ICT in EAP:
Are We There Yet?

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Introduction

I grew up in the 1960s and 70s with a common sense of "correct" English, but it wasn't my mother tongue. My maternal grandmother was Irish, but had married an English sailor, so my mother had me in Chesterfield, where what sounds like "Where's the bin?" means "Where have you been?" The sea of Irish and British dialects I was immersed in at home didn't sound like the BBC newscasters I could pick up over the airwaves. Nor did the spellings and grammar in my relatives' cards and letters always match those in The Dictionary, a book as full of irregularities as that other one next to it on everybody's shelf, The Bible. So by the time my father's career had moved me across Great Britain's north-south divide—from comprehensive school in the Midlands to grammar school in the Home Counties—I already knew that those teachers who preached "correct" English were lying.

I believed the ones who told me, though, that I'd be a good writer one day. In 1988, my ambition sustained by a Conservative government's Enterprise Allowance Scheme, I entered a playwriting competition. My entry, *Welcome to the Machine*, explored the power of human language in an age of intelligent computing, or something. I hadn't yet discovered word-processing, and only real scientists had email, so I hammered it out on an electric typewriter and delivered it by train to a theatre in Manchester. And there, on display in a bookshop, I encountered a new kind of English dictionary, compiled from a corpus using computers: the Collins Cobuild Learner's.

By the millennium, using that dictionary to teach English to overseas students at a British university, I could profess to some worldly knowledge of what was going on in my native speaking confusion. It's now 2010, and teaching pop historical linguistics to English Literature students in Japan, I

believe I've finally cracked that "correct" language I should've grown up with. What I want to do now is think radically about its world variants—my English, all your Englishes—and about how information and communication technologies (ICT) keep them all changing. If doing this without "proper" references seems inappropriate in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), it shouldn't for long—thanks to Google.

1. Literacy

The majority of the world's languages never developed writing. Of those that did, the majority of speakers remained illiterate (often bilingually). Where writing systems were invented—or imported and adapted, as in ancient Britain and Japan—it was by elite minorities, who used them religiously as instruments of socioeconomic control. Literacy didn't become an egalitarian norm until well into the 20th century, and then only in a minority of developed nations, like the UK and Japan.

Literacy entailed normative standards, prescribed in education systems which did accept a certain measure of creative deviation—just one much lower than occurs naturally in speech. The result: a hegemonic dialect came to be considered both advantageous and correct, and upwardly mobile classes aspired for their children to possess it. Of course, literate standards change over time, as any diachronic study of literature will attest. But recognition of historical change does not prevent one from aspiring to a synchronic ideal—embodied for each generation in just a few good speakers and writers. When I teach my Japanese students about Chaucer, I tell them how he and his printer, Caxton were keen to standardise their good English writings, for fear that otherwise future generations wouldn't be able to read them. And we can't: Middle English may look more Modern than Old English, but it's inaccessible to the majority of Global English readers.

In a morbid sense, then, the desire for immortality in a collective language is as doomed to failure as it is in the individual organism—but we love to deny this. As did Chaucer, whose printed "standard" flirted with every socioeconomic and regional variant of the English of his day. So why do we

prescribe "correct" language to our children? Why enforce the unfair rules in school which make them say "break, broke, broken" when they'd rather say "break, breaked"? Is it how we bridge the generation gap between us and them, so that nurture's memes, not just nature's genes, might survive?

In pre-literate societies, remembering across generations was achieved through recitation and repetition of spoken words, whose ancestral origins were in said practice invariably deified. Once writing was appropriated, such awesome deifications could be copied and distributed to everyone, everywhere, forever—if only the rules wouldn't keep changing. So ancient scriptures came complete with awful grammars, to be minded by heart, on pain of excommunication—even though illiterate common sense still recognised old exceptions, and new inventions. In monasteries across Europe, manuscripting monks who'd copied righteously for ages argued Caxton's type of redistribution was wrong. It wasn't, it was just new. Soon, every recollection which has so far survived will be retrievable via Google, and—through that company's translation tools—subject to all kinds of dubious reformation. What memory is, and whether language communicates it properly or not, are articles of faith now leaping across an unprecedented digital divide. Time for another radical rethink, then another reaction.

2. Oracy, Oralcy, Orality???

The distinction between spoken and writtten language is, of course, a literate one—and problematic with it. Writing is a dynamic process, but it creates a static product: an artificial record of natural speech. Examining such a record enables us to categorise its parts—verbalised sound is transformed into nominalised pictures of meaning. Thus writing becomes information, each text a visionary vehicle from which noise must be filtered out, to optimise the transmission of sound memory. But to the degree that writing remains phonetic, its analysis soon returns us to the acoustic and physiological phenomena of speaking and listening. And any would-be historic distinction between oral and literate cultures collapses along a mode continuum of mixed up (sound and unsound) postmodern meanings. By the 21st century, over the

Internet, people are forever chatting in forgettable text. In this dissonance of hearsay and readwrite, through electronic multimedia, the science of human language is coming of age—all over again!

Aping its pre-literate precursors, this reductionist science, Linguistics, originally backformed (and perhaps misoverestimated) human insights. Computerised research into first language acquisition now contradicts many of the assumptions which drove literacy teaching into the 20th century. Children don't develop speech by breaking it down into the fundamentalist blocks, then playing with rules for building these back up again. Starting in the womb, babies absorb intonation across whole utterances, conceiving mood before they can recognise meaning. When infants do start speaking for themselves, it is similarly in whole utterances, of whose grammatical components they may remain blissfully ignorant into adulthood. I learned /taɪmfəbrekfəst/ was in fact three words at primary school; not until my twenties did I realise the third of them was an old-fashioned compound of two more.

By teaching kids to readwrite while still in the critical period for hearsay, grammar schooling confused natural languages and their artificial scripts worldwide. For example, till the 20th century, UK grammar schools forced Latin rules on English speakers, resulting in the kind of talk up with which Winston Churchill would not put. Nevertheless, after World War II, that Romancified talk became the motivational norm for seekers after higher education in Britain. As late as the 1970s, I was told I'd have to study Latin if I wanted to go to Oxford or Cambridge universities. So I did, and then I didn't, so to speak. At an interview in Cambridge, alienated by my non-received pronunciation, I rejected the privelege on display before it rejected me. Now, when my students ask me to "correct" their pronunciation, to help them speak "proper" English, I point to a map of the British Isles and mimic British accents, from North to South. Then I ask, "Which English is it you wants to speak proper?"

Since spoken and written forms are all mixed up in the learner's dictionary, a communicative approach to English competence applies equally in writing as in speaking. A student word processes a unique phrase in his or

her interlanguage, and asks me "How can I change this into good written English?" "Don't change it!" I answer. "Just persuade six or seven of your friends to use it the same way on the Internet. Within a year or two it'll be in the Collins Cobuild Bank of English. Within two or three, you should find it in the *Oxford English Dictionary*." From its 19th century inception, the OED was a compilation of described usages, prescribing neither *for* nor *against* any particular one. Case in point: its recent refusal to omit the noun 'mcjob' when McDonalds claimed said usage was improper. According to the OED, enough people use 'mcjob' to mean "an unstimulating, low-paid job with few prospects" to merit that definition in The Dictionary. So when I encourage my students to add their own nonstandard phrasings to world English, I'm standing on the most giantesque of lexicographical shoulders.

Back before voice recording, when speech was as yet ephemeral, and access to print still quite priveleged, the OED's plan to bookend examples from all extant English proved remarkably realistic. Given the proliferation of World Englishes now spoken and written across the Web, has that aim become lamentably unrealisable? Not if we use hyperlinks instead of bookends! But just as the OED signalled a paradigm shift whose implications for linguistic research were still being ignored a century later, so the full ramifications of ICT are denied in EAP today. My profession seems scared of moving beyond that good and evil dialectic of old scholarly journals: referencing versus plagiarism. Yet like the ruler who eats, shoots and refuses to leave though the people's verdict is in, the pedant of proper citation is the peer of yesterday's bad review. To misquote 1066 and all that, isn't this a good thing?

3. Copyleft

Once upon a time, an overseas student at a British university (let's say her written English level was IELTS 5) had to submit a paper on Economics, Management and Finance. She wasn't lazy—within a year her writing would be par for her Master's course—and she was intelligent. She copied sentences and paragraphs from Internet Explorer and pasted them in good logical sequence into Microsoft Word, interspersed with logical conjunctions

and other appropriate discourse markers. The result was a clever argument, coherently threaded through collected chunks of relevant text, which she submitted as her essay. In tutorial, she was told she'd failed—because her work demonstrated no understanding whatsoever of her subject, because it contained no learner-English errors to prove it was she what wrote it. She understood: "Basically, you're telling me I should to go away and put stupid mistakes in, and then I will pass."

Plagiarism aside, in this exemplary student's treatment we might glimpse a fundamental paradox for EAP. Native speakers, as we now know, reconstitute their speech acts from a shared lexicon, a collective memory of collocating phrases and sententious idioms. These are absorbed during childhood and stored in various memory locations—brains, libraries, offices, etc. In effect then, when producing "their own" discourse, native speaker-writers copy and edit chunks of "other people's" language. Gradually, over many years, some demonstrate such remarkable insights into these chunks and the relationships between them, that we call them "originals" and put them on pedestals as poets or teachers. Of course, our non-native student isn't one. Nevertheless, she's copied and edited appreciable chunks of native text quite competently into a reasonably communicative argument—exactly what the average native does, however less chunkily. So why can't our non-native equally call her work "her own"? At what scale does relative chunk size mutate into absolute exclusion principle?

To avoid this quantum of paradox, our EAP tutor points at his student's evident plagiarism: no citations interrupt her good prose, no reference list is appended. "But how you can be so sure," she protests, "that I really didn't write all it by myself?" "Easily!" he replies, copying and pasting chunks of her text into Google, which locates the "originals" rapidly—eerily so, when you imagine how many websites and people are probably online at that instant. "By stopping me seeing where you got your ideas, what you have done is steal other people's and pass them off as your own," admonishes our well-drilled professional, unaware of his self-contradiction. "That's Plagiarism, arguably the worst crime you can commit in academic circles!"

Conclusion

Arguably in circles a crime—but where's the victim? The purpose of references is to enable readers to verify sources, which are now almost all retrievable online—if not via Google etc, then via Amazon et al. And whatever their chunk size, those sources are *all* compilations of edits of copies of collective language. So why continue insisting that word-processed documents conform to paper referencing standards—resulting in reams of dysfunctional hyperlinks no-one ever proofreads? As her tutor proved by so easily verifying the "original chunks" of her good English sampling, our exemplary student is only defrauding the EAP community if we assume its members are ICT-illiterate.

To some extent we still can, but surely not for much longer. ICT means an inevitable educational free-for-all in EAP. If we're not quite there yet, it's because of hypocrisies in declarations of human rights over intellectual property. I'll deal with them in my next "paper" (in *Mulberry* 60).

References

Chunks of the above pasted into Google