While the last two decades has seen a plethora of books dealing with the teaching of English as a foreign or second language, there have been very few books written on teaching English as an international language. This topic is both the title and subject of a new book by Sandra McKay of San Francisco State University. The main thesis of this work is simple: “the teaching and learning of an international language must be based on an entirely different set of assumptions than the teaching and learning of any other second or foreign language. The purpose of this book is to clarify these assumptions and advocate that they be considered in the design of English as an international language (EIL) teaching methods and materials.” (p. 1) It is intended for “those who teach or will be teaching English to individuals who are learning the language alongside one or more languages they speak to communicate with those from another culture and to participate in a growing global community¹it will also be useful to individuals in English language curriculum and materials development and those involved in English language acquisition research.” (p. 3)
The book is short (150 pages) but covers many topics. It is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, ‘English as an International Language,’ opens with a discussion of what constitutes an international language. McKay notes that contrary to popular perception, an international language is not just a language that has a large number of native speakers. She claims that for a language to be international means that the language has developed to where it is “no longer linked to a single culture or nation but serves both global and local needs as a language of wider communication.” (p. 24) In this chapter, she also examines why English has spread as quickly and widely as it has, pointing out that it was due not only to complex historical, geographical, political, and economic factors, but also to migration patterns, and just plain good luck and timing. McKay also briefly touches on the negative aspects of this spread of English and several factors that could in the future hinder the language’s spread.

The next chapter, ‘Bilingual Users of English,’ looks at how bilingual users of the language use English as an international language. By bilingual users of English, she means “individuals who use English as a second language and also one or more other languages they speak.” (p. 27) Using Kachru’s famous circle classification of countries in which English is used, McKay argues that the requirements of bilingual users in the Outer and Expanding Circle countries are in general different from those in the Inner Circle (primarily due to migration needs). But she also notes that “in some instances this distinction is inadequate since some bilinguals in the Outer Circle have come to use English in ways very similar to many Inner Circle users. Given the growing number of bilingual users of English and the great diversity that exists among them, it is essential that more research be undertaken on the various ways these individuals make of English.” (p. 46)

McKay also examines in detail the various problems associated with using the native speaker model as the final goal of English learning. Pointing out that 80 per cent of English teachers around the world today are bilingual users of the language, she concludes that “If English continues to spread, it is clear that the majority of users in the coming decades will be bilingual users, largely for purposes of wider communication¹ in meeting the pedagogical needs of such users it is essential that the native speaker fallacy be challenged. Challenging this fallacy will hopefully lead to a more complete picture of how English is used in many communities around the world, a better understanding of how it is acquired in various contexts, and a more accurate interpretation of the strengths of bilingual English-speaking professionals.” (p. 45)

Chapter three, ‘Standards for English as an International Language,’ looks at the controversial and complex topic of what form of English should be considered the standard for the international use of the language. McKay investigates this problem from the perspective of intelligibility, examining attitudes towards, and the lexical, grammatical, and phonological features of, varieties of English. She also discusses rhetorical and pragmatic standards in English as an international language.

The next chapter, ‘Culture in Teaching English as an International Language,’ explores the role culture plays in the teaching of English as an international language. In it, McKay maintains that it is essential that teachers institute “a sphere or interculturality in EIL classrooms so that individuals gain insight into their own culture. These insights can then be shared in cross-cultural encounters undertaken in international contexts.” (p. 100) In addition, McKay explains what aspects of culture should be presented in the classroom and lists three general principles that need to be observed when introducing culture in EIL classrooms.

The next chapter, ‘Teaching Methods and English as a Second Language,’ is grounded upon the position that Inner Circle target models should not long dictate English teaching methodologies. McKay believes that the old Inner
replaced with one that recognizes that individual classrooms within one culture can vary greatly in terms of the expected role of teachers and students.” (p. 104)

Interestingly, she criticizes current culture of learning’ theories, saying that the “comparison of various non-western cultures with western ones suggests that the latter are the standard and hence should provide the model for the teaching of English. However, in the teaching of an international language, bilingual users should be allowed to take ownership not only of the language but also of the methods used to teach it. Which particular cultures of learning, particularly non-western ones, are depicted as less productive than western ones underlies much of the discussion of CLT.” (p. 107)

She also writes about communicative language teaching, the various objections that have been made to this approach, and what in her view constitutes an appropriate methodology for teaching English as an international language. Determining an appropriate methodology is what Prahbu calls a teacher’s sense of plausibility. Methodologies that marginalize local teachers, if the teaching of EIL is to take place in a socially responsible and appropriate manner, the control of the curriculum must be given to local teachers... although it is essential to recognize that local educators are composed of various interest groups, often having different and competing perspectives and agendas.” (pp. 121-2)

In conclusion, Teaching English as an International Language is a brisk, clearly written introduction (albeit, because of the book’s size, limited) of an increasingly important subject. McKay generally touches upon all the key issues and arguments as well as offering concise and objective explanations of all of the major positions. I found her section on culture and EIL to be especially informative. Her principal argument that the EIL field needs to take a more inclusive, local, contextual (taking into account political and social influences), pluralistic, intercultural approach which recognizes the importance of local educators and learning styles, while not original (many books the last few years dealing with teaching methodologies and applied linguistics have touted the same line), is nevertheless a point well worth restating.

But she unfortunately deals only peripherally with the core meta-sociolinguistic question concerning the field of English as an international language, a question so basic that it is rarely raised in current discussions on the subject: namely, is there any real and practical utility for the average person to learn English in the first place? (particularly if they are a resident of an Expanding Circle country). In other words, in those countries where English is aggressively taught, is the large amount of money that is spent on learning it and the vast educational resources employed in teaching the language ultimately justified?

For example, take the current situation in East Asia, where I have taught for the last 14 years. It is estimated that more than $3 billion is...
spent annually on English education in South Korea, in Japan, it is much more (just for public education, the Japanese have 2.45 billion yen earmarked this year for English education, an 8 fold increase over what was spent last year). English plays an extremely important role in these three nations (and a key part of the college entrance examination). South Korean and Chinese students all begin school in the third grade of elementary school, and Japanese start at age 13. In China, all university students are required to pass an English proficiency test in order to graduate. In Korea and Japan, most university students are required to take an English class, regardless of their major. Both the Korean and Japanese governments have debated making English the official second language of their countries. (In fact, in 2000, a Japanese advisory committee dealing with the matter, made the recommendation that English be made Japan’s official second language).

In Japan and South Korea, many high and junior high school students, in addition to their regular classes, also attend English language schools. The ELT business is a huge lucrative business in all three countries. A large number of major Western ELT publishers have offices in each nation and it is easy to find Western textbooks in big bookstores (in China, these publishers sell their books at a special, reduced rate). To give an idea of the scale of this business, in China, 25% of all books published deal with the learning of English. There are numerous English learning shows on television and radio. Both Japan and South Korea have large numbers of Westerners teaching English at universities, language schools, and high schools, and the number of foreigners coming to work in the major cities of these nations on public and private signs, in advertisements, clothing you inspect the latest East Asian governmental English education white paper with their short and long term plans, and examine the omnipresent ads for English schools and the newest teach yourself grammar/conversation books, it is easy to feel that a heated regional English learning race is going on.

But much of this is deceptive. The bald fact is that the influence English has upon the daily lives of average people in East Asia is much less than has been commonly assumed, and the strong governmental drives to get people to learn the language has often been propelled by domestic political concerns, reasons of international image, and big business interests, rather than concrete national needs. Most Korean and Japanese students are only studying English because it is required or have only a vague, abstract interest in the language, and are acutely aware that outside of school they will probably never be called upon to actually use it (i.e., for or on a job, when traveling abroad, using the Internet, or encountering a foreigner). McKay mentions that one major reason for the spread of English has been that “it serves a vast array of specific purposes.” (p. 97) While this may be true, the purposes the average Japanese or Korean student use English for are probably not exactly the purposes McKay had in mind. (Of course, this is not a blanket statement concerning all learners of English in these countries, both Korea and Japan have students who are competent in the language–usually they can be found at the top schools–but they are generally in the minority. My focus is on the attitudes and performance of average students). The personal experiences of many TESOL teachers who have taught in Japan or South Korea (and general apathy of Korean and Japanese English students), as well as by recent TOEFL paper test scores, South Korea was ranked 119th out of 155 countries in terms of average test scores. A leading South Korean newspaper, the Korea Times, commenting on this lackluster national performance, stated incredulous that such a big trade and Internet power is near the bottom in terms of average...
lower at 144th. During the 1990’s, the boom years of English education in both of these countries, there was only a very slow rise in test results, the upshot being that Korea is left comparatively in roughly the same position it was in when the decade started. In contrast, China’s results have been much better, (it was ranked fourth in Asia), given the large number of students studying the language taking the exam, the fact that the formal study of English is of more recent origin (English has been dropped from the school curriculum twice, and then restated), and the added limitation that the average Chinese student does not have access to the language schools and English learning materials that a Korean or Japanese student does. The problem with English education in China today (and what makes it significantly different from Japan and South Korea) is the sheer intensity and extensive scope of the government’s emphasis on the language (in many ways, the stress is even more intense) and because it is out of proportion to what the country presently (and in the future) actually needs. (I find it quite telling that when I teach my two speech classes each term and have my Chinese students pick the topics they want to talk on, inevitably several select the subject of English education in China and raise many of the points I have just mentioned).

Accordingly, McKay is quite correct when she notes that “One major factor that has impeded and will continue to impede the spread of English is that there is often little incentive for individuals, particularly in Expanding Circle countries, to acquire more than a superficial familiarity with the language.” (p. 19) But she does not carry out her analysis far enough and ask whether it is really necessary to study English to begin with. We are all familiar with the standard arguments that have been advanced for the learning of English (it is a tool for international communication, important for access to higher education in a large number of countries, the major language of science, entertainment, business, publications, international travel, organizations, and politics, in short, that English is the language of ‘global literacy’), but on a very practical and daily needs level, the stark question remains, how necessary is it for the ordinary, educated person to have knowledge of English in a region like East Asia? Is the enormous amount of time, money, and educational and social resources involved in teaching the language to generally all Korean, Japanese, and Chinese students, in the final analysis, really defendable? I find it quite telling that when I teach my two speech classes each term and have my Chinese students pick the topics they want to talk on, inevitably several select the subject of English education in China and raise many of the points I have just mentioned. The opinion that it is, generally speaking, not, and that the effort and resources that have been made upon students to acquire it, are not, in the end, warranted. Curiously, recent Korean and Japanese history may have some bearing on this topic, for it is revealing that both Japan and South Korea have become major and internationally important trading nations with first rate economies and high educational levels in spite of the fact that the general English level in these countries is still quite low. (The obvious question is whether they can maintain this competitive edge with this language limitation, I suspect they may be able to).

Of course, each country has specific English needs (in order to stay on the cutting edge of technological, scientific advances, and international business practices, in addition to general translation requirements), but one way in which these national demands could be met is by the adoption of a two-tier educational system whereby those students who are both interested in, and demonstrate an ability, to learn English, would be allowed to pursue a special track English education program or school (it does not have to be English) for a couple of years in junior high or high school so that they besides their own. English should also be eliminated from the college entrance examination for college students and from job requirements (unless the job involves the actual use of the language).
Through the implementation of this streamlined approach to the formal learning of English, requirements, social expectations, and resources (educational, economic) would be met, and funds would be able for a badly needed restructuring of the problem laden East Asian higher education system. More devoted to subjects that students are actually interested in or to fields that the country is in shortage of, in addition, an academic and psychological burden would be removed from students (and their parents will not need to send their children to special English schools or engage private tutors).

These broad but basic questions over the justification for studying English, and the attendant implications of learning it, the tension over social needs versus resources, and the real reasons why the language is being studied are not abstract concerns, for the way these matters will be resolved by the Outer And Expanding Circle countries will directly affect areas like the type of English that will be taught, whom it will be taught to, and the role EIL teachers from all these circle countries will have.

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