

CHALLENGES/CONSTRAINTS IN TEACHING TODAY'S ENGLISH IN VIETNAM: TEACHERS' VOICES

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, English language teaching (ELT) in the context of Vietnam has been strongly influenced by the 'native speaker' model via communicative language approach. With the globalisation and internationalization of the English language and the emergence of newer varieties of English, however, there is a need to shift to teaching English as an international language. Although there has been an effort to reconsider the conventional practices of ELT in the world, this issue has not been evident in Vietnam and it is important for ELT in Vietnam to focus on the changing status of English to prepare learners for effective international communication. This empirical study investigated the possible challenges or constraints that Vietnamese ELT teachers mostly encounter in teaching English today. Data was collected from individual interviews with 21 teachers of English from secondary schools and university levels in different areas in Vietnam. The findings present a number of perceived challenges in teaching EIL such as teachers' limited capacity for teaching different varieties of English, exam-oriented curriculum, lack of supportive environment for English practice, limited teaching materials and facilities and other pressures that teachers have to endure in ELT in Vietnam. Based on the constraints, the paper suggests several potential pedagogical directions for ELT in Vietnam and in similar contexts.

Key words: English as an International Language (EIL), English Language Teaching (ELT), teaching constraints or challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1992, English has been observed as a “language with functional and formal variations which arise from divergent sociolinguistic contexts, ranges and varieties in creativity, and various types of acculturation” (Kachru, 1992, p.2). Indeed, English is now a globalised phenomenon with a massive growth in the number of English speakers, “resulting in more contact with other languages than any other language in the world” (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. x). As a result, the role, function and perception of English as a global English has changed significantly, which calls for a need to re-visit teaching models and materials in ELT, especially in countries which have adopted traditional methods and approaches (Sharifian, 2009). In response to this need, English as an International Language (EIL) has been proposed as a paradigm shift in the field of English language teaching and learning. English teachers' views are pivotal to their teaching practice in the classroom and it is important to examine their responses to the suggestion of teaching EIL in Vietnam, which is what this study aims to do. The interview data shows that teaching a language which acknowledges the diversity of today's global English faces many constraints which will be discussed below.

CURRENT STATUS OF ENGLISH AROUND THE GLOBE

English is now widely acknowledged as an international language with official status in at least 80 countries around the world (British Council, 2016) with more non-native speakers (NNSs) than native speakers (NSs) of English (Galloway & Rose, 2015). About 74% of tourists travel internationally from non-English-speaking countries to non-English-speaking countries, highlighting the role of English in

international communication as the most important language for the increasingly mobile international world (Graddol, 2006). Moreover, thanks to the development of social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube, the internet now serves as another important medium for the dissemination of English, enabling language learners to interact in English with various speakers worldwide.

As the spread of English progresses, English has changed extensively both structurally and pragmatically. ESL/EFL speakers not only alter the sounds of English through their particular accents, but also import elements of their native language and culture into their usage of English. For instance, “you stupid” can be used as a term of endearment between husband and wife, like the wife saying this to husband to mean, “you’re not kind to yourself” in Chinese English (Sharifian, 2009). Thus, NNSs have created “their own varieties of English best fit for their intranational, interethnic communication” (Honma, 2000, p.11). In East Asia, this has resulted in the recently emerging varieties of Chinese English, Japanese English, and Korean English. As Galloway and Rose (2015, p. x) conclude,

There has been an explosive growth in the number of English speakers, and this increased usage on a global level has resulted in **innovations** in its use as it is employed by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural background and assumes distinct functions and forms in different contexts (emphasis as in original).

Such changes suggest a need to re-examine how the language should be taught (Galloway & Rose, 2015). In particular, there is a call for a paradigm shift in the teaching of English as an international language (Sharifian, 2009), one that moves beyond the NS model.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE (TEIL)

Traditional ELT pedagogy has mainly used the American and British English models to teach English. It has been extensively argued, however, that English learners do not ultimately require the same competence as NSs, especially in terms of pronunciation and pragmatics (McKay, 2002; Matsuda, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2014). Graddol (2006, p. 63) confirms that targeting learners to achieve native speakerism is unattainable and “designed to produce failure”. According to Kirkpatrick (2014), sounding like a native speaker of English is not as important as the ability to simply communicate in the language, which is perceived as mutual intelligibility.

The paradigm of English as an international language (EIL) has emerged as a response to the complex roles and rules of English today (McKay 2002; Matsuda, 2012; Sharifian, 2009). Recognizing all varieties of English as equally valid, the EIL paradigm is seeking a critical re-examination of the concepts, teaching models, teaching contents, methodologies and curriculum development of English language teaching (ELT) (Sharifian, 2009). In particular, with the rapid diversification of English leading to the development of an increasing number of varieties of English, Sharifian (2014, p. 41) asserts that “Teaching EIL is teaching English as a truly pluricentric language, which does not focus simply on one or two varieties”.

Indeed, Sharifian (2014, p. 41) contends,

The approach of TEIL focuses not only on the development of learners’ linguistic and communicative skills, but more importantly (on) intercultural communication skills, in a systematic way, which are necessary for successful communication between users from various cultural backgrounds.

This is in line with Kirkpatrick’s (2014) conclusion that it is important for English speakers to develop the ability to adapt the language linguistically and socioculturally for intercultural communication. As a result, adopting a pluricentric approach to teaching and learning English is a necessity in today’s globalised world (Lowenberg, 2012).

Shifting to a new paradigm of teaching and learning English, however, is not likely to be a smooth transition. Issues and challenges for TEIL have been discussed, for example, in Japan. Honma and

Takeshita (2014) look at the major elements which would need to be incorporated into Japan's ELT approach, namely teaching EIL in order to help students explain their own cultures and understand other cultures. They notice that there are three challenges to implementing this framework. They are (1) the concept of EIL and its various logical deductions reflected in ELT, (2) English as a self-expressive language and (3) exploring other cultures from a wider perspective (Honna & Takeshita, 2014, pp. 66-67). In the same vein, it is important to examine challenges or constraints in teaching today's English in the context of Vietnam.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM

Vietnam must concern itself with the EIL paradigm because English has played a vital role in Vietnam's political, economic, cultural and social domains since the 1986 economic reform known as "Doi Moi" (Renovation). The status of English has been significantly strengthened after Vietnam became a member of the Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN) in 1995, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998 and, more recently, the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2006. Vietnam has also gained significant attention from Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), much of the interaction with this requires communication in English (Gos.gov.vn, 2017). According to statistics from Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment taken in June, 2017, Vietnam attracted 1.732 FDI projects from ASEAN countries with a total capital of 19.22 billion USD, up 54.8% as compared to the same period 2016. For instance, Japan was the biggest investor in Vietnam with a total capital of 5.08 billion USD, making up 26.45% of total investment capital. Korea ranked the second while Singapore ranked the third. Hence, more and more English-speaking foreigners have come to Vietnam to do business, bringing with them the need for Vietnamese nationals to learn English for intercultural communication. Indeed, English is the most preferred foreign language in language teaching and learning programs in Vietnam (Hoang, 2011).

With the focus on using English as a key tool to keep pace with other countries in the region, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education approved a 10-year National Plan for "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the Period of 2008-2020" (Decision N°1400, 2008). In recent years, the Vietnamese government has encouraged tertiary institutions to use English as the medium of instruction for several subjects such as maths, physics and chemistry in order to promote English language teaching and learning at tertiary level. This has been implemented at a number of pivotal universities before being applied to the whole tertiary educational system.

Despite the efforts toward improving the quality of ELT in Vietnam, globalisation and the diversity of English has remarkably challenged English language learning and teaching methodology, teaching materials, curriculum and the competence of Vietnamese ELT teachers. In terms of ELT methodology, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been the method of choice since the 1990s (Pham, 2005a). Using CLT, American or British English is posited as the only standard model of language learning. Yet, Alptekin (2002) observes that requiring Vietnamese students to acquire English native speaker competence seems irrelevant. He calls for a new notion of communicative competence that recognizes English as a world language.

In response to the EIL paradigm, there has been an effort to reconsider the conventional practice of ELT. In 2010, Ton and Pham conducted a study documenting Vietnamese teachers' and students' perception of global English. The findings reported that British and American English were the preferred models in the classroom. Despite the teachers' awareness of the importance of familiarizing their students with other varieties of English, they continue to use the native speaker model due to time constraints, limited materials for reflecting the diversity of English and the lack of non-native speaker model based tests. There has been no further research into examining teachers' opinions about implementing TEIL. Realising this gap in the literature has motivated the present study, which is designed to discover what English teachers think about the recent changes of English and how they might impact on their teaching practices.

THE PROJECT

The aim of this project is to empirically explore the possible challenges and constraints of teaching today's English in Vietnam from the perspectives of ELT teachers. This project is part of a larger scale research focusing on Vietnamese ELT teachers' reflections on the possible implications of the recent changes within English for their teaching profession.

The study is built upon a qualitative framework that utilises data from in-depth individual interviews conducted with 21 volunteers teaching English at secondary schools, colleges/universities as well as English language centres in various parts of Vietnam. To adequately represent the wide range of teachers, participants were selected from various workplaces and geographic locations. Most of them were female, reflecting the over-representation of female English teachers in Vietnam. Their ages varied from 24 to 64 years with a broad range of teaching experience from two to over 20 years. Fifteen of them were qualified with master's degrees in ELT and each of the remainder with a BA.

For the interviews, they were asked to discuss the following questions:

1. What do you think of the current status of English in the world?
2. What can be the possible constraints/challenges to teach today's English in Vietnam?

The interviews were audiotaped and conducted in both English and Vietnamese based on the participants' preference. To maintain anonymity, they were all allocated new Vietnamese names. For the interviews in Vietnamese, relevant data was selected and translated into English for data analysis. To avoid bias, the translations were carried out with the consultation of the moderator and a Vietnamese teacher teaching translation. The main ideas of each excerpt/quote presented in the section of findings and discussion are in bold. The data was transcribed and coded, using the coding technique adapted from Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). The data was then divided into two prominent themes based on the interview questions: (1) the reflections on the status of English and (2) on the implications for teaching challenges and constraints. The substantive reflections were then counted, coded, and grouped into sub-categories as presented in the next section.

FINDINGS

Findings – Reflections on the current status of English

All the participants displayed their acknowledgement of the global spread of English and how its role had widely expanded. The interviewees further expressed their belief that there were more interactions in English among an increasing number of NNSs, leading to demographic, geographic as well as structural changes in English. They also stated that English would continue to serve as the most popular language in the world. Please note that codes (Lect1, Lect2, Lect3, etc.) were used to identify participants and to maintain anonymity.

Such acknowledgement can be expressed in these following opinions:

Lect3: English has been used widely... English used in each country has **changed accordingly**... I have talked to Singaporean or Thai people; I have noticed the changes in pronunciation and words...

Lect9: English is not only English but also **a language with variations**.

Lect10: There are some differences in English, like we **have varieties of English in every country**, like Vietnamese English, Singaporean English... it makes English different from each other...[sic]

Lect18: English is **no longer used by native speakers** but also by all the peoples in the world. When used this way, we must **accept the fact that English is changed** as speakers inject the features of their mother tongues into English.

As can be clearly seen from the excerpts, the first interview question provided participants with a chance to reflect on the current status of English, especially on variations of the language. While some participants related their reflections to the diversity of English they had experienced in foreign countries, the others seemed to think more deeply about the major causes of emerging varieties of English as follows:

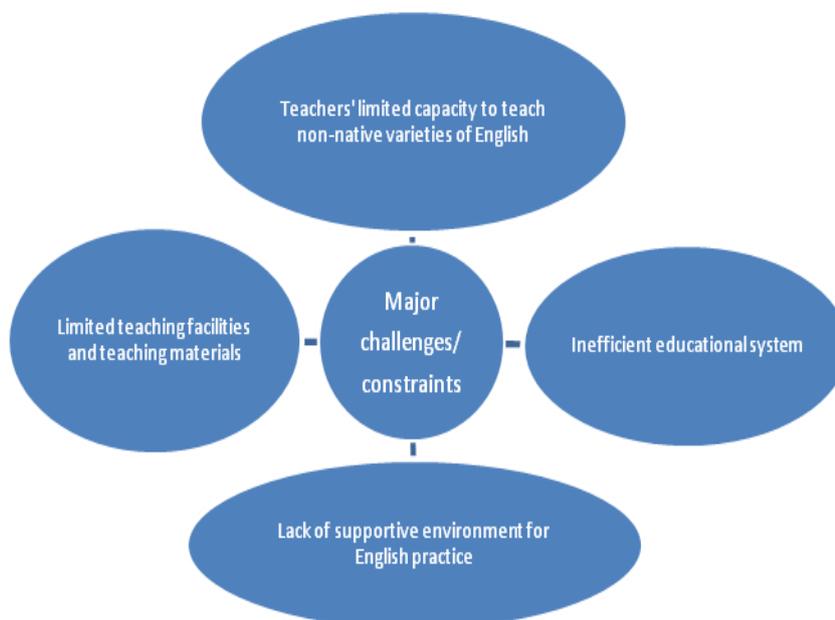
Lect2: **English is an international language**...because of globalisation, the role of English has been expanded...when English is used in different regions of the world, **it is integrated in each country**, making it so unique. E.g. Vietnamese people use English in a Vietnamese way and Singaporean people in their Singaporean way.

Lect21: There is the **existence of different forms of English and different varieties of English** in terms of pragmatics, phonology and vocabulary. When used by different communities in the world, English has specific features.

Even one participant noticed that Vietnamese words have been used by speakers of English when they came to Vietnam. Instead of using ‘motorbike taxi’, which is the direct translation of ‘xe om’, they said “Can you get me an **om**?”. He also believed that Vietnamese English was on the way to becoming an emerging variety like other non-native varieties of English.

While reflecting on the widespread and diverse nature of English and its implications for teaching practice, all participants described several perceived challenges or constraints that they faced in teaching English today. The findings show that they had quite similar responses in terms of teachers’ limited capacity for teaching different varieties of English, an inefficient educational system, lack of a supportive environment for English practice, limited teaching materials and facilities, and some other pressures that teachers had to endure in Vietnam ELT as shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Teachers’ perceived teaching challenges/constraints



Findings – Challenges in teaching English today

1. Teachers’ limited capacity in teaching EIL

All participants stated that teaching about today's English was more challenging than it used to be. This is mainly due to teachers' lack of awareness of the increasing role of different varieties of English in intercultural communication. Seven informants reported that they had no knowledge of, or experience in teaching about the diversity of English. In addition, eleven participants expressed that they had difficulties in updating themselves with knowledge about different varieties of English, which is shown in the following excerpts.

Lect2: I find varieties of English **quite hard to understand or update** because I have never learned them formally. That's why I just prefer American and British English.

Lect9: Students are to compare and contrast Vietnamese English and 'standard' English but not Chinese English... I **do not have the experience** to provide this to students. Therefore, I just introduce students when I have available sources in teaching...

Lect16: **With the fact there are varieties of English...yes, there are challenges.** It is not always easy to carry out the assisting task for my students.

For those who wished to include other varieties of English in their teaching classes, they found that it was not practical because of time constraints, and lack of teacher authority to choose teaching materials as they commented below:

Lect7: **Teaching periods are not enough for teachers**; 45 minutes is not enough for teaching the integrated skills necessary for other varieties of English...because teachers tend to teach grammar.

Lect11: Even though I would like to teach my students to communicate internationally, I have **no authority to select materials** to allow them to improve their English proficiency. That's why the understanding of the students is based on the two cultures of the two countries such as America and Britain.

It is not possible that shifting from a traditional method of teaching English, focusing on the NS model, to teaching EIL would be a smooth transition, especially in the context in which students are assessed by an exam-orientated education system mainly based on American and British norms. A discussion of this challenge is the focus of the next section.

2. The inefficient educational system, especially regarding assessment

All of the teacher participants stated that teaching English was a challenging job as student levels of English were quite low mainly due to the exam-oriented scheme of the educational system. Teachers aimed to encourage students to listen and to talk in English but these skills were not reflected in written tests and exams. As a result, the main purpose was to help students to pass exams, which made the need to include other varieties of English in lessons irrelevant. As Lect13 said, "There are so many differences between our teaching aims and teaching methods according to the requirements of the Ministry of Education. We have to teach our students to pass final written exams. However, every day we have to teach them how to use English, speaking, listening..." This opinion was similar to other comments:

Lect5: It is the **fault of the whole educational system** from elementary to upper secondary school. Students just **cram for exams**. My students' knowledge is so limited that it is very hard to teach them to reach university level. This **prevents teachers of English from adding the diversity of English** to their lessons.

Lect12: Our teaching in our country is **based on test orientation**. We have to teach our students to pass exams. The most important thing is that **the Ministry of Education should change the exam style**. So I can change teaching immediately. We prefer to teach our students to speak English confidently. That means the Ministry of Education puts a **heavy burden** on our shoulders.

This exam-targeted educational system has such a negative impact on learners that Lect4 sadly stated: “Teachers expect students to become successful learners of English while students just want the diplomas or certificates. Students want teachers to teach them what is easy to study to pass exams”.

3. *Lack of supportive environment for learners to practise the target language*

Two-thirds of the participants indicated that their students did not have any opportunities to practise their English, and or to interact with different speakers from all over the world. As a result, they were quite bookish and were not really motivated to learn English. The following excerpts express such views:

Lect3: Students study a lot but they **don’t have time to practise for reproduction**.

Lect10: You can see that students in my university have **fewer chances to interact with foreigners**...they have some opportunities but not a rich variety of nationalities for them to contact. Speaking to real people is different from listening to the tapes in class.

Lect11: I think we **have limited opportunities for students to use English**... We try to create a lot of practical situations for students but they are not exactly the same in reality, so they tend to forget what they have learned.

Lect23: Students **don’t have a speaking environment**. They only learn three lessons a week.

Moreover, the fact that there were normally 35 to 40 students in one language class prevented them from having real opportunities to practise the target language for communication purposes. When discussing the issues of having a large number of students in classrooms, the participants associated it with limited teaching facilities and teaching materials.

4. *Limited teaching facilities and teaching materials*

Most participants stated that there were not enough teaching facilities to meet their teaching demands, especially when they felt the need to apply new teaching techniques or to update themselves in the recent developments of English. Here are several supporting opinions:

Lect8: In the materials at school, the materials are **only limited to America and Britain**.

Lect9: There are not **enough facilities** that accommodate my ideas such as low quality labs.

Lect10: There are **limited materials** in the library...

Lect14: Limited facilities, lots of students in one class and the rooms are very small. The desks are fixed...hard for students to move around. We have one lab but in **poor condition**... and we don’t like it.

Lect20: I use textbooks that are from Cambridge and Oxford to teach. Therefore, they **do not include varieties of English**.

In addition, lack of finance was also an issue that three participants mentioned. When discussing how to teach other varieties of English to students, Lect10 suggested organizing outdoor activities for students where there are foreign visitors so that they could be exposed to different kinds of English and cultures. However, she said it was not easy because the institution could not provide any finance for that purpose. The situation is the same for Lect5 who was substantially integrating other varieties of English into her lessons by regularly inviting speakers of English from Outer and Expanding Circles to talk to her students. She commented that creating this supportive environment was really challenging due to the lack of finance and human resources such as ‘qualified’ speakers of English from other countries.

Meanwhile, Lect19 expressed her concern over the low salary for teachers. She stated,

Salary is too low. Salary **does not equate to teachers' effort and labour**. Teachers **have to work part time jobs** in other sectors. As a result, research in ELT is poor and teachers are lazy to do research.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to examine the possible challenges or constraints that teachers might encounter in their teaching of the English language which has recently gone through major changes. The interview data reveal that two-thirds of the participants claimed that they were aware of the current status of English and that English would continue to diversify in the future with more varieties. For those who had been to foreign countries where English was used by NNSs of English, they tended to be more likely to accept other varieties of English. For instance, Lect9 said that she used to target her students with 'standard' English. However, after spending 1.5 years studying in Australia, where she was exposed to different kinds of English, she became more flexible in her teaching approach. The participants also emphasised the need to introduce the diversity of English to students as Lect1 stated, "It is important to make students aware of this, especially for those who choose to study the kind of English to help themselves to go abroad".

Their perceived reflections are in line with the perceived need as stated in the literature to introduce different varieties of English into ELT in order to prepare learners for intercultural communication (Matsuda, 2012; Marlina & Giri, 2014). Along with a basic knowledge of so-called 'standard' forms, grammatical structures and language cultures from the Inner Circle, it is necessary for learners to be acquainted with other varieties of English. This will help them to understand that successful communication with other English speakers does not completely rely on the variety of English they use but rather on the effectiveness of their ability to communicate in reality.

Nonetheless, when it comes to the question of how to add these varieties to their teaching repertoire, the interviewees displayed a certain amount of reluctance due to a number of teaching constraints/challenges facing them in their teaching. As can be seen from the interview discussions, the most frequently discussed challenge was the diversity of English itself. Most teachers argued that it was not possible for them to know several varieties of English, let alone all the different varieties, making the task of teaching today's English more challenging. This finding is consistent with Matsuda's (2012) observation that teachers find it hard to change their current teaching practices despite their awareness of the fact that these practices are not sufficient to prepare learners for intercultural communication. This is mainly because they have not had any training in how to teach EIL and this, "leaves many teachers with no choice but to continue doing what they have been doing, only now feeling less confident about what they deliver to their students" (Matsuda, 2012, p. 6). In addition, confronted with the pressures of helping students to mainly pass exams based on American and British English, they found it particularly difficult to keep up to date with the recent changes in English.

Furthermore, the study displays the lack of supportive learning environments, teaching facilities and teaching materials reflecting the diversity of English that contributed to the constraints and challenges in teaching English today. The participants in this study reported that they used textbooks as their main guides to English teaching methodology. This finding is in accord with Rubdy's (2003) proposal for textbooks to act as agents of change, encouraging teachers to revise their traditional practices. That the current course books are mainly imported from America and Britain, however, limits the teachers' ability to keep themselves up to date with the recent changes within English.

More importantly, it was their mindset that played an essential role in their choice of teaching models. About two-thirds of the participants definitely considered American and British English as 'standard' English and they therefore supported the English native speaker model which they have upheld since starting to teach. The findings of this study are in line with Ton and Pham's (2010) results who maintain that teachers should only teach 'standard' English as they do not have the conditions or ability to teach other kinds of English.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

The study presented a number of perceived challenges and constraints that teachers are facing in their profession of TEIL in Vietnam. Even though the findings of this study are by no means conclusive, the data indicates that Vietnamese ELT teachers are generally confronted with such challenges. Most of them claimed that they would teach about the diversity of English in the future when they had a more thorough understanding of the recent changes in English; better teaching conditions, less 'heavy' curriculum and more appropriate assessment methods.

The findings in this study have important implications for updating current teaching practice in response to the changes in the use of English. As Matsuda (2012) argues discussing EIL is very challenging for teachers. On one hand, they are aware that their current teaching is inadequate to helping learners become successful communicators with speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, they find it hard to update their current teaching practices due to the lack of a set of teaching ideas in light of the changes in English (Matsuda, 2012). Raising teachers' awareness of the diversity of English can be achieved through exposure to the cultural/linguistic diversities in foreign countries, and additional teaching materials, mass media and audio/video resources reflecting EIL (Ahn, 2014, 2015; Matsuda, 2012, Galloway & Rose, 2015).

It is, therefore, necessary to conduct a variety of English examinations reflecting the diversity of English—both oral and written—to be conducted to test the outcomes of formal education. As most of the participants teach English based on examinations largely focusing on reading and writing, it is quite challenging for them to teach students to be able to communicate in English. In the same vein, teaching facilities and teaching materials should be designed to engage learners in developing an awareness of the current status of English. All of the interviewees faced a lack of teaching facilities and materials for promoting other varieties of English. This prevented them from including the diversity of English in class, at least for now, even if some of them claimed that they wanted to.

Finally, these challenges and constraints are important considerations for ELT scholars, materials developers, syllabus designers and administrative staff. Awareness of them should encourage the revisiting of existing curricula as well as teacher and student training programmes if the needs of learners in the context of globalisation are to be met. As Matsuda and Friedrich (2011, p. 25) note, the paradigm shift to EIL cannot simply take place by

...adding a new lesson or component on EIL to an existing programme. What is needed is a complete revision of the entire programme, using one's understanding of the use of English in international contexts as a foundation that influences every single aspect of the curriculum. It entails a major overhaul, but a much-needed one.

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