, that the less utilitarian, more idealistic arguments came to the fore. Livingstone and others argued forcefully that learning the classical languages and literatures made students more logical in their thinking, better able to understand and express abstract ideas, more appreciative of the beauties of language and literature, more knowledgeable about the foundations of Western civilization, and, in the end, better people and better citizens. The practical roles of Latin and Greek had nearly disappeared, so their advocates thus found other reasons to justify their continued study. The utilitarian arguments that the classicists did make—that experience translating from Latin and Greek made students better writers of English, or that knowledge of Latin and Greek roots improved students' English vocabulary—were forced and unconvincing, and they were easily demolished by the modernists.

In the case of World Englishes, the practical and idealistic arguments exist contemporaneously. When Aya Matsuda and Patricia Friedrich, for example, write that “traditional approaches in ELT [English-language teaching], which privilege the US and UK in terms of both linguistic and cultural representations, may not adequately prepare EIL [English as an international language] users for their future interlocutors from other English-speaking contexts” (2011, p. 332), they are making both a practical argument (about preparing students for real-life situations) and an idealistic argument (against granting undue advantages to powerful countries). When B. Kumaradivelu writes, in the first paragraph of a paper titled “A Postmethod Perspective on English Language Teaching,” that “the English language, in its long march to its current global status, was aided and abetted by colonialist and imperialist projects that trampled upon the political, cultural and linguistic heritage of millions of people across the globe” (2003, p. 539), the idealistic framework is dominant.

The idealistic arguments of Matsuda, Friedrich, Kumaradivelu, and others when advocating greater recognition for other types of English in education are powerful in the same way that Livingstone's idealistic arguments for classical education were powerful. In both cases, the scholars look beyond the narrow, short-term goals of much classroom education—testing, grades,

certifications, etc.—and consider the effect of their educational program on their students' future lives and on society as a whole. The fact that Livingstone was, in his time, conservative and that the advocates of the World Englishes perspective often use the language of progressive or radical politics is irrelevant for this comparison. What matters is that classical-language education eventually died out and modern languages prevailed. Despite their cramped focus, the arguments for the everyday, utilitarian, commercial advantages of French and German outweighed the arguments for the character- and nation-building advantages of Latin and Greek.

The Future of English Education

It is in light of this victory—for narrow-minded utility over visionary ideals—that the potential fate of World Englishes in second-language education needs to be considered. It is true that many young students learning English as a second language today will need to interact with people who use a variety of Englishes. Education focused solely on British or American English is indeed inadequate for that purpose, and if polymodel pedagogy is possible in practice then it might very well become the mainstream methodology for ESL. But given the difficulty of teaching and learning even one version of a language, it is unclear whether most students can be made reasonably competent in more than one variety. Mere exposure to multiple varieties or to knowledge about the diverse roles of English in the world today might not yield the practical outcomes that, in the classical-modern debate, were decisive in determining which languages would eventually be taught.

In this regard, the attitudes of people who, when younger, learned English through World Englishes pedagogies will bear great weight. Running throughout the 19th-century and early 20th-century attacks on classical education is a distinct sense of resentment toward the classical education that the attackers themselves had been forced to endure as children. Part of that resentment was directed merely against the way in which the languages were taught, including the heavy emphasis on grammar from the early stages of learning and the corporal punishment that sometimes accompanied those lessons. But most of the

resentment seems to have been prompted by the writers' realization that, as adults, they were not enjoying enough practical benefits from their past study of Latin and Greek to justify the many hours they had devoted to the languages in their youth. If, twenty or thirty years from now, people who, when young, were exposed to or were taught global Englishes have risen to positions of influence in education, business, culture, and government believe that they themselves have benefited from that approach, then the current focus on British and American linguistic models will no doubt fade away. If, on the other hand, the dominant perception of those future leaders is that the time they had devoted to learning, and learning about, multiple versions of English had been wasted—perhaps because they never, in the end, had much need to use those alternative versions of English, or because they would prefer to be more fluent in a dialect still perceived by some as more prestigious—then the polymodel approach will be the one that fades away.

Another potential barrier to the success of the World Englishes perspective to second-language education is indifference or opposition to some of the fundamental ideas supporting that paradigm. One of those ideas is an emphasis on descriptive, as opposed to prescriptive, approaches to language study—that is, considering languages in view of how they are actually used by all of their speakers and writers, rather than how people in positions of power or influence assert they should be used. The descriptive approach is fundamental both to the modern science of linguistics and to the World Englishes paradigm. However, as I have noted elsewhere (Gally, 2009), most nonlinguists, regardless of their level of education, seem to view language primarily prescriptively, that is, to believe that there are correct and incorrect forms of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary and that children should be taught only the correct forms. While their emphasis on nonjudgmental linguistic diversity is admirable, World Englishes advocates will have to overcome the prejudices in favor of British and American English held by people worldwide, including, significantly, many language educators.

Another challenge for World Englishes advocates is the heavily politicized vocabulary and reasoning that they use to support their ideas. While many people throughout the world are opposed to the political, economic, and cultural domination

that are said to underlie the spread of English worldwide, others, including many in influential positions in business and government, are more willing to accommodate themselves to that domination. For such powerful people in particular, the World Englishes focus on the empowerment of students and on opposition to the privileging of British and American English may seem to be a threat to their own power and privileges, thus leading to active opposition by educational administrators and government officials to the adoption of global Englishes in the classroom.

Even more important than active opposition to the political motives of many World Englishes advocates could be mere political indifference among English learners. The degree of political engagement by young people varies considerably from country to country and from generation to generation, and politically justified World Englishes pedagogies might indeed succeed if they happen to come to the fore at places and times when students are actively concerned about the relationship of their classroom education to larger political and social issues. During periods of political apathy among young people, however, emphasizing such issues in the language classroom might only serve to demotivate students even further.

Finally, as in the 19th century, commerce also plays a key role. While the majority of ESL teaching worldwide probably takes place in regular schools and universities, the commercial sector of language institutes, conversation schools, test-preparation courses, online instruction, and self-study materials is also huge. What distinguishes such “mercantile” education from conventional classroom teaching, especially in state-sponsored schools, is its keen sensitivity to customer demand. If people paying directly out of their own (or their parents’) pockets to learn English want to study global Englishes, the market will quickly adapt to meet those needs. If the customers instead prefer to learn English as it is spoken and written by native speakers in Britain or the United States, no arguments in favor of global Englishes—whether political or practical—will have much effect.

The classical-modern debate dragged on for decades before eventually being won by the modern-languages side. With the idealistic arguments in favor of World Englishes approaches not convincing to many educators, administrators, and learners, and

with the pedagogical feasibility and practical benefits of such approaches not yet known, the uncertainty about what types of English should be taught in the second-language classroom might last equally as long.

Notes

1. A comprehensive reference on the World Englishes paradigm is *The Handbook of World Englishes* (B. B. Kachru, Y. Kachru, and C. L. Nelson (Eds.), 2009); the book's first editor, Braj B. Kachru of the University of Illinois, is often credited as the founder of the movement. A detailed discussion of that paradigm in relation to the ESL classroom in Japan can be found in Shiroza (2010).
2. Matsuda and Friedrich (2011), for example, propose curricula for English as an international language.
3. Sturm's school is reminiscent of the growing number of international schools and university programs in countries such as Japan and Korea where the education is conducted entirely in English, even when most of the students are natives of the local country.
4. A more thoughtful analysis of the classical-language tradition—one which admits some positive aspects while being critical overall—is "The Theory of Classical Education" by Henry Sidgwick (1867).

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