TESOL: What does the acronym stand for?

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Abstract

The use of English as a lingua franca as a global means of communication challenges conventionally accepted ideas about the activity that goes under the name of TESOL. This talk de-constructs the acronym and examines the significance of each of its constituent parts and their relationship. What kind of E is it appropriate to teach in a digitalized and globalized world? How is the activity of teaching itself to be defined? What effect does the learners’ experience of other languages have on how English is actually learned, and what implications does this have for ways of teaching it? As with so many other assumptions based on the past, this talk argues that those that have informed English teaching also need to be critically reconsidered to suit the changed circumstances of contemporary life.

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The acronym TESOL is a now universally accepted name of the subject that teachers of English in Japan, and everywhere else, are engaged in teaching. What does it stand for? There are, of course, two answers. One is simple and a matter of straightforward deciphering: the letters stand for words so the acronym just stands for the phrase Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. But then the second question arises, which is a matter of interpretation, and so not so readily answered: what idea does this phrase stand for? What kind of activity does it refer to, what conception of the pedagogic subject ‘English’ does the phrase represent? For when one considers the matter, each element of the acronym raises issues that call for critical consideration. TESOL – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. T -what does the teaching involve? E- what is this English? SOL - who are these speakers and what is ‘other’ about their languages?

To begin with the T, what kind of activity is teaching?

It is generally assumed to be closely related to learning, so what is the nature of this relationship? Teaching and learning: the conjunction and indicates that they somehow go together. But this conjunction can be used to indicate very different ways in which activities go together. It can be used to relate two events that happen coincidently to occur together, like sitting and talking. Or it can be used to signal a converse relationship where one event presupposes the other and vice versa, like buying and selling. I can talk to you without sitting, sit without talking, but I cannot sell something without someone buying it, and I cannot buy something unless it is sold.
So what kind of relationship is *teaching and learning*? It seems commonly to be assumed, as the sequence of terms itself seems to indicate, that there is a unilateral dependency of the second activity on the first - that learning is a necessary consequence of teaching just as buying is a necessary consequence of selling. But when one considers the matter, the direction of dependency is just the opposite: teaching depends on learning and not the other way round. Learning is not all like buying because it is obvious that learning can and does happen independently of any teaching. Most of what we learn in life, including the learning of our own language, is not directly taught. So you can obviously learn without teachers. But teaching cannot happen without learners. If I say ‘She is teaching English’ learners are presupposed, even though they are not explicitly mentioned. If I say ‘She is learning English’ no teacher is presupposed.

What is taught does not determine what is learnt, as every teacher knows. This is not to say that teaching does not influence learning, but the question is what kind of influence does it have, and to what effect. I will return to this question later but for the moment, let us turn to the second letter of the TESOL acronym.

E stands for English. But what kind of English?

There is no single unitary English. The language manifests itself in many different versions, but the generally accepted assumption is that the relevant version for pedagogic purposes is the version which has been described on linguistic authority as the standard language in grammars and dictionaries. This is usually said to be the English of its native speakers, and so to have a uniquely authentic status which other versions do not have. We need to note, however, that this is by no means the English of all, or even most, native speakers but a subset -those who are said to be educated. But all speakers have been educated to some degree, so it is not clear how the category ‘educated speaker’ is to be defined, so in effect it is an idealised abstract construct that has little correspondence with actual reality. Yet it is this standardized, idealised version of the language that is taken to the E in TESOL, and teaching it involves getting learners to correctly or accurately conform to its rules.

The concept of Standard English is based on the abstract construct of the idealised native speaker. In the present digital age, however, with the availability of computer technology, it is now possible to describe in detail what real as opposed to ideal language users actually produce. So the E of TESOL can now be defined in accordance not only with the rules of the standard language but also with the conventions of native speaker usage. What this means is that teaching E is directed at getting learners to conform not only to norms of correctness but also to norms of customary idiomatic usage – customary that is to say among a certain sub-set of native speakers who have been selected as representative. So again, there is a degree of idealization, and of course the normative assumption persists that it is native speaker linguistic knowledge and behaviour that defines the E to be taught.

But is it the E that is learned? As pointed out earlier, teaching does not presuppose learning or learning teaching. TESOL stands for the teaching of English to speakers of other languages but it is not like giving or selling something to somebody, because there is no necessary converse relationship. As we all know, learners by no means always buy what teachers are trying to sell them. Teaching does not always take place. Why should this be so? Does it have to do with how we teach, or what we teach – the T or the E of TESOL? I will also
return to this question later. But meanwhile on to the next part of the acronym.

SOL – speakers of other languages.

These, like ‘educated native speakers’ are collectively reduced to a category. All other languages are represented as essentially alike in being other. Similarly, the alternative acronym used to label this pedagogic activity, TEFL – Teaching English as a foreign language represents English as foreign in the same way for all learners, no matter what their other language might be. But obviously how another language is other or foreign is a relative matter and languages vary radically in their otherness in relation to English. English can only be foreign in relation to the familiar first language of the learners and so is foreign in very many different ways.

English is other or foreign differently for Japanese than for, say, German or Spanish or Arabic speakers. This is not only because of the formal differences in grammar or phonology, which have always been recognised, but because the role and status of English are perceived in very different ways. And this perception is likely to be influenced by how English and its native speakers have figured in their history, what economic and symbolic values are currently associated with it, and how learners think of their own language.

So while teaching presupposes that E is the same for all learners and speakers of other languages, it is by no means the same for the learners themselves. For them, the main problem is to know how to deal with the relationship between the other language and their own, how to come to terms with its foreignness.

Generally speaking, conventional approaches to TESOL/TEFL do not help learners with this problem. On the contrary, they tend aggravate it by making English more foreign by disconnecting it from the other language. Since learners are indeed speakers of other languages, they already know how language is used and their natural inclination is reduce the foreignness of English by relating it to their own linguistic experience. Although teaching is usually monolingually focused on English, and so on its distinctive foreignness, the other language is always covertly present in the learners’ mind and continually drawn upon in the learning process. But this, of course, is generally discouraged and when the other language makes an overt appearance, as it quite naturally will, it is usually taken as evidence of interference and identified as error. But the central question here is why do learners make these so called ‘errors’ and why are they so persistently resistant to correction? I would argue that they are attempts by the learner to de-foreignize English by making use of it as a communicative resource as they would their own language. It is, one might say, evidence of the learners’ natural language using, or languaging, instinct which defies attempts by the teacher to get them to conform. This is why the so called ‘errors’ that are most resistant to correction tend to be those which have little if any communicative significance. This non-conformist English is usually described as learner language which has no independent status but is evidence only of defective or incomplete interim stage in achieving the objective of native speaker competence. But this is based on the mistaken assumption discussed earlier that what is learnt is determined by teaching. If learning is acknowledged to be an independent process, and learners recognised as language users already as speakers of other languages, then one can argue that actually what we see in their non-conformist utterances is user-language in its own right.
So what does TESOL stand for? What kind of assumptions about English teaching and learning are usually made in its name? Perhaps the first thing to note is the primacy given to teaching. Learning is defined in reference to teaching and is given no independent status. It is assumed to be a re-active and not a pro-active process and so assessed in terms of how it leads to conformity with what is taught. Language tests only give credit to this conformity, so it is what is taught that they test – not what is learned. And what has been taught as the prescribed learning objective is an idealised version of English, a range of formal rules and associated communicative conventions that supposedly represent what native speakers know of their language – that is to say their competence.

But it needs to be noted that learners persistently and consistently do not conform as required. For all the claims to effectiveness made in different approaches to methodology, learners keep on producing learner language rather than Proper English and so fall short of this prescribed objective. This is generally accounted a failure on the part of learners but it can more reasonably be seen as a failure on the part of the teachers. It is they after all that have set the unrealistic objective that they have failed to get their learners to attain. As I have suggested, tests measure what been taught, so it makes sense to say that any shortcoming is the teachers’ responsibility – though it is of course the learners who are penalised.

In view of the problematic issues that I have argued arise in a critical analysis of what TESOL seems to stand for, it seems reasonable to suggest an alternative way of thinking. We might begin by shifting the primary focus from teacher to learner, from teaching directed at an eventual objective to how English is experienced as another language in the learning process itself. I have suggested that so called learner errors can be considered efforts by learners to naturalize or de-foreignize English by making use of it as they would their own language. When learners leave the confines of the classroom, this is what they continue to do, released from the constraints to conform imposed upon them. And they find that occasions arise when they can put their learning to actual practical use, can expediently exploit the language they know as a communicative resource – in many cases the very language that when they produced it as learners would have been marked as deficient. They find that they can get by with their English and the very act of using it to communicate with others creates conditions for extending it. Thus incompetent learners can be quite capable users. And it is entirely natural, and predictable, that this should be so. For the competence objective is defined in reference to the usage conventions associated with a particular native speaking community and there is obviously no reason to suppose that these will have any necessary relevance when the language is used in other contexts and for different purposes.

The communicative capability of ex-learner users is evident in the use of English as a lingua franca – ELF. This can also be referred to by the acronym ESOL but here the E is not a dissociated English defined in reference to native speaker norms that is taught to speakers of other languages, but it is English used by speakers of other languages, and when this use involves interaction with English native speakers, English also becomes like one of the other languages. The various forms that ELF takes may not be regarded as Proper English as usually prescribed by orthodox TESOL, but it is appropriate to communicative purpose.

This raises a central question: what is the essential relationship between encoded linguistic forms and communication? As indicated earlier, the orthodox assumption seems to be that the
latter is dependent on the former, just as learning is dependent on teaching – that the ability to communicate corresponds with conformity to norms of correctness. But it has to be noted that such norms are simply the result of an historical process whereby a particular community adopts certain conventions as suited to their inter-communal communicative needs. But once established, these conventions also represent the socio-cultural customs of the community and are retained as symbolic markers of communal identity, even where they cease to have little if any essential communicative value. Conforming to such conventions in this case, therefore, signifies the user’s membership of a particular communal group, and correctness is simply a matter of social comportment. If you are not a member of the group, or do not need or wish to identify or comply with its customs, then such identifying features of the language cease to have any relevance and you can focus attention on those formal features of the language that have more general communicative potential. As is well attested, this is what users of English as a lingua franca do. And this, I have argued, is also the instinctive strategy that learners resort to.

One can argue then that in both ELT learner and ELF user English we see essentially the same process at work, and so it is not surprising that there are formal linguistic similarities between them. This has led to the classification of non-conformist ELF usage as simply learner language, and its features assigned the status of ‘errors’. I would argue just the opposite: that it is not that such users should be conceived as learners but that learners should be conceived as users. The E of the subject TESOL would then be based on how English is actually used by speakers of other languages, Accordingly the T would not be objective oriented, involving the unilateral prescription of ideal native speaker competence norms, but process oriented, whereby teachers give reactive support to what learners actually do rather than focus on what they ought to be doing.

In this alternative way of thinking, TESOL is a matter of teaching English not to but for speakers of other languages – the English that relates to their past experience of language and that corresponds with how they actually learn and use it – the English of speakers of other languages. With reference to the alternative acronym, TEFL, as every teacher knows, English learned as a foreign language – ELFL does not correspond with English taught as a foreign language – ETFL. This, I have argued, is because the normative native speaker E of ETFL remains foreign, whereas what is learned is E that is made familiar by being appropriated as a communicative resource. Since this is what ex-learner users of English as a lingua franca do, it seems clear that ELF is indeed essentially indistinguishable from ELFL.

In this view, the orthodox focus on teaching competence and the insistence on conformity have the effect of inhibiting the natural capability for learning and using language as a communicative resource. From this perspective, many, perhaps most, of the problems that learners encounter are in effect, teacher induced. And it is important to note that being capable of making strategic communicative use of whatever linguistic resources are available is an ability that continues to be activated beyond the end of a language course. This is what we see when learners leave their classrooms and become ELF users and as they encounter different contexts of use which make further demands on their English, so they will quite naturally be motivated to adapt and extend their language. This is what all language users do and such adaptation and extension is the natural driving force of all language variation and
change, without which language would become dysfunctional. Communication is seldom simply a matter of conformity, which is why it cannot be equated with competence. All of us develop the capability of learning language by using it. This being so it seems perverse to try to teach English in denial of this natural learning/using process.

Of course there are reasons for the persistence of the orthodox view of what TESOL stands for. It is institutionally well entrenched and its validity ratified by standard linguistic description, language acquisition research and the vested interests of publishers and policy makers. It provides something definite and measurable to teach and test. So it would be fanciful, not to say irresponsible, to suggest that it should be abandoned in favour of the kind of alternative way of thinking I have explored here.

Nevertheless, I think the issues I have raised are worth thinking about. So many of our established ideas and certainties about language and communication and social life have been called into critical question in recent turbulent times by the rapid and radical changes brought about by globalisation. Since the international use of English has been, and continues to be, a crucial factor in globalisation, it seems particularly perverse to suppose that how we think about the language and how it might be taught can remain immune from change.